

BODEGA CHACRA

PATAGONIA - RIO NEGRO

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Argentine Reds You Should Know



Mention Argentina and wine, and the first word that comes to any oenophile's mind will be "malbec." Argentina's success with its signature red grape over the past decade has been astounding and could be a case study for marketing classes. Argentina's wine exports to the United States have surpassed Chile's. Cahors, the French appellation that relies on the grape, has defied French convention by putting its name on labels and branding its wine as "the French malbec."

Well, surprise: Argentina has much more to offer than just malbec.

Think fresh, elegant cabernet sauvignon; plummy, earthy syrah; and juicy bonarda. Most exciting may be Argentina's pinot noir, including some delicious examples that prove once and for all that pinot does not have to be expensive to be good. (For this column, I'll stick to red wines, though I'm partial to the aromatic whites made from the torrantes grape.)

These other varieties thrive alongside malbec in Mendoza, Argentina's main wine region in the Andes foothills, and growers keep climbing to higher altitudes to plant new vineyards. More altitude means brighter sun but cooler temperatures, helping grapes ripen fully while retaining acidity and avoiding high sugar levels and the resulting alcohol.

To help make sense of Argentina's diversity, I sought guidance from Laura Catena, winemaker at her family's Catena Zapata winery in Mendoza and author of "Vino Argentino: An Insider's Guide to the Wines and Wine Country of Argentina" (Chronicle, 2010).

"I see a lot of potential for cabernet sauvignon in Mendoza," she wrote via e-mail. "In the clay soils of Lujan de Cuyo, it is rich and dense, with mostly dark fruits. As one goes higher into Tupungato (west toward the mountains) or south in the southern part of the Uco Valley, it is cooler and the cab sauv has more... mint, acidity and nice density, more Bordeaux style."

I've always been impressed with the cabernet from Catena, from its basic bottling (\$24) to its Alta (\$40) and the winery's flagship cab-malbec blend, called Nicolas Catena Zapata. The house style — well, maybe a national style to some extent — is elegant and fresh, with some appealing mintiness and tannins that give structure but remain nearly invisible beneath the fruit.

Bonarda is more widely planted than cabernet. "It's a really fun wine," Catena says. "Incredibly aromatic with bright red-fruit aromas, and an almost sweet-and-sour taste that makes it ideal for pasta with tomato sauce and pizza."

Researchers at the University of California at Davis determined that bonarda is the same grape as charbono, which used to be featured in California's jug reds but is now mainly an expensive novelty if it can be found at all. Luckily, bonarda from Argentina remains affordable. I can't remember a bonarda I didn't like; two current favorites are the bright, juicy Nuna Reserve 2009 (\$17) and the lively, earthier Nieto Senetiner Reserva 2010 (\$16).

Catena likes the potential for syrah in La Rioja, a region northeast of Mendoza where she is planting syrah, malbec and petit verdot at an elevation of 6,500 feet. She is known for her syrah under the Luca label grown in the Uco Valley of Mendoza.

I fell for the Los Ailos Syrah Reserve 2009 from the Tulum Valley in San Juan, a small, windswept region between Mendoza and La Rioja.

Ah, but those pinots. I swooned for the light, perfumed and minerally Barda Pinot Noir 2010 from Bodega Chacra in the southern region of Patagonia. It's a sly wine that wrapped itself around my imagination so subtly that before I realized it, I was in love. It's similar to a lighter Burgundy such as Santenay and priced accordingly at \$30. Although the Barda was my favorite, I found several commendable pinots under \$15, including the terrific 2010 reserve from Nieto Senetiner (\$13).

With these reds — and we haven't yet explored blends — we have evidence that Argentina's magic formula is not limited to malbec.

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Bodega Chacra Barda Pinot Noir 2010

Three Stars

Patagonia, Argentina, \$30

Light and austere, like the minor Burgundy appellation of Santenay; coyly seductive, drawing you back as the evening progresses, revealing a little more with each sip.

Kobrand/Republic National: Available in the District at Calvert Woodley, MacArthur Beverages; and on the list at Dickson Wine Bar, I Ricchi, Tortilla Coast.

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| by Deb Lindsey