

DRINK IN THE VIEWS

In the land of the gaucho, where the Andes tower over pampas plains, some of the New World's best wines are made. Phil Crozier is seduced by Mendoza

Photography **David Loftus**



M

y love affair with Argentina started in 1999. Tasked with creating a new wine list for Gaucho, at a time when we had just four restaurants,

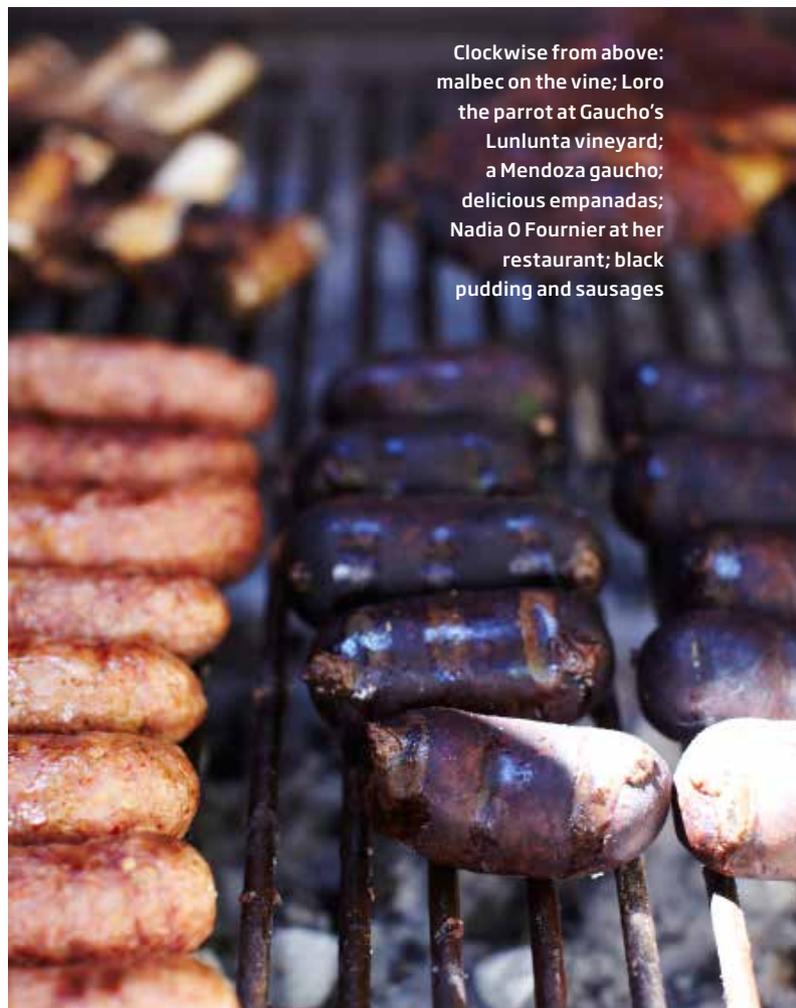
it seemed logical that the list should be Argentine. After all, our beef was straight from the flat, lush lands of the pampas and we sold ourselves as being an Argentine restaurant.

Years later I'm reminded how I inadvertently created the world's first all-Argentine wine list. I knew nothing about wine, so it was naivety that led me to take such a step. It would be fair to say, in hindsight, that the wines weren't terribly good in those days.

But how things have changed. In 1999 I was asked by one of my suppliers if I'd like to join them on a trip to South America. I jumped at the chance and, following some time in Chile and a short trip to Uruguay, I finally arrived in Mendoza. It was like coming home.

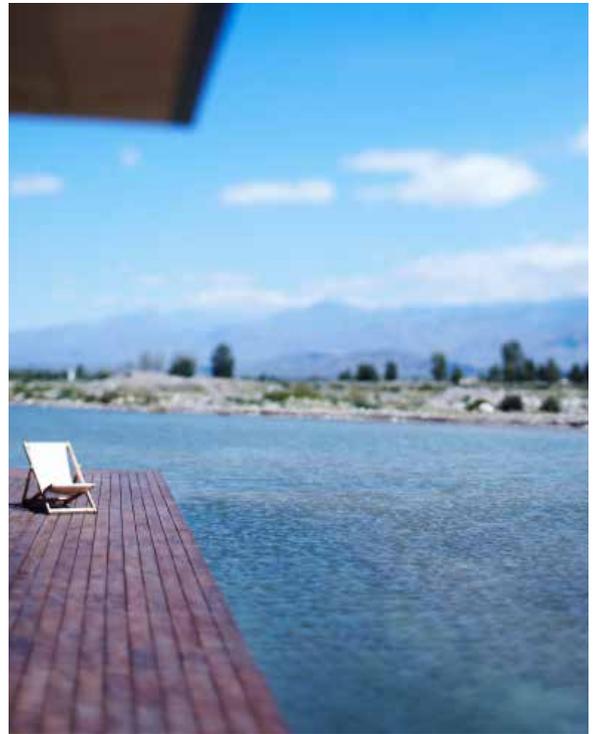
What strikes you first is the sheer majesty and awe-inspiring scale of the Andes. This part of the world's longest mountain range is at its most majestic in Mendoza, a province 650 miles west of Buenos Aires, with Mendoza city at its centre. Founded by Pedro del Castillo in 1561, it's since been rebuilt several times, following earthquakes. Today, we own vineyards and make wines here, and I feel part of the fabric of this magical place.

