

When God was busy creating the earth, and it was time to place the finishing touches on South America, He decided to place the Andes mountain range between Chile and Argentina. The range became the dominant geographical feature of the Argentine and Chilean wine regions, with snowcapped mountains often serving as the backdrop view in the vineyards. Each year as spring approaches, an intricate irrigation system of dams, canals, and channels carries the vital water supplies from the mountains to the wine regions below. Most of the wine regions are located near the foothills of the Andes range. I mention the water first as it is so important to have this abundant supply of water. Without it there would be no wine produced, as it is extremely hot during the growing season and the mountains and the water provide cooling and irrigation.

Wine production in Argentina is traced back to the 1500s when cultivation of vine cuttings, brought to Santiago del Estero (north central Argentina) by the Spanish Settlers, were successfully grown in local areas and eventually throughout all of Argentina. For hundreds of years, producers were only interested in producing QUANTITY. However, the desire to increase exports gave rise to significant advances in QUALITY. Argentine wines started to be exported in the 1970s. The wines grew in popularity, and today Argentina is the largest exporter in South America. (Argentina, in the meantime, gave an assist to the wine industry and tourism. Argentina devalued their Peso. This decreased wine production costs and markedly increased tourism. The reduction in the value of the Peso gave way to a whole new concept in wine tourism. The past years have seen a growth in tourist friendly wineries with free tours and tastings.)

The most important regions showcasing the new prosperity in wine are Mendoza, San Juan, and La Rioja, with Mendoza being the most important in production for domestic and exported products. For us here in the Lowcountry, Mendoza wines are represented more than any other region. Are there other regions? Very definitely. As time goes by we will hear more from regions such as Catamarca, Rio Negro, and Salta.

Next we move to the grapes. Argentina's workhorse grape is Malbec. But there are others. Included in the red category with Malbec, we find Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranilla, Barbera, and Sangiovese. For the white varietals there are Torrontes and Chardonnay used mainly for export wines. Chenin Blanc, Criolla, and Cereza are used mainly for domestic wine production. Getting back to Malbec, we find that it is highly successful with Argentinian

winemakers as they are producing many single varietal wines from the grape. They are probably the only winemakers in the world to do so. Malbec is characterized by deep color and intense fruity flavors with a velvety texture. There are many Malbecs available for sale in the Lowcountry stores in the \$12-\$15 range. More expensive Malbecs are available by special order. Examples are the 2007 Altocedro Reserva for \$50 or the 2007 Catena Zapata for \$120. Expensive? Yes. So you blow the budget on a wine that will compete with a comparable Bordeaux any day of the week. Just say that the devil made you do it!

In the white wine arena, we find that Chardonnay is more available in the Lowcountry than any other white varietal. There are good values ranging in price from \$7 to \$15. There are good reserve Chardonnays available locally in the \$12 plus range. Most of these Chardonnays will reflect spice and some honey.

One very important footnote on Chardonnay is that the University of California, Davis developed a chardonnay clone for Argentina. It is called The Mendoza Clone. This is important in that the vines thrive in high altitudes where many growers are located. The success of the clone varietal also spread to Australia where it is doing very well.

If you go to Argentina, and I hope that you do, try to include some wineries in your trip. Any good travel agent will probably try to route you to Mendoza. White wines will be most enjoyed at the Lurton Winery. The wines are produced from the Torrontes and Chardonnay grapes. The yield from Torrontes is light, floral and fruity. From the Chardonnay you will experience creamy fruit flavors. These are both affordable at the \$10-\$15 range. Your search for good red wines, in addition to the wineries mentioned above, should include Trapiche. Trapiche wines do get to the Lowcountry. From this winery you will enjoy Malbec, Pinot Noir, and Chardonnay.

Winespeak

What is a **Bodega**? This is the Spanish word for winery. An example is Bodegas Trapiche.

What is an **ampelographer**? An ampelographer is a person who studies the identification and classification of grapevines. Professional ampelographers were employed in the 1800's when many cuttings of various vines were brought to Chile and Argentina from Europe.

Next stop is California. Cheers

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