



Regional profile

# Patagonia, Argentina

OK, they don't make wine in the exact spot above, but with vineyards at 39° south, this fledgling cool-climate region is the end of the world in viticultural terms. Andrew Catchpole visits its pioneering producers, and recommends bodegas and bottles



*'It's the wines, rather than penguins and glaciers, now putting Patagonia on the map'*

– Andrew Catchpole

IT'S A LONG, long drive south from Mendoza to the northern stretches of Patagonia; a dawn to dusk ride through increasingly barren, scrubby lands, punctuated only by the occasional modest cluster of rustic haciendas by the roadside. It comes as a relief to crest the low ridge that marks out the course of the Río Negro and be met by a verdant swathe of irrigated green in this otherwise inhospitable countryside. Beyond this oasis of life lies another 2,500km of relentlessly windswept, rocky terrain before the icy tip of Cape Horn.

Photograph: Peter Adams/JAI/Corbis

But down in the shallow depression, and centred between the town of Neuquén and the older region of Río Negro, lies the most exciting, up-and-coming Argentinian region for cool-climate wines. It's also

one of the world's most southerly, at 39° latitude. Sure enough, there's great Malbec here, producing incredibly concentrated, yet minerally intense and lively wines. But there's also a gamut of other varieties, from Sauvignon Blanc, attractively scented Viognier and poised Chardonnay to red fruit-infused Cabernet Franc, elegantly structured Cabernet Sauvignon and surprisingly good Merlot of appealing, plummy depth.

All can be (and often are) excellent. Yet the variety that provides the clearest signpost to the fresh, temperate climate of this region is Pinot Noir, which has arguably become Patagonia's signature grape. And it is primarily Pinot Noir that has lured a number of pioneering, enterprising winemakers

**Above: the Perito Moreno glacier is a major tourist draw in Patagonia, but with the host of new bodegas opening in the past decade, focus is now turning towards the region's elegant, cool-climate wines**



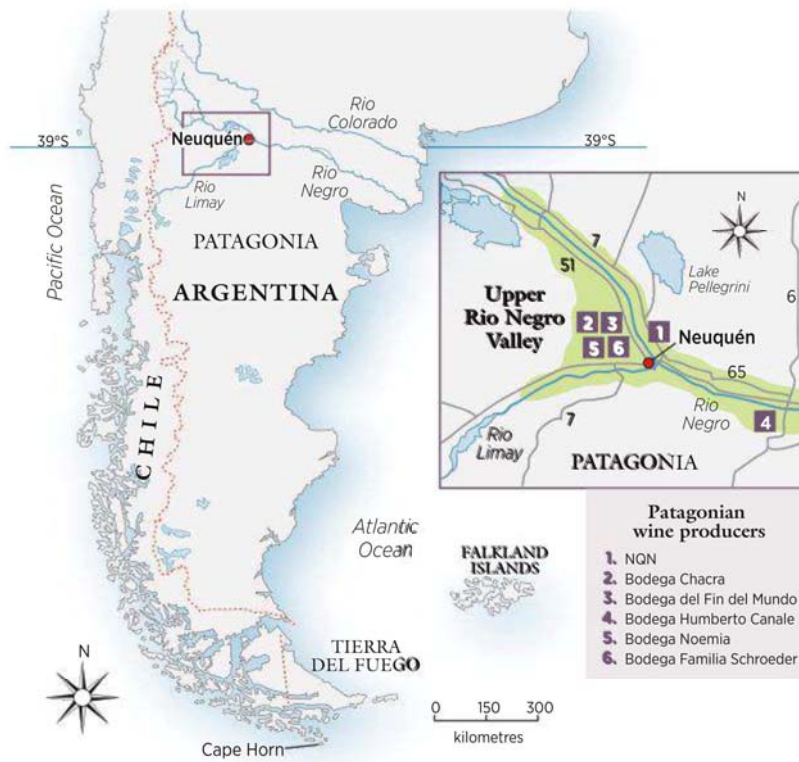
Patagonia at a glance

Neuquén

**Area under vine**  
1,632 hectares  
**Altitude** 275m  
**Main varieties**  
Malbec (562ha)  
Cabernet Sauvignon (282ha)  
Merlot (246ha)  
Pinot Noir (215ha)  
Syrah (35ha)  
Cabernet Franc (27ha)  
Tannat (5ha)  
Petit Verdot (5ha)  
Chardonnay (112ha)  
Sauvignon Blanc (71ha)  
Torrontes (10ha)  
Viognier (9ha)  
**Soil** A mix of heavier clays and poor, stony sand at higher elevations  
**Vine age** 10-15 years  
**Producers** Nine  
**Climate** Warm, sunny days and cool nights combine with persistent breezes to create long ripening periods in this dry, continental climate

