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Argentina a Cause for Optimism Despite Crisis



© AFP | Catena Zapata's vineyards in Mendoza with a backdrop of the Andes – the winery is considered as a pioneer.

Things look bleak for Argentina's wine industry right now, but **Tim Atkin** believes there is an exciting future ahead.

Posted Wednesday, 21-Jan-2015

Crises are almost a way of life in Argentina.

The present malaise, featuring 40 percent inflation, rampant corruption and one of the weakest currencies in Latin America is nothing new. I've been visiting the country for more than 30 years and this is the third time I've seen the economy on the ropes. Things have been even worse – inflation hit 5000 percent in 1989 and the government defaulted on a record debt of \$100 billion in 2002 – but the place is still in a mess.

As you'd expect, the sizable wine industry isn't immune from the economic downturn. Only last week, thousands of growers and vineyard workers took to the streets of [Mendoza](#), the country's wine capital, to protest at the indifference of the provincial government to their plight.

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And yet I'm still optimistic about the future of [Argentinian](#) wine. Why? Three main reasons. [Malbec](#) is one of the "hottest" grapes in the world, especially in the United States, and is becoming increasingly diverse. The current crop of winemakers, many of them in their early 30s, is the best the country has ever seen. And, lastly, there's a new interest in terroir that is redefining the styles and quality of some of the top wines.

To understand what's happening now – and why it represents such a radical break with the past – you need to know a little bit about the past. Argentina has been making wine since the mid-16th Century, but its modern industry is a recent creation. Argentinians are proud of the fact that theirs is the most established wine culture in the New World but, historically speaking, most of what the locals drank was of very basic quality. To a significant degree it still is.

Nicolás Catena, the patriarch who runs Rutini, Escorihuela, Caro (with Château Lafite) and Catena Zapata, is the man who is often credited with launching the country's wine revolution. He returned to Argentina in the mid-1980s after a spell as a visiting economics professor at the University of California, where he was inspired by the example of Robert Mondavi.

Catena was certainly a pioneer in lots of ways, but the arrival of several overseas consultants, one of them invited by Catena himself, was just as important for the development of Argentinian wine. Michel Rolland and Paul Hobbs came from France and the U.S. in 1988, followed by two Italians, Alberto Antonini (1995) and Roberto Cipresso (1998). The significant thing about this quartet is that they don't just consult in Argentina;

they have also invested their own money to create, or help create, some of the best wineries in the country: Yacochuya, Viña Cobos, Altos Las Hormigas and Achaval Ferrer.



© Tim Atkin | Matías Riccitelli and Sebastián Zuccardi are among the new generation of talented local winemakers today.

All four are still important figures in Argentina, not least for the work they do promoting the country's wines overseas, but they have been joined by a host of talented local winemakers. To be fair, Argentina always had its share of these – Pepe Galante (Salentein), Daniel Pi (Trapiche), Mariano di Paola (Rutini), Roberto de la Mota (Mendel), Walter Bressia (Bressia) and Jorge Riccitelli (Norton) spring to mind – but the last decade has seen the emergence of a golden generation of new talent, such as Sebastián Zuccardi (Zuccardi), Alejandro Vigil (Catena), Alejandro Sejanovich (Manos Negras and Tinto Negro), Matías Riccitelli (Fabre Montmayou and his own label), David Bonomi (Norton), Edy del Popolo (Per Se) and the Michelin brothers (Zorzal and Passionate Wine).

It's ironic in such an established winemaking country that, until recently, very few people thought carefully about what they planted where. The focus was on altitude (coolness is important in a continental desert climate) and proximity to consumers rather than soil type. But the discovery, or recognition, of limestone deposits (defined by some geologists as calcium carbonate) in parts of the [Uco Valley](#) and [Luján de Cuyo](#) has changed that for the better. These limestone-sourced reds are fresher and more mineral than the blockbuster styles we have become used to, and they are redefining Argentinian wine.

I think we're only just beginning to see what Argentina can do. The combination of new, cooler areas, either in the Andes or, in one case, close to the Atlantic Ocean in Chapadmalal, appropriate soils, lower alcohol levels, earlier picking and less oak is very exciting. Malbec is still Argentina's dominant grape, accounting for more than half of what the country exports, but it's been joined by other styles. Red blends, Pinot Noirs, Cabernet Sauvignons, Tannats, Cabernet Francs, Bonardas, Sauvignon Blancs, Semillons, Torrontés and Chardonnays are also part of the new wave.



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The wine industry can't solve the country's economic problems. That will have to wait until the election later this year at the very earliest, but with their increasing focus on terroirs – long considered an Old World preoccupation – and on wines that work with food other than slabs of beef, Argentina's winemakers are achieving something that is genuinely new and exciting. Can they persuade consumers who want their Argentinean wines, especially their Malbecs, to taste a certain way to follow them? Let's hope so.

Six New Wave Wines From Argentina:

2012 [Zuccardi Aluvional Malbec, Altamira](#)

There are three wines in the Zuccardis' Aluvional series, all of them excellent, but this one from limestone-influenced Altamira in the southern Uco Valley is my favorite. Floral, focused and very chalky with subtle oak and a lingering finish. 97 points.

2012 [Colomé Aútenico Malbec, Salta](#)

This might not sound like a new wave wine – it comes from a 90-year-old vineyard after all – but it is modern in its emphasis on balance (partly the result of high altitude) and also the complete absence of oak. Concentrated, rich, yet very mineral and refreshing. 95 points.

2012 [Catena Zapata Adriana Vineyard White Bones Chardonnay, Gualtallary](#)

Catena's two top Chardonnays are way ahead of the field in Argentina. Showing their poor limestone soils and high-altitude origin, this wouldn't look out of place in Puligny-Montrachet with subtle oak and hints of citrus and struck match. 95 points.

2011 [Pulenta Estate Gran Cabernet Franc, Agrelo](#)

The Pulentas were the pioneers of top-quality Cabernet Franc and still make the best example of the grape for my money. Smooth and slightly grassy with leafy tannins, deftly handled oak and hints of graphite and green pepper. 95 points.

2013 [Matías Riccitelli Hey! Malbec, Mendoza](#)

A great label and an equally fun wine from one of the most exciting young winemakers in Argentina. It's a blend of grapes from Perdriel and the cooler Uco Valley, with low key oak, supple tannins, plush fruit and a thread of acidity. 92 points.

2014 [Zorzal Eggo Sauvignon Blanc, Gualtallary](#)

The name "eggo" is an allusion to the concrete eggs that are the Michelinis' stock in trade. This comes from a small parcel in the high Uco Valley region of Gualtallary and it's beautifully refined, with subtle grapefruit and lemongrass notes. 93 points.

2014 [Mar & Pampa Riesling, Chapadmalal](#)

Grown only five kilometers (three miles) from the Atlantic and weighing in at a mere 10.8 percent alcohol, this is a very promising first release from this Trapiche-owned operation. Floral, crisp and well balanced with a crunchy dry finish. 91 points.



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