

Argentinian Wine

From Wine Searcher, The Oxford Companion of Wine and Wine Folly

Argentina is one of the most important wine-producing countries in the [New World](#), and the largest producer of wine in South America. The high-altitude deserts of the eastern Andes have given rise to a high-quality wine industry and the [terroir](#) here is well suited to Argentina's adopted grape variety, the ubiquitous [Malbec](#). Originally from Bordeaux, this is now responsible for some of Argentina's most famous wines. Most viticulture in Argentina takes place in the foothills of the Andes, and most famously in [Mendoza](#), where desert landscapes and high [altitudes](#) combine to make a terroir that gives rise to aromatic, intensely flavored red wines. Vineyards in Mendoza reach as high as 1500 meters above sea level, increasing levels of solar radiation and a high [diurnal temperature variation](#), making for a long, slow ripening period.

Nearly three-quarters of Argentinian wine production takes place in Mendoza, and in addition to Malbec, there are significant plantings of [Cabernet Sauvignon](#), [Chardonnay](#) and [Bonarda](#). Mendoza's position in the [rain shadow](#) of the Andes means that there is little rainfall, and irrigation is supplied by Andean melt water.

Argentina has a long viticultural tradition, and wines have been made here since the 1500s, initially by Spanish missionaries and later Italian settlers. Until very recently, Argentinian wines were exclusively domestic, based mostly on the high-yielding [Criolla Grande](#) and [Cereza](#) grape varieties. Over the past 20 years, however, the country's wine producers have raised quality levels and successfully consolidated an international export market. Argentina has risen to become the fifth-most-prominent wine-producing country in the world, following [France](#), [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and the [USA](#).

Labeling

In terms of labeling, a varietal wine must contain at least 85% of the varietal cited, while a varietal mentioned must constitute at least 20% of the blend. Reserva wines have to be aged from six months (whites) to 12 months (reds) and Gran Reserva wines have to be kept twice as long.

As agreed with European markets, wines are classified as IP (Indicación de Procedencia) for table or regional wines, IG (Indicación Geográfica (IG) for V. Vinifera wines from a specific region with certain minimum quality standards, and DOC (Denominación de Origen Controlado) for high-quality wines in which restrictions related to alcohol, wine making techniques, yields, ageing, and other criteria apply. Argentina has so far two DOCs, Lujan del Cuyo and San Rafael- and roughly 90 IGs. So far, the DOCs are used by only a handful of producers. Two locations in the Uco Valley are close to the creation of IGs- Pajare Altamira and San Carlos- in Tupungato.

Wine Producing Regions in Argentina

Mendoza Wine

Mendoza is by far the largest wine region in Argentina. Located on a high-altitude plateau at the edge of the Andes Mountains, the province is responsible for roughly 70 percent of the country's annual wine production. The French grape variety Malbec has its New World home in the vineyards of Mendoza, producing red wines of great concentration, which are characteristically bright and intense, with floral notes and flavors of dark fruit.

While the province of Mendoza is large its viticultural land is clustered mainly in the northern part, just south of Mendoza City. Here, the regions of Lujan de Cuyo, Maipu and the Uco Valley are home to some of the biggest names in Argentinian wine.

Mendoza's winemaking history is nearly as old as the colonial history of Argentina itself. The first vines were planted by priests of the Catholic Church's Jesuit order in the mid-16th Century, borrowing agricultural techniques from the Incas and Huarpes, who had occupied the land before them. Malbec was introduced around this time by a French agronomist, Miguel Aimé Pouget.

In the 1800s, Spanish and Italian immigrants flooded into Mendoza to escape the ravages of the phylloxera louse that was devastating vineyards in Europe at the time. A boom in wine production came in 1885, when a railway line was completed between Mendoza and the country's capital city, Buenos Aires, providing a cheaper, easier way of sending wines out of the region. For most of the 20th Century, the Argentinean wine industry focused almost entirely on the domestic market, and it is only in the past 25 years that a push toward quality has led to the wines of Mendoza gracing restaurant lists the world over.

