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drinking out loud

Why "Exotic" Is Essential

To become great wine countries, Argentina and Chile need distinctive wineries that offer an altogether new vision

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Posted: April 20, 2010

One of the questions I've been asked most frequently while living in Argentina is, "What do you think of the local wine industry?"

It's a vague question, and I imagine the answer that they're seeking is something along the anodyne lines of, "It's a great wine industry with wonderful wines," etc.

But this question did get me to thinking about what I *really* think about Argentina's wine industry. My first, knee-jerk, instinct was to focus on the domination of really big wine companies in both Chile and Argentina, such as Chilean giant Concha y Toro and, in Argentina, the likes of Peñaflor (Trapiche), which exports nearly 2.3 million 12-bottle cases annually, or Bodegas Esmeralda (Alamos, Catena), which exports more than 1.6 million cases. Mind you, those figures don't even account for their almost equally substantial in-country sales.

Clearly, the big boys are present, and there's no disputing their equally outsized influence—much of which is admirable, it should be noted. But living here in Argentina has made me realize something that had not previously coalesced in my mind: the importance of what might be called "exotic" wineries. The term is deliberately chosen and is, I recognize, an unusual one. Allow me to explain.

The dictionary definition of "exotic"—at least in the sense that I'm referring to—is "strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different or unusual." We see it with "exotic cars" (Ferrari, Maserati) or "exotic fruits," among other items.

Here, I'm referring to a necessary—even vital—distinction from the usual dichotomy of small wineries and big ones. Back in the 1970s and well into the '80s, especially in California, the cosmology of California wine comprised that simple division. You had the big outfits such as Gallo, Italian Swiss Colony and, later, the likes of Benzinger and Kendall-Jackson. Then you had the so-called boutique wineries that represented a different kind of ambition, as well as ambitious pricing.

Size said everything, or so it seemed. I still remember how, when I interviewed Robert Mondavi for *Wine Spectator* in 1987, he chafed over how critics saw his wines through the distorting lens of big wineries versus boutiques. "I don't want to talk about numbers anymore because we have been hurt by that," said Mr. Mondavi. "They [the critics] look at only boutique wineries; they don't look at the quality of what you produce."

Were we critics wrong back then—or even now? I don't think so. There was then, and still is today, a substantive difference between the ambitions of small wineries and big ones.

Exotics are an essential part of the wine ecology. Sure, their numbers are small. But their importance and influence are disproportionately large.

I continue to believe what I wrote in a 2002 *Wine Spectator* column called "Why Size Matters." I wrote then:

“There's an inverse relationship between size and courage—or at least adventurousness. If you're going to place a big bet, you're going to look for the safest one that you can make.... Big wineries play it safe because they must. They have too large an audience to risk alienating anyone. They will not create the most original wines precisely because their audience is too large. The middle ground is their *terroir*.”

That said, my time in Argentina has persuaded me to add further nuance to this assertion. Do both Argentina and Chile have small (5,000 cases, 10,000 cases, whatever) wineries? They do. I don't know the precise count, but I'll bet that the number is several hundred, at minimum. After all, the Mendoza region alone counts some 1,000 wineries.

What seems to be lacking—or is at least in greater need—in Argentina (and I imagine in Chile as well) are “exotic” wineries. These are wineries that are not merely small. It is entirely possible—indeed it's all too common—for small wineries to be every bit as timid and play-it-safe as the big boys.

Instead, an exotic winery is one where some distinctive element of its nature results in an altogether new vision for wine. Perhaps it's the outsized ambition of its owner (think Angelo Gaja), or the far-out distinction of its vineyard site (David Lett of Eyrie Vineyards planting Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris in Oregon in 1966), or the originality of a winemaker's approach (Josko Gravner's use of terra-cotta amphorae to age his wines). Indeed, some of these guys create whole new wine industries, as David Lett did in Oregon, or raise the bar to a new level of quality, as Jim Clendenen of Au Bon Climat did in Santa Barbara County.

Such exotics are an essential part of the wine ecology. Sure, their numbers are small. But their importance and influence are disproportionately large.

Perhaps the best analogy is haute-couture fashion designers. They are few in number. Their runway designs are all but unwearable. And their more wearable, real-world, made-to-order outfits are affordable only to the very few consumers who have both the money and the interest. (In wine, Burgundy's Domaine Leroy comes to mind.)

But in the ecosystem of fashion, the visions and volcanic creativity of these designers drive a broad industry, including businesses that would seem far removed from the runways of Paris, Milan and New York.

For example, many years ago my brother was a corporate buyer for all Macy's stores. He was buying bathroom towels at the time. “Avocado will be what we'll be selling next year,” he proclaimed. “That's what everyone will want.”

“How can you know this?” I asked. “Because that was the hot color on the runways two years ago,” he replied. “It trickles down to towels and bedsheets. And then eventually it gets to household appliances.” He was right.

The analogy clearly applies to the wine ecosystem as well. What I call the exotic wineries play an haute-couture role in pioneering creative new approaches in winegrowing and, not least, in shaping the larger wine culture.

In that regard, size doesn't necessarily preclude being an exotic. The best example I know is Robert Mondavi from the time he started his own winery in 1966 through the 1980s. Can anyone doubt his transformative role in reshaping California's and America's wine culture? His is the (rare) example of a really sizable winery playing in the exotic league, entirely thanks to the man's singularly questing personality.

Does Argentina have exotic wineries? It does. I would count among them Achával-Ferrer in the Mendoza zone; Bodega Tacuil (owned by the Davalos family that previously owned nearby Bodega Colomé) and the revitalized Bodega Colomé (now owned by Donald Hess) in Salta province; and Bodega Chacra in Patagonia, to name but four.

All of these producers, in their respective fashions, are engaged in out-of-the-mainstream wine visions: Bodega Tacuil and Bodega Colomé in cultivating extreme vineyard sites at ultrahigh elevations in remote locations;

Achával-Ferrer by employing high-risk winemaking techniques that are virtually unique in Argentina (I intend to write about Achával-Ferrer's winemaking at greater length in a future column); and Bodega Chacra in creating one-of-a-kind Pinot Noirs from an almost 80-year-old vineyard in Patagonia.

Are there others? Surely there are. And I would very much welcome your nominations. But regardless of the final count, I think it's safe to say that Argentina needs more such wineries. Because these visionary, original, even way-out wineries are more essential to a great winegrowing nation than their modest numbers would ever suggest.