



# Destination: Patagonia

by Fabricio G. Portelli

Bariloche is a small city in the mountains of Río Negro, in northwestern Patagonia. In the vast reaches of southern Argentina—where you can cruise to Antarctica, walk on glaciers, stroll along steppes, mountain climb or ski—Bariloche is the ideal starting point, especially when it comes to wine and food.

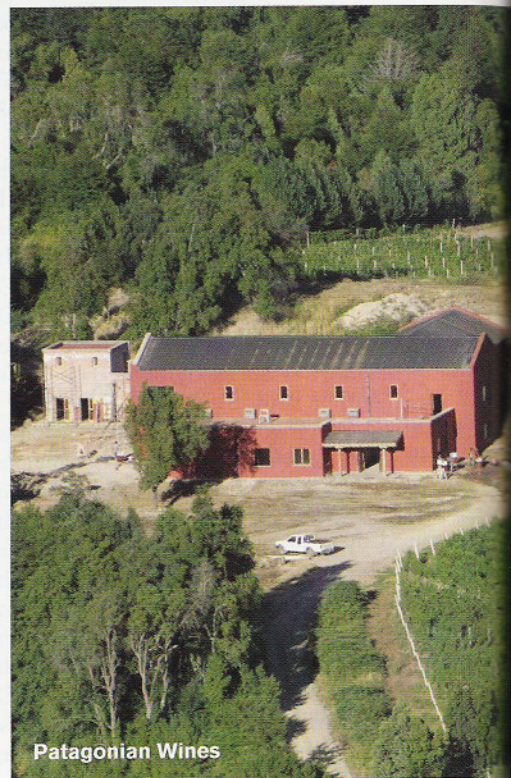
Settled in the early 20th century by German immigrants as a trading post with the local Mapuche tribe, Bariloche's setting has made it a center for adventure travelers from around the world. It's surrounded by high Andean hills and crystal lakes. In winter (from June to September) the city wears spotless white; in summer it takes on the brown of the mountains, the green of the woods and the deep blue of the lakes. Its stone-fronted houses may be rustic, but they are well tended.

On a recent visit to Bariloche I noticed that the hotels and restaurants have multiplied. In what was once a remote town 1,000 miles southwest of Buenos Aires, today there are luxurious hotels and restaurants with world-class chefs who focus on local ingredients (wild game, river fish, lamb, venison, and other game such as guanaco). Many of the smaller restaurants are still family run, as

they have been for years. There are also several new wineries to check out—whether you venture out for a visit or enjoy their wines in local restaurants.

Humberto Canale was the Río Negro pioneer who started growing grapes in Alto Valle nearly 100 years ago. Several wineries have opened more recently, their owners drawn to the weather and landscape of these southern latitudes, most of them focused on varieties that thrive in a short growing season—pinot noir, merlot, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and semillon.

In fact, Patagonia is home to the oldest vines in Argentina for most of these varieties. Consider Chacra, for instance. It's the new project from Piero Incisa della Rochetta, whose family makes Sassicaia at their Tenuta San Guido in Tuscany. What drew him to





Hans Vinding Diers of Noemía and Piero Incisa della Rochetta of Chacra

this region were the pinot noir vineyards he found dating back to 1932.

Many of the best sites gain from a constant cool wind from Antarctica, which moderates the weather so the grapes reach maturity with a high natural acidity. The soil is as poor as the best areas in Mendoza, but often significantly deeper and rockier. So the best wines are fresh, mineral and finely built.

From Bariloche, it's a beautiful two-hour drive south, the road winding over the mountains and across the



steppe to El Hoyo, a valley between the Andes and the Pitriquitron hills. Bernardo Weinert, an important producer in Mendoza, established Patagonian wines here 17 years ago; it's the southernmost winery in the country at 42 degrees latitude.

Located at the heart of a small mountain valley, in the midst of lenga and cypress woods, Patagonian Wines farms 30 acres of vines, producing mostly small lots of chardonnay and pinot noir, among other varieties, that Hubert Weber bottles as young wines after a brief six months in oak. He also produces a complex and elegant sparkling wine, a blend of chardonnay and riesling using the traditional Champagne method. Weber is one of the only enologists working both in Mendoza, where he makes traditional wines, and Patagonia, where his style is more modern. By harvest time, the weather is so cold here that he doesn't require any cooling equipment.

A more ambitious trip—six hours north of Bariloche by car—takes you to Noemía and Chacra, two new Argentine wineries that have already brought international attention to the region.

Hans Vinding Diers, a young Danish enologist, established Noemía with Noemí Cinzano, proprietor of Argiano in Tuscany's Montalcino zone. Their property, surrounding a malbec vineyard planted in the 1930s, is located in Valle Azul, just at the point where civilization ends and the true Patagonia starts. The arid landscape is dominated by the grey, windy Patagonian steppe. The Andes are beyond the horizon, so the view is of an unending plain, as if at the end of the world.