Altitude is one of the most important characteristics of the Mendoza terroir. The strip of vineyard land that runs along the base of the Andes lies between 800 and 1200 Mts. above sea level, and it is this altitude that moderates the hot, dry climate of the region. Warm, sunny days are followed by nights made much colder by westerly winds from the Andes. This cooling-off period slows ripening, extending the growing season and contributing rich, ripe flavors to the grapes, which that do not come at the expense of acidity.

The rivers that cross the region, including the Mendoza itself, which runs down from the mountains, facilitate irrigation. Warm, dry harvest periods mean that winemakers are able to pick their grapes according to ripeness, rather than being ruled by the vagaries of the weather. This leads to a reduction in vintage variation, and consistent quality from year to year. Harvests also afford Mendoza's winemakers the increased control over the styles of wine they produce – a factor, which has contributed to the region's international reputation.

The soils in Mendoza are Andean in origin and have been deposited over thousands of years by the region's rivers. These rocky, sandy soils have little organic matter and are free draining, making them dry and low in fertility. This kind of soil is perfect for viticulture – vines are forced to work hard for hydration and nutrients, and will produce small, concentrated berries. The wines produced

from grapes grown on these soils are often highly structured, with firm tannins, and have a distinct minerality that is often attributed to the soil.

While Malbec is undoubtedly the star of the region, there are also extensive plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Syrah, Torrontes and Sauvignon Blanc.

To the north of Mendoza are the regions of **San Juan**, **La Rioja**, **Jujui**, **Tucuman**, **Salta**, and **Catamarca**, the last two being even higher in elevation and a world-ranking vineyard owned by Bodega Colomé in Molinos sits at 3000m. Low latitudes in this corner of Argentina are tempered by the high altitude and cold mountain air. Here, Argentina's signature white grape, Torrontes, is grown, making an aromatic, floral white wine.

There are also some wine-producing regions in Argentina closer to the Atlantic coast than to the lofty peaks of the Andes. Patagonia in the south is now home to two regions, **Rio Negro** and **Neuquén**, the cooler conditions of which are suited to creating wines made from Pinot Noir.

Neuquén Wine

Neuquén is a very young wine-producing region on the Patagonian plains of southern Argentina. Wine has been made here on a commercial scale only since the early 2000s, but the region has already shown both significant growth and promise. Wines ranging from good value to ultra premium are produced here, mostly from Malbec, Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc.

Officially, the province of Neuquén covers a large area of northern Patagonia, just to the south of Argentina's most prolific wine region of Mendoza. In practice, however, winemaking is contained to a scant 1400ha surrounding the small town of San Patricio del Chana on the Neuquén River.

The first commercial vineyards in the region were planted as recently as 1999, after wine producers were encouraged by the international success of the wines of Mendoza. A large area of land on the edge of the Neuquén River was developed and planted with vines. The pioneering winery that developed the land, Bodega del Fin del Mundo, has since sold off pockets to other premium producers, encouraging the growth of Neuquén as a wine region in the past decade.

The Neuquén viticultural region is markedly different from most of the rest of Argentina. Elevations here reach only about 1000-3000m above sea level, which is relatively low for a country where the highest vineyards are found at altitudes of around 10,000ft (3000m). The climate is significantly cooler than in Mendoza, and the Andes 240km to the west have little to no effect on viticulture in Neuquén.

Strong desert winds and hot sun combine to provide a climate in Neuquén that is sufficiently temperate for viticulture. Warm, sunny desert days are followed by brisk desert nights, and the diurnal temperature variation that results extends the growing season. This allows the grapes time to develop fruit complexity without sacrificing acidity, and the wines are well balanced as a result.

This windy part of the desert is fed by the Neuquén River, which brings melt water from the Andes to hydrate the vineyards. The stony alluvial soils are well drained, and allow root systems to grow deeply into the ground for minerals. The healthy vines that result produce high-quality grapes with an excellent concentration of sugars and acids.

The relatively cool climate in Neuquén means that although much of the region produces red wines, the quality of the whites made here is high and is attracting international attention from critics and consumers alike.

SOUTH AMERICA WINE MAP

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