

Vintages in the process of changing

I believe change is here, and it is here to stay. One of the big changes is around harvesting dates, and that might have a bigger influence on the wines than the overall actual vintage conditions. I see more and more winemakers harvesting early, moving away from excessive ripeness (beware! There's no formula!). Many other viticulture practices seem to be changing, too. When a winemaker, a winery or a region is changing, the vintages might have less effect on the wines than the actual learning-growing-changing experience, which I think is the case with plenty of the names in this report. However, I'll still give you a brief overview of the latest vintages (not a detailed weather report), mainly a generalization about whether it was a warm or cold vintage, meaning above or below the average, with all the problems and exceptions known about generalizations, of course... I'm reporting on some 850 wines of about 1,000 tasted, and the great majority (770) are from vintages 2010 through 2013.

1998 was a disastrous year, the worst in recent times.

2002 was a mild year, which produced very balanced, long-lived wines. Many call this the best vintage in recent history.

2003 was the year when temperatures reached the highest ever, 47°C! This harvest really marked its wines.

2005 was very fresh.

2006 was a warm vintage.

2007 was a problematic vintage with rain during harvest.

2008 was a fresh vintage.

2009 was a warm, ripe vintage which resulted in powerful wines.

2010 was fresh, balanced, with less alcohol and more acidity than 2009. Some compare it to 2002. This is my favorite recent vintage.

ACHAVAL FERRER	2012	CABERENT SAUVIGNON	MENDOZA	(\$25.00)	RED	89
ACHAVAL FERRER	2012	MALBEC	MENDOZA	(\$25.00)	RED	91
ACHAVAL FERRER	2011	QUIMERA	MENDOZA	(\$48.00)	RED	90
ACHAVAL FERRER	2011	MALBEC FINCA MIRADOR	MEDRANO, MENDOZA	(\$120.00)	RED	92
ACHAVAL FERRER	2011	MALBEC FINCA BELLA VISTA	PERDRIEL, MENDOZA	(\$120.00)	RED	95
ACHAVAL FERRER	2011	MALBEC FINCA ALTAMIRA	ALTAMIRA, MENDOZA	(\$120.00)	RED	95

I met very early on with Santiago Achaval one of the leaders of quality wine in Argentina, as he traveled to Madrid to talk and taste his wines with me. He is one of us, he's passionate about and loves wine. You can see in his eyes there's a special spark when he talks about wine, and his candid answers make him very approachable. Achaval Ferrer is, by no means, a centenary winery: their adventure only began in 1999. I asked him about how things started and he confessed that they were going to plant a new vineyard, do everything very technologically, everything modern, and they happen to run into the grapes of the Altamira vineyard, which was almost abandoned. When they tasted those grapes they changed their plans and decided to do something to show the potential of those grapes. We had a nice long conversation and Achaval explained his philosophy, beliefs and methods, which were very down to earth and sensible. Everything is fermented in cement, which is a very good regulator and they don't worry until temperatures reach 33-34°C. As for oak, he also has very clear ideas. "A barrel is an instrument, it is not an ingredient: newer wood means more open pores," he said. The other issue is ripeness and it is enough to say that they harvest two or three weeks before their neighbors. I like wine to drink, not wine to taste. The wines should be drinkable on release. I also heard something from him I had not heard before: "If you expose wine to air, and we use big fans, you can lower the alcohol up to 1%," he said. "I don't like to add water to wine, well, there are lots of things I don't think you should do when you have great grapes, but if the year has given you a little bit of alcohol, I think making it evaporate with these fans is the most natural way to fix the issue."

As you have probably heard, Achaval has new strong financial partners. In April 2011 the Stolichnaya group bought a majority stake in the winery, but according to Santiago Achaval, they do not take part in any decisions, Stolichnaya wants them to continue doing the same thing. They have done good marketing, but they have also made very good wine. The wines are not extracted, they are not heavy, and not excessive. Are they powerful? Yes, they are. But they show just what the grapes in Mendoza are capable of. "When you have low yields and concentrated grapes you do not need to extract," Achaval said. "When you have all the power in the grapes you go very carefully." Later on we also met at the Finca Altamira when I was visiting Mendoza, as I was impressed when I tasted

2011 was dry and cool, similar to 2010, but a little riper and warmer.

