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# Bodega Chacra

## Río Negro, Argentina

NATALIE GUINOVART, CWE, DWS

### AN ITALIAN WINEMAKER CONNECTS WITH THE LAND OF PATAGONIA.

#### *Bodega Chacra*

Avenida Roca 1945  
General Roca  
Río Negro  
Argentina  
+54-294-1605125  
www.bodegachacra.com  
Importer: Kobrand  
Corporation  
www.kobrand.com



*Natalie Guinovart is a freelance wine writer and educator based in Denver. A certified sommelier, she currently teaches courses for the Wine & Spirit Education Trust at Johnson and Wales University. Since trading in her apron for a corkscrew just six years ago, she has achieved numerous awards and certifications, including the prestigious Banfi Award for the highest score on the 2008 Certified Wine Educator exam. She can be reached at Natalie@wineforthought.com.*

The first time I tasted a Pinot Noir from Patagonia was on a 2005 visit to Argentina's southernmost point, Tierra del Fuego. At a fine-dining restaurant, our server recommended a Pinot to go with a rich, spit-roasted lamb. Wary of drinking a light-bodied red rather than a bold, well-structured Syrah or Bordeaux, but eager to try a local wine, I agreed. To my surprise, the wine was the color of black raspberries, had weight and substance on the palate, and paired beautifully with the lamb. The label read "Río Negro, Patagonia." I couldn't imagine that the Patagonia I was experiencing—this frigid land of penguins and glaciers—was capable of producing a Pinot of such profundity.

Fast-forward five years: I find myself standing in a Pinot Noir vineyard in Río Negro, rough-

ly 1,000 miles north of Tierra del Fuego, yet still part of this exotic land called Patagonia. There are no glaciers or penguins here, only open desert, endless blue sky, radiant sunshine, and winds that howl like banshees. On my quest to discover what made that first Patagonian Pinot so unlike any other I had tasted, I have stumbled upon one of the best Pinot Noir producers in the world—Bodega Chacra.

Río Negro shares the same latitude with most of New Zealand, between 38° and 41° south, and has a moderate-to-cool climate (Region II on the Winkler scale). In fact, it's so far south that the days are long during the growing season, meaning plenty of sunshine. But the temperature quickly plummets with the sun, creating a diurnal fluctuation of as much as 40°F. In the

kind of long, steady ripening season that Pinot Noir loves, the vines produce small quantities and tight bunches of tiny, healthy berries with thick skins, accounting for the unique depth of color and dimension in the wines.

Irrigation canals were established by English settlers in the mid-1820s to take advantage of the fresh Andean snowmelt, making agriculture possible in this otherwise dry and desolate region. A constant wind flows through the valley, virtually eliminating pests and disease.

Of the five delimited regions in Río Negro, the Alto Valle seems best suited for high-quality winegrowing. Here, in 2002, Piero Incisa della Rochetta (whose grandfather established Tenuta San Guido in Bolgheri, Italy) discovered two old vineyards that had been abandoned by local farmers. Planted in 1932 and 1955, they were still on their original rootstocks, the limestone-tinged alluvial soils untouched by phylloxera. Using biodynamic practices, Incisa della Rochetta was able to restore these vines; since the winery's first release in 2006, they have formed the basis of Chacra's flagship wines, Treinta y Dos ('32) and Cincuenta y Cinco ('55).

Biodynamics is just one example of what Incisa della Rochetta describes as his "total con-



*Bodega Chacra's 1955 vineyard (left); Pinot Noir grapes (top); winery (above); Piero Incisa della Rochetta (bottom).*

nection" to the land. He recalls that his grandfather, who wrote a couple of books on agriculture, opposed the use of pesticides and conventional farming methods. Although Incisa della Rochetta admits that "it's easy to be self-convincing," he firmly believes that biodynamics "produces tangible results." But he's quick to add that he has no intention of using it as a marketing tool: "Fashion is boring. I'm interested in character, in identity."

