

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

At the Other End of Patagonia: The Río Negro Province

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The Río Negro province in Patagonia is the home of the eastern extension of the river valley that is suddenly emerging as a quality wine producing area. Here the Río Neuquén joins the Río Limay to form the Río Negro, which then runs through a 15-mile-wide glacial bed whose soils are heavier than those on the western end of Neuquén, where I visited yesterday. There's more clay here, along with some limestone, as well as plenty of small, rounded pebbles left by the retreating glacier.

In this part of the valley there's also far more history than there is for the Neuquén wineries. The Humberto Canale winery has been making wines here since the early 20th century, though the winery is mired in mediocrity today. Old-vine vineyards abound, though many today are either cropped at high yields or simply abandoned altogether. (Viticulturally speaking, it's not unlike the situation Mendoza was in several years ago.) Though it represents just a small percentage of the overall plantings, Pinot Noir joins the dominant Malbec grape to form the region's lead duo of quality grape varieties.

While the wineries in Neuquén represent the more modern, large-scale side of the wine industry, replete with restaurants and bright, attractive tasting rooms, the wineries in Río Negro tend to take on a more boutique feel, though that doesn't make them any less expensive when it comes to the level of investment required.

Located nearly a two-hour drive from the strip of wineries in Neuquén is Bodega Chacra—if you can find it. There's no signage here, just a wooden gate that leads down a dirt road.



Owned by Piero Incisa della Rochetta, Bodega Chacra (which debuted in the 2004 vintage) aims to produce silky, elegantly styled Pinot Noirs. The grapes are fermented in small cement vats using semicarbonic maceration, and just the top two bottlings are aged in barrel, only one-third of which is new. Lovers of high-octane Pinots will need to look elsewhere.

The top wine, the Pinot Noir Río Negro Treinta y Dos 2007 clocks in at just 12.5 percent alcohol, but it shows beautiful length and balance, with dark cherry, licorice, floral and mineral notes that drive through the finish. 2007 was a markedly cool vintage in the area, "and old vines are more affected by heat and cold," noted della Rochetta. Despite its light-bodied texture, the wine feels complete and shows plenty of complexity.

The wine represents the result of a painstaking and ongoing rehabilitation process in the vineyards, which had



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Pinot Noir represents a tiny percentage of the vines planted in the Río Negro Valley.

planted in 1932 that goes into the Treinta y Dos bottling, along with an 8.5-hectare parcel planted in 1955 and 15 additional hectares of new plantings and leased vineyards that go into the winery's Barda bottling.

The Pinot Noir Río Negro Cincuenta y Cinco 2007 (2006 was the debut version for this wine) is heftier, at a whopping 13 percent alcohol, while showing fresher and more forward briar, spice and red cherry notes. For the '07 vintage, della Rochetta used nitrogen during the bottling for the first time, so he expects the wines to take a little longer to evolve in the bottle.

The Pinot Noir Río Negro Barda 2007 (of which just 2,250 cases were made) is perfumy and focused, with rose petal and dried cherry notes that linger on the elegant finish.

Chacra represents the boutique of the boutique. It turns out just 1,500 cases a year combined of the two single-vineyard Pinots, the 1932 (Treinta Dos) and 1955 (Cincuenta Cinco). The new Barda bottling, named for the ridge that can be seen in the distance, will debut in the U.S. market with just 800 cases of the 2007 vintage. Total production of all the wines here will top out at 6,500 cases annually, with the Barda bottling the only cuvée with room to grow in terms of production. Lovers of delicately styled, hand-fashioned Pinots, however, will be rewarded for searching out these wines.

Also on the Chacra property is a plot of old Malbec vines that also dates back to 1932. Since della Rochetta is focusing on Pinot Noir, he sold the plot to his friend, fellow winemaker Hans Vinding-Diers. Vinding-Diers uses these grapes for the top wine at his Bodega Noemía de Patagonia, which he co-owns with Noemía Cinzano (who owns the Argiano estate in Tuscany).

Vinding-Diers, like della Rochetta, has been nursing the old vineyard back to health while also removing the non-Malbec vines – a result of the common field blend plantings that were done generations ago. Vinding-Diers is replacing them with cuttings from the old Malbec plants that he has identified as the best in the parcel – watch the other accompanying video here for Vinding-Diers' tact on working these old vineyards.

There are just 250 cases produced of the top wine, a function of the small vineyard and low-yielding, old vines. The Río Negro Valley bottling debuted in the 2001 vintage and has rated at least 93 points every year since (no 2005 was produced due to a severe frost in March). The early vintages were made in a rented facility without a temperature-controlled environment—the

been abandoned before della Rochetta took over the property.

“When you plant a new vineyard, everything is happy from the get go,” said della Rochetta, who splits his time between Chacra and his family's Tenuta San Guido estate in Tuscany. “Working with an old vineyard is totally different.”