Río Negro

**Area under vine**  
2,636 hectares  
**Altitude** 260m  
**Main varieties**  
Merlot (340ha)  
Malbec (339ha)  
Syrah (131ha)  
Pinot Noir (113ha)  
Cabernet Sauvignon (101ha)  
Tempranillo (39ha)  
Torrontès (512ha)  
Chardonnay (30ha)  
Sauvignon Blanc (46ha)  
**Soil:** Ranging from richer alluvial soils to poor, stony sand back from the river  
**Vine age** 10-60 years  
**Producers** 27  
**Climate** Cold winters and warm, dry summers, tempered by Andean breezes and the moderating influence of the river, deliver long ripening periods



Above: Bodega del Fin del Mundo winemaker Marcelo Miras. Top: old barrels at Humberto Canale

here, who have upped sticks and made a home along the Río Negro and around Neuquén, on the margins of viable viticulture.

This narrow slice of Patagonia has long been a big fruit-growing area. But it's not until you visit the century-old, colonial-style bodega of Humberto Canale that you realise wine has been around here for a long time too. 'There used to be many other bodegas when the family built this winery, but Humberto Canale is the only one that is still here,' explains oenologist Horacio Bibiloni. Full marks to this fourth-generation family-run winery for surviving – even more so, as it produces very elegant, European-style wines. Its Old-Vine Reserve Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc and Merlot are all particularly worthy of mention.

Youth and vitality

Pockets of surviving old vines notwithstanding, what has really put Patagonia on the map has been the arrival of a host of new bodegas, mostly in the past eight years, in the wake of Julio Viola. This entrepreneur arrived in 1996, snapped up more than 3,000 hectares of desert, installed irrigation (at huge expense), then sold parcels off to what would become NQN, Familia Schroeder and Valle Perdido, retaining a third of the land for his own project, the aptly named Bodega del Fin del Mundo.

This might not quite be the end of the world, but standing high on the gantry walkways peering across the gleaming rows of steel tanks, Bodega del Fin del Mundo certainly feels otherworldly, especially in such a remote location. Winemaker Marcelo Miras explains why Patagonia has such special conditions for ripening grapes: 'The

*'The all-important thing is the latitude here'* – Marcelo Miras (above)

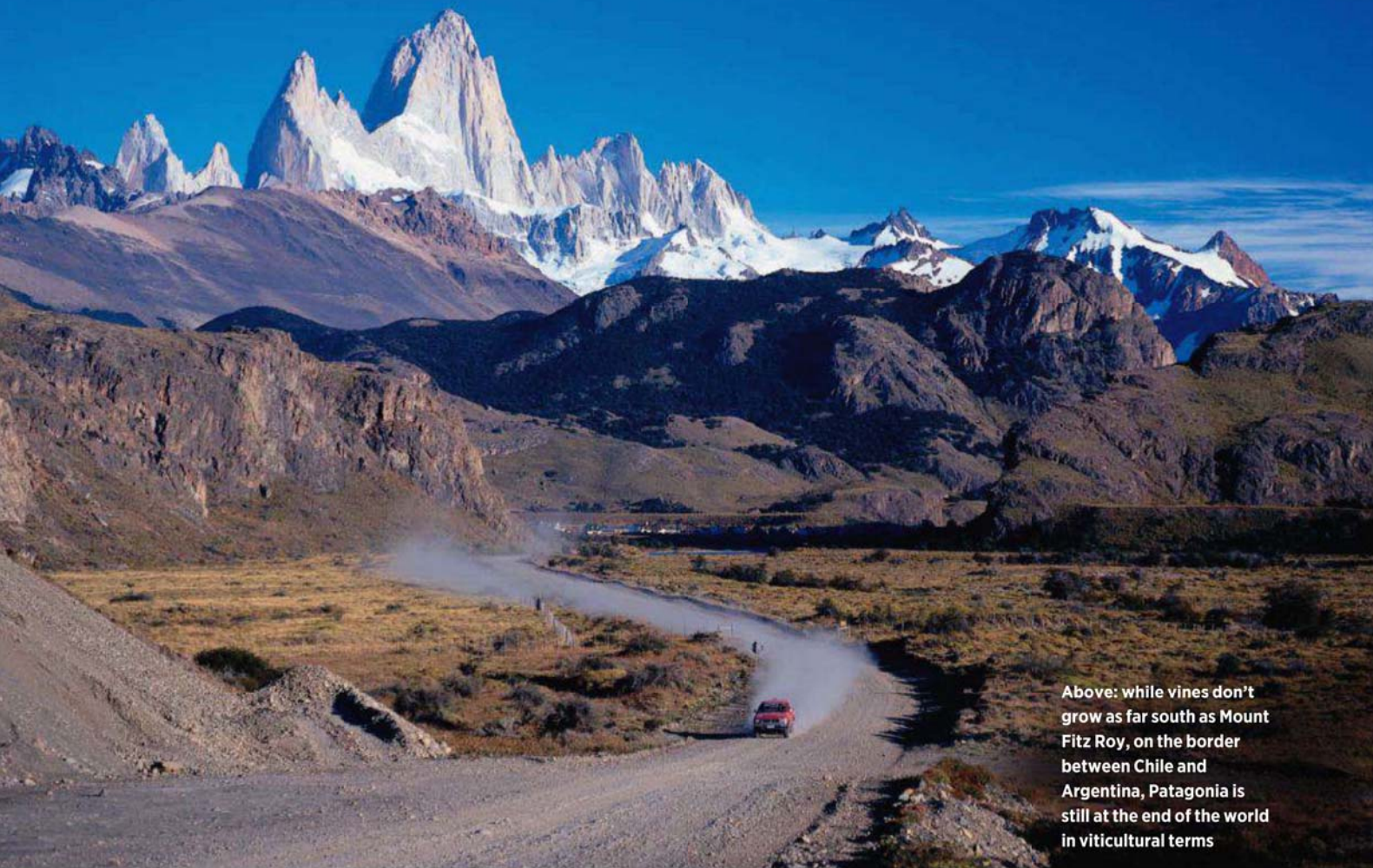
all-important thing is the latitude here,' he said. 'It is a very dry area and we have only 100mm of rain a year, but we also have sunny days, and an ideal range in day and night temperature between 30°C and 10°C, which is perfect for keeping the colour and aromatic qualities in the maturing grapes.'