Bodega Chacra rarely receives visitors. That may come as no surprise considering its remote location, but it's also a matter of philosophy—everything here is about the wine. The morning my first interview with Incisa della Rochetta was scheduled, we were told it would be pushed back a couple of hours because "conditions were finally perfect to take photographs from the plane." Indeed, the atmosphere was as clear as crystal, the dust and wind from the day before a distant



## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

### Pinot Noir Treinta y Dos

2009 \$79

Limpid black raspberry in color. The nose is neither obvious nor elusive, but seductive, gently unraveling in the glass. The wine smells of roses, dark cherry, mulberry, sage, sandalwood, frankincense, and vanilla. Layers of spice and a deep, almost indescribable minerality come through with aeration. Like the 2008 version, this '32 is positively luscious yet impeccably poised and oh, so long. Approachable now, it will evolve beautifully over the next seven to 10 years. Only 5,868 bottles were produced, each hand-numbered. Enjoy with roasted Patagonian lamb or duck or with butternut-squash ravioli.

### Pinot Noir Cincuenta y Cinco

2009 \$58

Medium-ruby core with a pale-ruby rim. Whiffs of bacon, rhubarb, musk, and dried leaves distinguish this wine, made from a vineyard adjacent to the '32, but stylistically a world apart. While the '32 is both voluptuous and elegant, the '55 has what the French call a *force tranquille*—a quietly intense expression. Its medium-bodied, lifted, bright-cherry core is completed by a long finish. About 8,000 bottles were made.

### Pinot Noir Barda

2009 \$29

Made from new plantings near the *barda*, or ridge, where the soils are less fertile, this garnet-colored wine offers a good, juicy introduction to the Chacra style. Pretty aromas of red cherry, wild strawberry, and citrus peel are followed by a light-to-medium-bodied palate with effusive, almost confected cherry and bright-strawberry fruit, light earth, clear minerality, and acidic focus. Best enjoyed with food, particularly lean dishes with exotic or sweet spices.

Prices are current estimated retail.

memory. As we walked through the vineyards, a little white prop plane glided overhead. Later, when I asked Incisa della Rochetta why he was taking pictures, he told me he was looking for discrepancies, irregularities, or patches of vineyard that could be improved.

That perfectionism extends to the winemaking. Renowned Danish-South African vintner Hans Vinding-Diers was recruited from neighboring Bodega Noemía, where he also makes wine for Incisa della Rochetta's cousin, Noemi Cinzano. "When the Bodega Chacra opportunity came along," says Vinding-Diers, "it was perfect because I could still make the wine, but not worry about the launching of the project—which could not have been done by a better per-

son than Piero himself. The first time I vinified Pinot Noir was for Humberto Canale in 1999 in the Río Negro; the funny part is that I was brought up in Bordeaux, and I visited Burgundy for the first time ever in 2010, with Piero and Rajat Parr." At Chacra, Vinding-Diers uses no mechanization in the vineyards or at the gravity-flow winery. Grapes are hand-picked in the early morning and carefully placed into small bins so as to not rupture the fruit. When they arrive in the cellar, they are fermented with ambient yeasts in small, custom-designed cement tanks. Some lots undergo partial carbonic maceration, adding a voluptuous texture.

The Chacra team is always "performing lots of carefully managed trials," Incisa della Rochetta says, "not to confuse the consumer by drastically altering the style of the wine from one year to the next, but to convey the maximum character from the grapes year after year." In 2010, what Incisa della Rochetta considers "the best vintage for Pinot Noir so far, with a stronger impression of minerality," they scaled back the oak by using larger barrels and by reducing toast levels and aging time. In Incisa della Rochetta's view, this allowed them to "prioritize the mineral aspects, the raciness, conveying a certain sobriety and intellectuality to the wine."

Two interviews and tastings were enough to convince me that Incisa della Rochetta possesses this same combination of sobriety and intellectuality. By treating his vines and the land on which they grow with the utmost respect, and by making wine with a singular focus and passion, he has led Bodega Chacra to the pinnacle of Pinot Noir in South America. 🍷

Pinot Noir skins saved for composting (left); fermentation vat (right).



Photo by Wayne Maszer (right)