Della Rochetta has had to work his parcels vine by vine, replacing dead vines and getting the canopy into balance. It's vineyard micromanagement. Check out the accompanying video to get a feel for the vineyard and della Rochetta's efforts.

Bodega Chacra (a *chacra* is a square parcel surrounded by Alamos trees) is made up of just the 2.5-hectare parcel



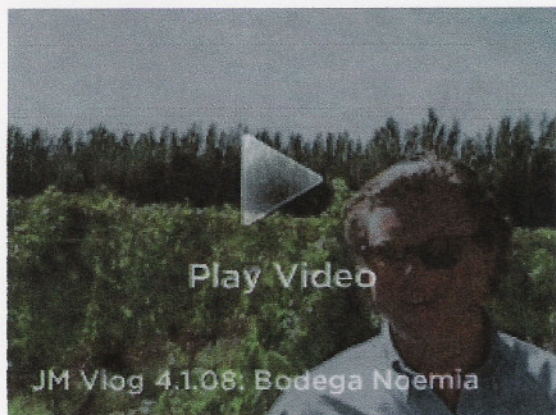
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Bodega Noemía de Patagonia is using this parcel of vines, planted in 1932, for their top Malbec bottling, which rates outstanding.

wines were vinified in an old fiberglass tank.

As I taste through a complete vertical of the top Malbec, it's amazing the early vintages are still showing well considering the bare bones way in which they were made: They do give off a more roasted quality than the more recent bottlings, but still have great underlying acidity. The roasted edge is likely because both the '01 and '02 wines got up to 25° Celsius in their barrels during the summer months, according to Vinding-Diers.

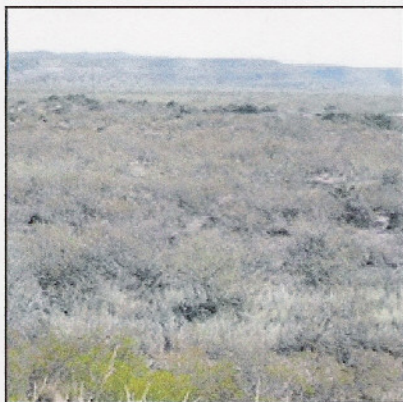
"It was difficult," said Vinding-Diers matter-of-factly about the early days of the project.



Since the 2004 vintage, however, Vinding-Diers and Cinzano, who spend several months a year here, have worked out of a new facility they built 40 kilometers from the vineyard in the Valle de Azul, on the south bank of the Río Negro. With a cold room for cooling down the grapes and a pristine barrel room with ideal temperature and humidity control, both the '04 and '06 wines are superfresh and racy, with deliciously pure red fruit, licorice and graphite notes. The 2006 spent just 18 months in barrel, the shortest *élevage* yet. I found the '06 (to be released later this year) easily the best vintage yet for this young but very impressive Malbec bottling. It's another potential classic, in a league with the best bottlings from Achával-Ferrer (which I also visited on this trip) and Bodega Catena Zapata (another of my recent stops).

"It's all an evolution in the vineyards and expertise, and in age too," said Vinding-Diers. "Experience counts for a lot."

There are two other wines produced here. The J. Alberto Río Negro Valley is a blend of mostly Malbec along with a drop of Merlot, sourced from vines planted in 1955. Since it, like the top wine, is a single-vineyard wine, production tops out at around 800 cases annually. At around \$40 per bottle, it provides a mini-Noemía experience without the triple-digit price tag, similar to the St.-Joseph bottlings of producers such as J.-L. Chave, M. Chapoutier and E. Guigal that can deliver a "mini-Hermitage" experience at a fraction of the cost.



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The basic bottling here, the A Lisa Río Negro Valley, costs just \$25 at retail. Production is currently 2,500 cases annually, but plans are to double that, as it's produced from younger vines and sourced fruit. A blend of Malbec and Merlot as well, it's typically fresh and forward, with juicy red fruit, floral and mineral notes.

After my visit at Bodega Noemía, it was time to start the long trip home, the first leg of which was on Aerolíneas Argentinas, an airline that everyone had told me was not only the worst airline in business today, but getting worse all the time. Considering my travel jinx streak, I seemed headed for a perfect storm.

They didn't let me down, either. As my reservation was

*A different kind of park view:
Looking out from the winery of*

Bodega Noemía de Patagonia you can see the barda, or plateau, in the distance.

to work: A flight of Argentine Malbec was set up and waiting for me to review ... why stop a good thing?

cancelled, which meant spending a night in the Neuquén airport hotel (and the wine list there is not strong). Luckily I made my outbound flight home from Buenos Aires. Upon returning to the office, I rolled up my sleeves and got back