

THE POUR

12 Wines From Argentina and Chile to Seek Out

These distinctive wines show off the character and identity of South American terroirs.



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For many years I rarely found an emotional connection to South American wines.

Not because they were bad. Malbec from Argentina has been so popular that it's become almost a brand name, while Chile can be counted on for sound, moderately priced wines and high-end bottles of polish and gloss.

The wines seemed generic to me, well-made but rarely distinctive. I felt as if they were being shaped by the perceived desires of the market rather than offering their own distinctive characters.

Over the last six or seven years, however, I started to see a change. More and more, I was finding soulful wines that were cracking the stereotypes — or at least my stereotypes. These wines drew me in.

In February, I went shopping at New York wine stores and found a dozen bottles from Argentina and Chile that I eagerly recommend. If I had gone shopping in another month, with different bottles available, I might have put together an entirely different collection.

What sets this dozen apart? Unlike those earlier, more generic bottles, these all have a real sense of place and identity. Of the Chilean examples, I've especially been drawn to those from southern regions like Itata, where farmers have made wine for centuries from old vineyards for local consumption.

Often these wines were made from unfashionable grapes like cinsault and país, or mission, a grape originally brought to Chile centuries ago by the conquistadors.

Until recently, these wines were generally dismissed by Chile's mainstream wine industry, which assumed the international market was more interested in global grapes like cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc, or carménère, which Chile has tried to make its signature grape as Argentina has done with malbec.

Argentina has not plumbed its past to the same extent as Chile. Instead, some of its best producers, not satisfied with making fruity, oaky crowd pleasers, have gone exploring, seeking vineyards at higher altitudes rich in bedrock soils, hoping to make fresher wines more expressive of their terroir.

Often, they have exceeded, making superb examples that both smash the conventional notion of Argentine malbec and demonstrate the potential of other grapes like chardonnay and pinot noir.

These 12 bottles are by no means a complete picture. Chile offers some exceptional high-end bottles from producers like Viñedo Chadwick and Errazuriz. Argentine producers like the Michelini brothers are examining the potential of grapes not often associated with the country, like chenin blanc.

Then you have other countries like Uruguay, from where I've had some excellent tannats, and Brazil, which is making some unusual wines not readily available in the United States. Wine lovers prospecting for new flavors have a lot to explore in South America.

Here are the 12 bottles I suggest, from lowest to highest in price.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Pedro Parra Secano Interior Itata Imaginador Cinsault 2019, 12 percent, \$20

Pedro Parra is a Chilean geologist and terroir consultant who helps wine producers around the world hone an understanding of their vineyards. He also has his hand in some top South American wine producers, like Alto Las Hormigas in Mendoza. His own label focuses on old vineyards in the Itata region of southern Chile, especially those planted on granite soils. This cinsault comes from four vineyards, 45 to 70 years old, in the Secano Interior, the inland side of the coastal mountain range. Some of the vines are growing among other varieties like muscat and sémillon. Imaginador is light-bodied and pale ruby, almost delicate in texture, earthy and floral. It's the kind of red you can serve with seafood. (Skurnik Wines, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Gustavo Riffo Lomas de Llahuen Itata Portezuelo Pipeño 2020, 12.5 percent, \$20, 1 liter

Pipeño is a wine consumed in southern Chile, typically fresh and unaged, mixed by blending whatever grapes grow in the vineyards nearby. It's the sort of wine that locals never imagined might find an audience internationally, yet that's exactly what's happened over the last decade. This delicious example is made of país, otherwise known as mission in the United States, organically grown by Gustavo Riffo. It's fresh and alive, with juicy flavors of fruit and flowers that seem to leap out of the glass. (José Pastor Selections/Llaurador Wines, Fairfax, Calif.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Rogue Vine Itata Valley Grand Itata Blanco 2020, 12.5 percent, \$20

Rogue Vine has been one of the leaders in demonstrating the appeal of wines made from old vineyards in southern Chile. One partner in Rogue, Leonardo Erazo, has had his hands in several exceptional labels, including A Los Viñateros Bravos, another Itata producer. Rogue is especially drawn to hillside vineyards in which the vines are trained into goblet shapes, without trellises, often referred to as head-trained or bush vines in English, and gobelet in French. This white is 45 percent muscat, 30 percent riesling and 25 percent sémillon. It's floral, with an almost honeyed aroma, and lightly fruity, stony flavors that persist long after swallowing. (Brazos Wine Imports, Brooklyn, N.Y.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Luyt Pipeño Blanco Itata Carrizal Familia Ernesto Soto 2021, 12.7 percent, \$25, 1 liter

Pipeño can be white as well as red. Louis-Antoine Luyt, who is French and lives in Chile, makes his own wines while also highlighting interesting terroirs and growers. In this case, it's the Ernesto Soto family, which farms ancient bush vines in the Carrizal area in Itata. This cloudy, unfiltered white is made of muscat, chasselas, sémillon and torontel, otherwise known as torrontes. It is delicious and refreshing, fragrant with aromas of dried flowers and a kind of musky quality, beautifully textured with the flavors of tropical fruits. (Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Cara Sur Calingasta Valley Finca Maggio 2018, 13.5 percent, \$25