- ▲ 1. Patagonian Wines
- ▲ 2. Humberto Canale
- ▲ 3. Chacra
- ▲ 4. Noemía
- a. Villa de Angostura
- b. Cipolletti
- c. Mainque
- d. Chichinales

Vinding Diers, who trained in Bordeaux, handcrafts malbec at this tiny, artisanal winery. He also makes wines at Chacra, where Cinzano's cousin, Piero Incisa della Rochetta, has developed a collection of old-vine pinot noir blocks nearby (a 30-mile drive; not far, at least by Patagonian standards).

At Chacra, Vinding Diers produces three pinot noirs: Barda, from the youngest vines, Chacra Cincuenta y Cinco (from a vineyard planted in 1955) and Chacra Treinta y Dos (from the oldest vineyard, planted in 1932). The first vintage, 2006, has just been released last year. The production may be small, the distribution limited, but the wines are striking for their elegance and mineral complexity—especially Chacra Treinta y Dos, which is the best pinot noir I've tasted from Argentina, and one of the best Argentine wines today.



Las Balsas

It's well worth the trip to visit Vinding Diers at his two projects. To reach Chacra, you drive north from Bariloche to Cipoletti (about 260 miles). Once there, take route 22 along the Río Negro to Mainque, where Chacra is located. From there, the only way to reach Valle Azul is by asking a local, since it is virtually impossible to find Noemía with a map.

### Dinner in Bariloche

All my visits to Bariloche start at *Il Gabbiano*, where Guillermo Kempin hosts the classic dining room and his wife Mimi Barchetta runs the kitchen. They give a warm welcome to guests from all over the world.

The restaurant feels like a small country tavern in Italy—it's just 540 square feet, with ironwork, stone and a lot of wood. There's a traditional menu, but I always prefer to choose from the board. Try the fresh local funghi, lightly grilled and seasoned with fresh herbs, which go well with the Infinitus Chardonnay-Semillón from Río Negro. Or start with the house-smoked venison or boar. Next, I order rabbit with garlic and rosemary, and match its intense flavors with the Malma Reserva Merlot from Neuquén, a clean wine with concentrated fruit character and the elegant texture of this variety. The wine list has more than 250 labels from Argentine wineries, plus some imported wines, all well stored in the restaurant's underground cellar.

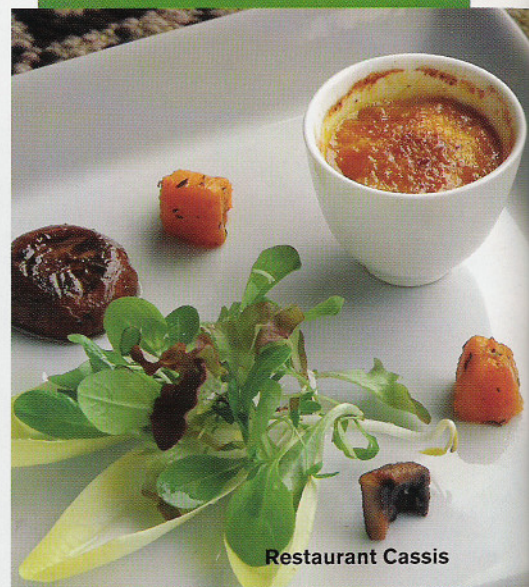
The restaurant *Cassis* is located in Peñon de Arelauquen, a few minutes out of town. Many consider it the best in Bariloche. It's a quiet place where chef-owner Mariana Müller offers modern European dishes, based on local ingredients from Andean Patagonia. The flavorful lean meat of a loin of hare with nuts and juniper croûte, golden semolina and shallot goes well with a juicy but delicate red wine such as Humberto Canale's 2004 Marcus Gran Reserva Cabernet Franc.



Il Gabbiano

*Llers* is the new restaurant in the historic El Casco Hotel, which had been closed for the last 20 years. Famed art collector Ignacio Gutiérrez Zaldívar renovated the hotel in a modern and innovative style, and reopened it with a range of works by the most recognized Argentine artists. He hired Martín Erkejian to man the grill; Fernando Trocca, a noted Argentine chef, is in charge of the menu (Trocca is also chef/partner at Industria Argentina in New York City).

One hour out of town, in Villa La Angostura, *Las Balsas* is a *Relais & Chateaux* property where young chef Pablo Campoy offers a sophisticated menu from fresh local goods. Among the complex dishes, try the Pekin duck breast with rosehip seed-oil sauce, smashed sweet potatoes, eggplant and black rice. It's a great match with the 2006 Chacra 55. Or choose the venison with cassis and chocolate sauce. A structured malbec like Noemía 2004 harmonizes with the dense flavor of the game, a sophisticated taste for adventurers at the end of the world. ■



Restaurant Cassis

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