2012 was a warm, ripe vintage, smaller than average, with concentrated wines, where you had to be careful. Having said that, I tasted quite a few stunning wines from 2012.

2013 was a cold vintage. I've tasted quite a few wines already and found very good freshness, acidity and balance. Bear in mind that they are six months older than the wines from the Northern hemisphere

The wines

For once I broke my own (unwritten) rule as I couldn't refrain from scoring a couple of barrel samples here and there. I found a few unbottled wines that were just too exciting not to write about. However, the majority of wines included in the article were already bottled and should be currently available. Quite a few older vintages were uncorked thanks to the generosity of many winemakers. I think it is a good way to get context and perspective, but I'm keeping that for myself, I'm not publishing notes for older vintages here, as I didn't publish any notes on older Riojas when I wrote about Rioja, Spain. I wanted to keep the report as fresh and alive as possible, with current releases only. I feel Argentine wine is experiencing such change, there is enough exciting new wine to talk about, and honestly, I feel the country is producing better wines than ever.

One last word to thank all the people that went out of their way to travel to Madrid to show me their wines, who spared their free time to talk to me in Mendoza, who walked me through their vineyards, who made me jump into pits to see the alluvial soils, who helped me with the logistics of tasting so many wines (thanks Nora and thanks Wines of Argentina!), those who patiently answered all my (sometimes silly) questions and helped me understand a little bit about Argentine wine. I look forward to continuing learning, and visiting Mendoza, Salta and Patagonia next year, or the year after, or the one after that.

the wine and wanted to see the vineyard. He brought a couple of vintages of the wine and we drank it under the trees by the vines, which is a fantastic way to understand the link between place and wine. So let's take a look at what I tasted.

The Mendoza line blends grapes from different zones in the province, and is always bottled before the next harvest. It is two varietal wines, 90% of the bottles are from Malbec and 10% Cabernet which only started in 2011. **2012 Cabernet Sauvignon** mixes grapes from Medrano where it is warmer and their vines are young, while Agrelo is fresher (very old vines). The wine aged for eight months in French oak barrels, third and fourth-use. It is a ripe Cabernet with a creamy texture, where they are looking for the varietal character. It has a velvety palate and is medium-bodied and intense, with fine tannins combining the elegance of the Old World and fruit of the New World. Drink now-2017. The **2012 Malbec** (first vintage was 2003) is a blend of three vineyards from Medrano, one from Luján, one from Gualtallary (the highest altitude) and one from La Consulta in the Uco Valley. There is a short fermentation (7 days) but it resulted in a very dark-colored, ripe wine with aromas of blackberries, a touch of red fruit, and hints of smoke and spices. It is quite intense. The old vines are always different in the nose and the palate and this feels like velvety, grapy and silkier. Tannin and alcohol are well-integrated and in the background. Drink now-2018.

The **2011 Quimera** is a blend of all five varietals from Bordeaux aged for 12 months in barrel (1/3 new barrel, the rest second-year barrels) and separately. When they have simultaneous ripeness they co-ferment, but it was not the case here. It feels very Bordeaux, quite ripe, juicy with a mixture of blackberries, red berries and a little smoke. They look for barrels that respect the wine. It still feels a little tannic. We tasted some As for the single-vineyard wines, the **2011 Malbec Finca Mirador** is from Medrano, at 720 meters altitude, on the west parcel, where the soils are deep and clay-rich. This is their warmest single-vineyard with very fine tannins, concentrated but balanced, with aromas and flavors of dark fruit, graphite and black spice. The palate is medium-bodied, ripe and round, no edges, sophisticated and precise. It is always the wine that shows well