

Focus on Argentina

By [Stephen Tanzer](#)

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According to U. S. Customs data, Argentina was the fastest-growing category of wine imported to the U.S. in 2007, surging by about 50% in value and as much as 75% in volume (the same set of statistics ranked New Zealand and South Africa second and third in growth). This should come as no surprise to readers of this publication, as the quality of wines from Argentina continues to increase steadily, prices remain mostly reasonable, and vintage conditions have been favorable for several years running. In my extensive tastings in the last months of 2007, I enjoyed more world-class wines from Argentina than ever before, and by a wide margin. The real sweet spot along the price/quality spectrum is Argentina's wealth of very good to excellent red wines (i.e., those rating 87 to 89 points on the IWC's scoring scale) that can be found for under twenty bucks. While these wines may not have the aromatic complexity or refinement of texture of truly outstanding bottles from around the world, they are rich, ripe and satisfying wines that provide everyday drinking pleasure at very affordable prices.

As was the case two years ago, visiting enologists (such as California's Paul Hobbs, France's Michel Rolland and Italy's Alberto Antonini) continue to be behind many of the most impressive wines I sampled in recent months. These guys know from long experience what international drinkers are looking for, but they're also smart enough to realize that they are working in a near-ideal climate for grape-growing and that their wines must express a regional identity, if not more specific site character. While Hobbs and Rolland in particular continue to use a high percentage of new oak for their top bottlings, their wines are far more sophisticated than many other Argentine wines aimed at the American market, some of which are overwhelmed by lower-quality barrels (or oak chips) or appear to carry significant levels of residual sugar. But there's no shortage of homegrown talent in Argentina, and as these winemakers gain more experience with the international market, their own wines are becoming cleaner, better balanced and finer. The extended Catena family, which has always had an international perspective and has long been a leader in exporting high-quality wine from Argentina, was responsible for a number of the very finest wines in my recent tastings. Perhaps the best news for American consumers is that more of Argentina's top wineries than ever before are now shipping their wines to the U.S.

The overwhelming majority of Argentina's best bottles are red, with malbec, cabernet sauvignon and blends based on these two varieties accounting for a high percentage of the finest wines I tasted in recent months. The province of Mendoza, just east of the Andes Mountains, which form Argentina's natural border with Chile, dominates the wine industry in Argentina. Although Salta to the north and Patagonia to the south are already beginning to deliver on their outstanding potential, Mendoza still produces 85% of the country's wine, and accounts for roughly 90% of its exports. As I have noted in past issues, Mendoza is a semi-desert with hot daytime temperatures, cool nights and cold winters. Sparse rainfall averages barely ten inches per year, as the high Andes range blocks moist air coming from the western, Pacific coast of South America. The greatest weather challenges in Mendoza are spring frost and sporadic but potentially devastating hailstorms. Harvest-time precipitation is rarely a serious threat to grape quality.

The effects of heat are partly mitigated by planting at high altitude, with most of Mendoza's favored vineyards at 3,000 to 5,000 feet. The best sites are not far east of the Andes. Farther to the east, as the land slopes gently down from the mountains, temperatures are considerably hotter, soils are more fertile, and wine quality is lower. Irrigation is necessary throughout the Mendoza region, although it should be noted that most recent years have witnessed somewhat higher rainfall than the long-term average. It's too early to know what effects global warming is having on viticulture in Argentina: if alcohol levels in the typical Argentine wine have inched steadily higher over the past decade or so, that's probably more attributable to increasingly precise harvesting of thoroughly ripe fruit than it is to climate change.

Recent vintages. Most of the red wines reviewed in this issue are from the 2006, 2005 and 2004 vintages. As I wrote in Issue 123, the 2004 growing season featured a warm, dry spring followed by consistently hot early summer weather. Fortunately, February and March brought more moderate temperatures, as well as a period of cloudy, cooler weather, which allowed the phenolic ripeness of the fruit to catch up with sugar ripeness, which had been in advance. While normally warmer areas, especially in Eastern Mendoza, were likely to have yielded wines with a pronounced jammy character, it was usually a mistake to hurry the harvest. Malbec, syrah and merlot generally did best, while some later-ripening varieties, like cabernet, were affected by rain late in the harvest.

Two thousand five, in contrast, began with a cool, rainy spring and a late bud break. Early May frost reduced the crop size in some areas, especially for malbec, whose flowering was drawn out. It was then a generally cooler than normal summer without extremes of heat, which extended the ripening process and made for a later than average harvest with wide variations in picking dates depending on location. There were a couple of rain events during the harvest, but both were followed by sunny, windy weather that mostly prevented rot from developing. Ultimately, the grapes achieved very good physiological maturity and concentration while retaining sound acidity levels. The best wines are very well balanced, with rather elegant tannins. Malbec performed very well, as did cabernet sauvignon, which could capitalize on the long, dry summer and early fall.

Many insiders consider 2006 to be even better. Following a mostly humid and cool but otherwise uneventful spring without major frosts, the flowering was healthy and even. One significant late December hailstorm affected some sites in Vistalba and Alto Agrelo, not far from the city of Mendoza. January was very dry and hot, but a couple of well-timed rains in February followed by sunny, dry weather helped the ripening process. March was cool and dry, with sunny days and unusually chilly nights. These clement conditions helped the fruit achieve superb ripeness and concentration: good color, good tannins, and an ideal sugar/acid balance. The weather in April continued to be fine, and some of the latest-picked cabernets are extremely rich, with alcohol levels often higher than usual. Many growers consider their 2006s to be potentially great, often comparing them in color and aromatic character to their 2003s, but with perhaps slightly more consistency and alcohol.

91

2006 Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Treinta y Dos Patagonia

(\$110) Deep red, with a unfiltered appearance. Pungent aromas of floral red fruits, spices, herbs, blood orange and smoked meat. Not thick but penetrating and vibrant, conveying intense, high-pitched flavors of cherry, raspberry and rose petal. No shortage of density here, but this wine is impressive for its sheer juiciness and flavor intensity. Finishes very long and lively, with terrific grip. Without question the finest bottle of pinot noir I've tasted to date from Argentina. This held up very well with extended time in the recorked bottle. The names of these two wines reflect the years the vineyards were planted.

90(+?)

2006 Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Cincuenta y Cinco Patagonia

(\$90) Good full red. Musky aromas of strawberry, smoke and brown spices; lower-toned than the Treinta y Dos. Then big, rich, mouthfilling and sweet, with more volume but less lift than its stablemate. A lush, round, impressive pinot with flavors of strawberry, spices and earth. Seriously structured wine with substantial ripe tannins. This is more horizontal in style than the relatively vertical, Chambolle-like Treinta y Dos. After literally six days in the recorked bottle, this actually showed more tangy raspberry and strawberry fruit. (These notes were from my third tasting of this pair of pinots, from the new venture of Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, of Sassicaia fame. In late August, shortly after being shipped to the U.S., the wines were solid but not special; in November they showed much more intensity and definition; and in December they were outstanding. In other words, they behaved very much like Burgundies, which typically need time to settle down after being shipped and require careful handling. But my latest tasting suggests that the tiny crop levels harvested here, and the no-expenses-spared grape-growing and winemaking, are yielding pinot noirs with the potential for greatness.) (Kobrand, Inc., New York, NY)