The fine balance between concentration, aromatic lift, minerality and natural acidity is what defines the best of Patagonia's wines. That and the youth of the region (Humberto Canale being the honourable exception), which means that most vines are young, and experimentation – seeking out the best varieties in the best sites – continues apace as vigneron hone their understanding of the terroir. Leading Argentinian producer Catena Zapata has given its blessing, with a Patagonia project on the go and the first wines expected later this year.

'This is such a young region that almost all the winemakers here are consultants from Mendoza,' says Lucas Nemesio at NQN. An ex-architect himself (which explains the sleek modern lines of NQN's winery and cellar door), Nemesio works closely with consultant winemaker Roberto de la Mota from Mendel wines. The resulting Malbec, Merlot and Pinot Noir are all excellent – modern, yet infused with a freshness and balanced intensity that makes them arguably the best value wines in Patagonia.

'The thing is that with such young vines we still don't know exactly in which direction we will be going in the future,' continues Nemesio. 'Humberto

Photographs: Fridmar Damm/Huber/4Corners. Map: Maggie Nelson



Above: while vines don't grow as far south as Mount Fitz Roy, on the border between Chile and Argentina, Patagonia is still at the end of the world in viticultural terms

## Patagonian pioneers: six producers to watch

### NQN

Ex-architect Lucas Nemesio fronts up this modern bodega combining sleek winery design and relaxed cellar door dining, rooted in local cuisine, with some of the most exciting, best-value wines of the region. It's the intense, violet-scented, pure Malbecs and Malbec-Bordeaux varietal blends of the Coleccion range that stand out, along with the supple ripeness of the ageworthy Malma Merlots.



### Humberto Canale

Recently celebrating its 100th anniversary, and with Guillermo Barzi the fourth-generation descendant of engineer-turned-

winemaker Humberto Canale now presiding over the winery, this historic Río Negro estate makes some of the region's most attractive, European-style wines, especially the elegant Pinot Noir and plush Merlot. (*Its grape pickers' tokens are pictured, left.*)

### Bodega Chacra

An old winemaking property in Río Negro dating back to 1932, Chacra was revived by Sassicaia family member Piero Incisa della Rocchetta in 2004 with the aim of making great Pinot Noir in this promising but uncharted area. Using only biodynamic and natural winemaking methods, and drawing on fruit from vines planted in 1955 and 1932, Chacra's minimalist winery delivers wines of great purity and complexity.

### Bodega del Fin del Mundo

One of the largest of the new wave of Patagonian wineries, established in 1996, with vines



planted as recently as 1999 after completion of a 20km irrigation project. Julio Viola founded the Neuquén wine region, and this modern bodega, with its full gamut of wines (*above*) from Sauvignon Blanc to Cabernet Franc, is a great and accessible introduction to the diversity of Patagonia's climate and soils.

### Bodega Noemia

From his first vintage, bottled in 2001, winemaker Hans Vinding-Diers uses a blend of biodynamic vineyard practices, meticulous hand picking and selection, and non-interventionist winemaking to best coax the indigenous character from his rediscovered

1932 Malbec vines. It's pricey, but the concentrated yet beautifully balanced flagship wine, Bodegas Noemia, is among the country's best Malbecs.

