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Two Worlds of Argentine Wines

Big growers thrive with input from abroad, but smaller artisanal vintners pose a challenge

By **MATT KRAMER**

Mendoza, Argentina

The futuristic winery of O. Fournier is an apt symbol for the transformation of Argentina's wines. Resembling a flying saucer perched on massive concrete struts, the winery may as well have arrived from another galaxy. More than in any other wine-growing nation, Argentina's wines have been transformed by the capital, ambition and distribution muscle of Caesars from afar, most of them European.

José Manuel Ortega Gil-Fournier doesn't look much like a Caesar, wine or otherwise. Bearded, modest in height, with a slightly rumpled, roly-poly look, Mr. Fournier, age 42, comes from a wealthy Spanish family of lithographers that, from 1832 until the 1980s, held the government-assigned monopoly for printing playing cards.

A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, Mr. Fournier watched prices of collectible red Bordeaux rise and decided that Spain had equally collectible reds that could also show a rewarding profit. "Really, I knew nothing about wine at the time," said Mr. Fournier. "It was a business investment, nothing more."

But wine has a way of turning people's heads, and Mr. Fournier found himself increasingly absorbed by his new pursuit, visiting wineries and talking with winemakers. His new wine connections eventually linked him to investment opportunities in Argentina.

As has happened in California and Italy, the scope and scale of Argentina's wine production increasingly embraces two realms: ambitious commercial producers delivering wines of real quality at superb prices and the equally ambitious artisanal wineries with their sights set on conquering the world's most discerning palates, never mind the price.

It would be a mistake to see Argentina's wine saga—in either realm—as a dichotomy between dozing, lazy traditional local wine families and bright, bushy-tailed ambitious outsiders. After all, one of Argentina's star performers is the venerable Bodega Catena Zapata, one of the leading wineries in Mendoza, deftly issuing both sorts of wines.

That noted, there's no denying the outsize contribution of foreign investors in this notoriously unstable nation. For example, you have the venture of famed French wine consultant Michel Rolland, who persuaded several fellow winery owners, all from Mr. Rolland's native Bordeaux, to create a quasi-collective wine enterprise called Clos de los Siete.

To reach Clos de los Siete you drive down a narrow road, reaching a guard's entrance to the walled-off compound (hence "clos"). Once admitted, you eventually reach Avenue Michel Rolland. Modesty, you quickly realize, is not the order of the imperial day here.

Comprising five separately owned wineries, Clos de los Siete is otherworldly. No one lives at Clos de los Siete. It's eerily quiet; the owners are far away in France. Each massive winery looms in the high desert like the pyramids of Egyptian pharaohs, physically massive, almost hulking, structures designed to impress. A green expanse of 2,000 acres of meticulously groomed vines further reinforces the sense of removed privilege, an oasis in a vast expanse of flat, buff-brown drabness.

When you enter the sanctum of each hushed winery, you see not just winemaking equipment, but numerous artworks. In one case—Flechas de los Andes, or the arrows of the Andes, a winery partly owned by Baron Benjamin de Rothschild—you're assailed by an almost obsessive repetition of stylized arrows inlaid on the floors, adorning the walls and veneered into the cabinetry, reflecting the famous Rothschild family insignia of five bundled arrows.

The business concept of Clos de los Siete is clever: Half of the 2,000-acre vineyard production goes to a collective wine called Clos de los Siete, made under the supervision of Mr. Rolland. With an annual production of 1.5 million bottles, it's highly commercial. The balance of the vineyard output, about 1,000 acres, is divided among the five wineries, each of which has its own labels and different winemaking styles and blends.

Far more miniaturist, and ultimately more predictive of the future arc of Argentina's fine-wine trajectory, are artisanal wineries such as Achával Ferrer and Viña Alicia. Both are in the Luján de Cuyo zone, which lies only 10 miles south of the city of Mendoza.

Proof of this is found in the dazzlingly complex Malbec wines of Achával Ferrer. Started with several partners in 1998 by Santiago Achával Becú, 49, Achával Ferrer is arguably Argentina's first "cult" winery, commanding prices in excess of \$100 a bottle in both the U.S. and Argentina.

The Achával Ferrer winery is a modest facility in both size and style. "Our winery was built from steel parts we acquired from a factory that was being torn down," Mr. Achával Becú said proudly. "We got the material—beams, spiral steel staircases, you name it—for the scrap price."

Mr. Achával Becú is a good businessman—he has an MBA from Stanford—but it's his you-can't-fake-it passion for discovering and nurturing vineyards of old Malbec vines that sets him apart. His most collectible wines are his three single-vineyard-designated Malbecs, all boasting vines 80 to 100 years old. They're compelling red wines of pipe-organ depth and power without excessive alcohol or overripeness.

Equally artisanal is Viña Alicia, the namesake winery of Alicia Mateu de Arizu, a refined mother of three adult sons. The centerpiece of Viña Alicia winery is the Viña Alicia vineyard, which Ms. Mateu de Arizu inherited from her grandfather. With Malbec vines that are 80 to 90 years old growing at an elevation of nearly 4,000 feet, the Malbecs of Viña Alicia are models of finesse allied to a steely depth.

Argentina's wine production extends far beyond the centerpoint of Mendoza. For example, in Salta province in the northwest corner of the country, the Cafayate and Calchaquies valleys create Malbec wines that rival anything grown in the Mendoza region.

At the southern end of Argentina, in Patagonia, an emerging array of wineries are pioneering Pinot Noir, as well as making a persuasive case for such "un-Argentine" grape varieties as Cabernet Franc.

The flourishing of these other wine-growing regions, as well as the continued exploration of other grape varieties, is essential, according to Mr. Fournier. "One of my concerns is an overdependence on Malbec. Look at what happened to Australia with Syrah," he said, referring to the recent decline

in market appeal of Australia's signature wine. "That's what happens when you focus all of your sales on one variety."

Mr. Fournier adds: "A great wine country—which Argentina is—has more than one region and more than just one great grape variety. That's our challenge for the future—to make Argentina synonymous with fine wines of all kinds, not just Malbec."

—Matt Kramer is a contributing editor with Wine Spectator and the author of the "Making Sense" series of wine books.

Despite Argentina's emerging diversity, the varietal still remains the ticket. A sampler.

Terrazas de los Andes 'Mendoza' Malbec 2007/2008 (\$11) Champagne house Moët et Chandon came to Mendoza in the 1950s, originally to make sparkling wine. This Malbec is dense, lush and extraordinary.

O. Fournier Urban 'Valle de Uco' Malbec 2007/2008 (\$10) This modestly priced Malbec displays the deliciously round, rich fruity qualities characteristic of the Uco Valley.

Colomé Estate 'Valle Calchaquies' Malbec 2007/2008 (\$28) Colomé is a venerable (1831) property revived and expanded by Donald Hess, the Swiss owner of the Hess Collection in Napa Valley. In Salta province, high elevation vines deliver a striking minerality along with black fruit flavors of layered depth and dimensionality.

Viña Alicia Malbec 'Luján de Cuyo' 2007 (\$26) A superb Malbec suffused with intense fruit laced with mineral notes that displays exceptional finesse.

The signature "**Brote Negro**" (black stem) Malbec (\$80), made from a mutated clone or "sport" of Malbec discovered in the family's oldest vineyard. It's another order of the varietal's intensity and depth.

Achával Ferrer

'Mendoza' Malbec 2008 (\$22) From four vineyards. Santiago Achával Becú calls this "Malbec as fruit." Mighty tasty fruit indeed.

—Note: prices are drawn from online sources

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