Malbec is not the only red grape grown in Argentina. This red from the Calingasta Valley in San Juan, north of Mendoza, is said to be made of bonarda, a grape from the Piedmont region of Italy that is often called the second-most cultivated red grape in Argentina. However, studies have shown that the grapes called bonarda in Argentina can be any number of obscure grapes that came from northwestern Italy or southeastern France. Cara Sur is a personal project of Sebastian Zuccardi, the proprietor of the Zuccardi label in the Uco Valley, and three partners. The wine, which is aged in concrete eggs, is lightly tannic, with earthy, stony flavors. More than 15 different grapes in the vineyard are used for this wine, a mix that is called simply “viejas tintas,” or old red grapes. (Brazos Wine Imports)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Herrera Alvarado Cuero de Vaca Marga Marga Valley 2020, 11 percent, \$28

Wines do not get much more traditional than this red from the Marga Marga Valley in central Chile, east of Valparaiso. Carolina Alvarado and Arturo Herrera harvest old vines of pinot noir and make the wine in an adobe facility without electricity, using the methods of old farmers who have been making wine for home consumption for centuries. The juice is fermented over old cow hides and then pressed through the hide, using it as a sort of natural filter. Rather than tasting gamy or leathery, this is fresh and juicy, almost like a nouveau. It will not remind you of a conventional pinot noir, yet it's singular and beautiful. (José Pastor Selections/Llaurador Wines)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Carmelo Patti Mendoza 2017, 13.5 percent, \$34

Carmelo Patti is an iconoclastic winemaker in Mendoza who's been doing things his way for a long time. His way means fermenting wines in concrete vats with only indigenous yeast and aging the wine until he decides it's ready to be released, often four or five years, several years longer than is typical. The 2017 is the current vintage. It's intense and unpretentious, with fresh, juicy, earthy, flavors of dark fruits and flowers. (Elixir Wine Group, Bend, Ore.)



Zuccardi Uco Valley Paraje Altamira Concreto Malbec 2019, 14 percent, \$45

Zuccardi is one of the top producers in Argentina, specializing in farming high-altitude vineyards in the Uco Valley, making both regional wines that are moderately priced and more expensive wines that examine the intricacies of Uco terroirs. Concreto is one of my favorite malbecs. Whole clusters of grapes, from rocky limestone soils, are simply fermented and aged in concrete vats. It is floral, herbal and lightly fruity, with intensely chalky flavors. (Winesellers, Niles, Ill.)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Altos Las Hormigas Mendoza Appellation Gualtallary Malbec 2018, 13.5 percent, \$49

Altos Las Hormigas makes a terrific \$12 malbec. This one, though more expensive, is not simply pleasing but compelling. Hormigas is an Italian-Argentine partnership that has teamed up with Mr. Parra, the Chilean geologist, to help explore the complicated terroirs of Mendoza. This bottle comes from a vineyard roughly 4,000 feet high in Gualtallary with sandy limestone soils. It's plummy, with an intense minerality that I find irresistible. (Skurnik Wines)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Bodega Chacra Patagonia Pinot Noir Cincuenta y Cinco 2020, 13 percent, \$53

Piero Incisa della Rocchetta could not have found a more out-of-the-way area than the Rio Negro Valley in Argentina to go his own way from the family winemaking business, which happens to be the storied Sassicaia in Tuscany. This area, far from the more familiar Argentine wine region of Mendoza, had what he was looking for: Older vineyards of pinot noir, originally planted for a now defunct sparkling wine project. This wine, Cincuenta y Cinco, is named for the vines, which were planted in 1955 and are now farmed biodynamically. It is beautiful — light-bodied but intense, with floral, stony, fruit flavors that will get deeper and more complex with time, though it is delicious now. (Grand Cru Selections, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Leonardo Erazo Itata Valley Tinajacura Alto Cinsault Amigo Piedra 2019, 13.5 percent, \$72

In addition to the wines he makes for Rogue Vine and A Los Viñateros Bravos, Mr. Erazo started to buy small parcels of vines in Itata, which he uses for his own label. This bottle is made from old vines of cinsault grown in granite with a lot of quartz. It is gorgeous, subtle, lightly floral and fruity, but with powerfully stony undertones. He recommends decanting two hours before serving. It will be fascinating to see how this wine ages. (Ripe Wine Imports, New York)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Catena Zapata Mendoza Adrianna Vineyard White Bones Chardonnay 2019, 13 percent, \$125

More expensive than most wines I recommend, this wine demonstrates the potential of terroirs that, to a great degree, have yet to be unlocked in Mendoza. From the Adrianna Vineyard, almost 5,000 feet high in Gualtallary, Catena Zapata makes two extraordinary chardonnays from nearby parcels that have different soils. One, White Stones, is made from an area with gravelly ground, and tends to be more floral and herbal. This wine is from a plot with more limestone, in which fossilized bones are often found, hence the name. It's generally more stony and austere. Both wines are subtle, nuanced and elegant, sneakily and almost surprisingly intense. (Winebow, New York)

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