### Bodega Familia Schroeder

Another of Neuquén's new-wave wineries (*below*) was founded by four brothers of German descent, drawn here by the cool climate and deep-draining soils. Mineral intensity in the top-end Saurus wines, including Malbec, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, is highlighted by the giant bones from an *Aeolosaurus* on display at the bodega, found when the Schroeders dug into the ancient land to build the winery.





*‘Our cool climate and fresh natural acidity means there’s so much potential for so many varieties and styles’*

– Lucas Nemesio of NQN

Left: The sleek, modern winery design at NQN is matched by the wines – some of Argentina’s most expensive, but with a broad and loyal following

Canale made Patagonian Merlot and Pinot Noir famous, but our cool climate and fresh natural acidity means there’s so much potential for so many varieties and styles, and we also have very healthy conditions for the vines.’

### Oasis in the desert

There’s a good affinity between Patagonian cuisine and its wines, as demonstrated at NQN’s relaxed cellar door restaurant and the boutique hotel-come-winery Valle Perdido. The secret is in all that natural acidity: zingy Sauvignon Blanc with fish; crisp Chardonnay with trout empanadas; Pinot Noir with succulent local lamb or wild rabbit... Malbec with rich roasted kid and the ever-present barbecue meat-fest...

Further on, at bodegas Noemia and Chacra, the wines are not cheap, but there’s no shortage of customers queuing up to get their hands on a few bottles – so much so that exports to the UK, US and elsewhere are strictly allocated.

The mineral concentration and fresh core of Noemia’s range, from the great-value A Lisa Malbec, Merlot and Petit Verdot, to the older-vine Malbec-based J Alberto, and the elegant and voluptuous – if expensive – Noemia flagship, are a clear statement of the heady heights Patagonia can achieve. So too is the elegant weight and supple length of Chacra’s sublime, older-vine Pinot Noirs, again showing what this region can deliver as the vineyards gain maturity.

It all adds up to an oasis of rising quality in the middle of a windswept desert at the edges of the wine world. With the wines, rather than penguins and glaciers, now putting Patagonia on the map, it’s likely we’ll be hearing a lot more from this remarkable region. **D**

*Andrew Catchpole is a wine, food and travel writer, and former wine correspondent for The Daily Telegraph*

## Super six from Neuquén & Río Negro

**Bodega Noemia, Noemia Malbec, Río Negro 2008 ★★★★★ 19.5/20**  
£65–£84.95 **Majestic, Roberson**

A 1.5ha pocket of vines dating to 1932 is behind this extremely elegant, yet wonderfully concentrated, complex Malbec, exhibiting seamless balance to its lingering, mineral-tinged conclusion.

**Drink:** 2012–2020. **Alc:** 14%

**Bodega Chacra, Chacra 32 Pinot Noir, Río Negro 2009 ★★★★★ 19**

£58.50 **Lea & Sandeman**

From Chacra’s prized, ungrafted, pre-phylloxera, 1932 vineyard, this highly focused, finely textured, wonderfully supple Pinot offers red and black berry fruits over an intense, more savoury core, showing great length.

**Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 13.5%

**Bodega Noemia, A Lisa, Río Negro 2008 ★★★★★ 18**

£22.95 **Handford, Harvey Nichols, Lea & Sandeman**

Malbec plus splashes of Merlot and Petit Verdot deliver red cherry and darker berry fruit, balanced by lively natural acidity, to give a fresh, round, elegant and forward-drinking wine of great value and appeal.

**Drink:** 2011–2014. **Alc:** 14%



**Humberto Canale, Gran Reserva Pinot Noir, Río Negro 2009 ★★★★★ 17.5**

£15.99 **Enotria, Great Western Wine, Slurp, Swig**

Low-yielding old vines give a fresh, aromatic Pinot with elegant, European-style red fruit over supple, savoury depths, finishing on a whiff of earthy spice.

**Drink:** 2011–2015. **Alc:** 14%

**NQN, Malma Reserva Malbec, Neuquén 2007 ★★★★★ 17.5**

£14.99 **Hispa Merchants, Oxford Wine Co, Philglas & Swigott**

Fresh berry and damson fruit depth, rich chocolate and spicy notes, with a balancing thread of fresh mineral acidity. **Drink:** 2011–2016. **Alc:** 14.5%

**Humberto Canale, Estate Pinot Noir, Río Negro 2009 ★★★★★ 16.5**

£9.99 **Enotria, Good Wines, Great Western Wine, Highbury Vintners, Latin Wine Online, Slurp, South American Wine Online, Swig**

A great-value Pinot, with bright varietal fruit on the nose, plus attractive strawberry and hints of spice on the palate, finishing fresh and long.

**Drink:** 2011–2013. **Alc:** 14%

*For full details of UK stockists, see p123*