Mendoza is blessed with one of the great wine terroirs of the world, and since my first visit it has seen enormous change. Billions of dollars have been poured into the wine industry and it occupies a unique position in quality wine production, in that it completely



Clockwise from above:
malbec on the vine; Loro
the parrot at Gaucho's
Lunlunta vineyard;
a Mendoza gaucho;
delicious empanadas;
Nadia O Fournier at her
restaurant; black
pudding and sausages





relies on altitude and latitude to cool the grapes; the ocean plays no part. Any weather systems from neighbouring Chile, flowing from the Pacific, are totally spent by the vastness of the Andes, so the air is very dry by the time it reaches Mendoza.

This land is also arid; in fact, it's a desert. Water, the giver of all life, is channelled through ancient aquifers, introduced by the Incas. The system works - it has to. These channels run along the city streets of Mendoza itself and after a few malbecs it's easy to forget about them - so check when you get out of a car or off the path!

Mendoza vines receive more than 310 days of sun per year and only around 220mm of rain. Bad harvests are rare - you need to go back to 1998 to find the last one - so consistency is the

key. Much of this recent investment went into new wineries and equipment. Previously, there was no incentive to produce high-quality wines. It was a volume game, capitalising on the high demand for cheap, local wine.

This changed with the arrival of some key outside figures, including the pioneering Dr Nicolas Catena. His family has been in the business since the early 1900s, and a trip to California inspired him to make world-class wines. He employed the famous Paul Hobbs, who laid the foundations for quality viticulture in Mendoza. At the same time, he took samples of more than 100 clones of malbec and planted them in various sites around the province, at different altitudes. The best were selected and used to plant new areas for viticulture. All of this paved the way for many other wineries to join the quality revolution.

Today Argentina has a very healthy domestic market for its wines and a population with increasingly sophisticated and demanding palates. The rest of the world has become thirsty for Argentine wines, too, with exports now accounting for nearly 20 percent of production.

In my view, the future doesn't lie only with malbec. Torrontes, a grape indigenous to the north of Argentina, is fast gaining cult status, with cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot, bonarda Argentina and chardonnay adding more strings to the country's now considerable bow.

From far left: 'a la cruz' is a typical way of cooking goat in the Andes; picture-perfect water reserves at O Fournier in San Carlos, the Uco Valley; a gaucho pours a well-earned glass





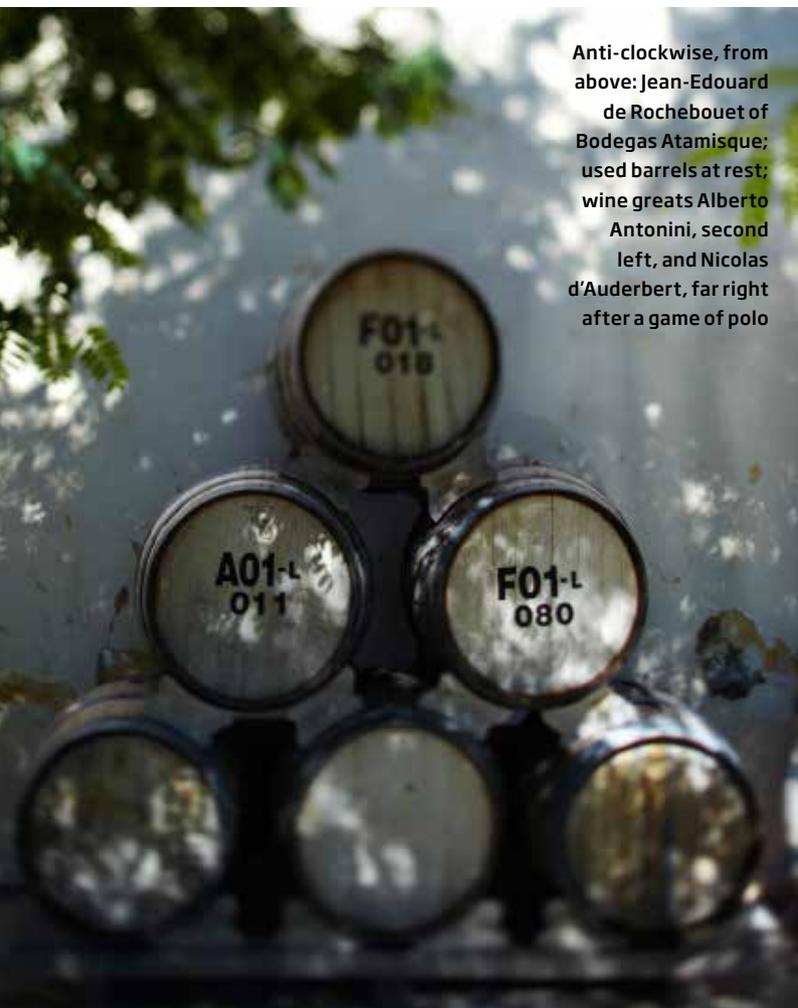
Mendoza is blessed with one of the great wine terroirs of the world – and exports now account for 20 percent of Argentine wine production

The biggest pleasure I have when going to Argentina is working with the people. In 2007 we bought a historic vineyard in the district of Lunlunta, with the aim of making our own wine. This beautiful old vineyard is next door to one of the great personalities of Mendoza – Roberto de la Mota, another malbec pioneer. He owns a lovely little winery called Mendel, which has since become one of Argentina’s benchmark quality wineries.

Then there’s the new breed of Argentine winemakers trailing an exciting wave of ‘anything goes’ viticulture. Matias Riccitelli, son of award winner Jorge, is making truly original wines such as Republica del Malbec, with new ways of labelling and marketing the different regions. Another Matias – Michelini – is, along with his brothers, making wines in the Uco valley using techniques borrowed from the Old World, such as co-fermentation (mixing different varieties of grape as they ferment in the barrel).

Then there’s winemaking genius Alejandro Vigil, of Catena Zapata, a maverick who has, to the credit of Nicolas Catena, been given a free hand to experiment and show the effect of different soils in each wine. And Daniel Pi, long-standing winemaker at Trapiche, achieves a consistent quality in huge quantities – a skill that often goes unrecognised.

Argentina is discovering itself – and its energy is contagious. Mendoza is a place on the move, in competition with itself and, now, the rest of the world. It’s holding its head high, fearlessly looking to a very bright future.



Anti-clockwise, from above: Jean-Edouard de Rochebouet of Bodegas Atamisque; used barrels at rest; wine greats Alberto Antonini, second left, and Nicolas d’Auderbert, far right after a game of polo



MY TOP 10 MENDOZA WINES

You might think this selection will be malbec, malbec, malbec. Think again. There are plenty of exciting high-quality Argentinian wines to choose from says Phil Crozier

1 2010 O Fournier B Crux Sauvignon Blanc (£13.99, 12%, Tesco)

Tesco picked a winner with this one. Grassy, with gooseberry, very complex minerality and deep kiwi fruit.

2 2007 Santa Ana Unanime Malbec (£14, 14.5%, Tesco)

Award-winning malbec from Santa Ana, with the great Daniel Pi at the helm to add style and class to this classic Mendoza beauty.

3 2009 Trapiche Broquel Bonarda (£11.99, 14%, Tesco)

Made with grapes that have been sourced from old vines in Cruz de Piedra, Maipu. Dense black fruits with a touch of liquorice and dried fruits, with a lovely sweet spice on the finish.

4 2010 Riglos Gran Corte (£32.99, 15%, argentinewine

online.co.uk) One of the best wines to come out of Mendoza in recent years. Snap this one up - it's only available in very limited

quantities. Paul Hobbs brings class to this malbec, cabernet and franc blend. Chocolate and mint, overplayed with violets and lavender, soft tannins and racy acidity on the finish.

5 2010 Humberto Canale Pinot Noir (£18.99, 14%, southamerican

winesonline.co.uk) Bright and juicy, with a lot of colour for a pinot noir. Earthy smoke and dried flowers with dried cherry and tangy cranberry notes.

6 2011 Vinalba Malbec Reservado (£11.99, 14.5%, Majestic)

One of Argentina's most successful wine brands, this is made by Hervé Joyaux Fabre, a winemaker originally from Bordeaux who came to Mendoza many years ago. Black mulberry fruit, bitter chocolate and a generous, soft and complex mouthfeel.

7 2006 Vina Alicia Cuarzo Petit Verdot (£45, 14%, goodwineonline.co.uk)

It's expensive, but this is well worth the money. It's from a 115-year-old vineyard just a

couple of doors away from ours in Lujan de Coyo. Petit verdot is brilliant in Argentina, and this inky black and intense beauty has great class and elegance.

8 2004 Carmelo Patti Cabernet Sauvignon (£14.35, 14%, pampaswines.com)

From the eccentric and wonderful Carmelo Patti. His speciality is cabernet, and this one has aged very well. If you like bordeaux, you'll love this.

9 2012 Susana Balbo Crios Limited Edition blend (£13.99, 13.9%, argentinewineonline.co.uk)

Susana Balbo is one of the best when it comes to blends. Malbec leads the way, with tannat, syrah and bonarda giving complexity to this approachable blend.

10 2012 Achaval Ferrer Malbec (£15.50, 14.5%, corneyandbarrow.com)

One of my all-time favourites, a big, full-bodied malbec with lots of smoky plums and juicy black fruits. Soft and opulent in the mouth, with great acidity on the finish.



Wine Guide

When visiting Mendoza, fly from Buenos Aires (about two hours), or from Santiago de Chile (45 minutes over the Andes) with LAN or Aerolíneas Argentinas.

NEED TO KNOW

Start your winery tour in Lujan de Cuyo, home to most of the famous winery names in Mendoza. With tourism booming, there are many companies specialising in wine tours, but I recommend doing a little homework and organising your own visits.

A visit to the Uco Valley is also essential - allow at least a day to explore the region.

Taxis are cheap, and can be hired for a whole day. Inflation, currently around 25%, is high in Argentina. Most hotels take dollars or pesos, but it's better to pay in pesos.

THE HIT LIST

Catena Zapata Calle Cobos, Agrelo, Cobo; +54 261 413 1100, catenawines.com. One of the most iconic wineries in Lujan de Cuyo, with its distinctive Mayan temple architecture.

Luigi Bosca San Martín 2044, Lujan de Cuyo; +54 261 498 0437, luigibosca.com.ar. Another iconic name, from the Arizu family.

Walter Bressia Cochabamba 7725, Agrelo, Lujan de Cuyo; +54 261 524 9161/62, bressiabodega.com. Small winery that still produces wines of huge personality.



Clockwise from left: the Andes at dawn; slow-roast cabrito (kid); sisters Bélen and Pamela Farro of Farrah Cocina de Autor; at the Norton wine lab; a Gaucho cook; eat well at Mendoza's plentiful vineyard restaurants



Achaval Calle Cobos 2601, Pedriel; +54 261 489 2247, achaval-ferrer.com. Views of the Andes and high-end wines from this famous ultra-premium boutique winery.

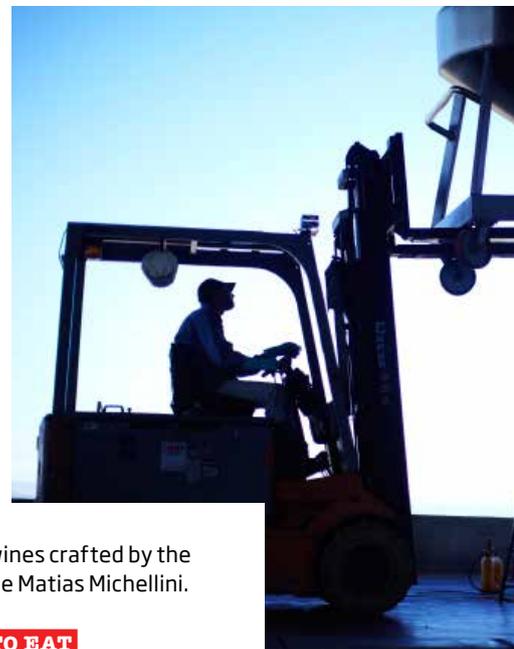
Bodega Benegas Araoz 1600 (Ruta Prov. 60), Lujan de Cuyo; +54 261 496 0794, bodegabenegas.com. The place to find old-school, but very Bordeaux-inspired wines of quality and distinction, run by the wonderfully eccentric Federico Benegas Lynch.

Lopez Ozamis 375 Gral. Gutierrez, Maipu; +54 261 497 2406,

bodegaslopez.com.ar. Very old-fashioned, visiting is like taking a step into the past.

Dominio del Plata Cochabamba 7801, Agrelo, Lujan de Cuyo; +54 261 498 9200, dominiodelplata.com.ar. The home and pride of Susana Balbo, a winery that is going places.

Familia Zuccardi Ruta Provincial 33, Maipu, Mendoza; +54 261 441 0000, familiazuccardi.com. A big winery with an even bigger name. And perhaps the best winery restaurant in all of Mendoza (Casa del Visitante - see right). Brilliant olive oils, too.



Mendel Terrada 1863 Mayor Drummond, Lujan de Cuyo; +54 261 524 1621, info@mendel.com.ar. Small and beautiful, tucked away in the tree-lined dirt tracks of Lujan de Cuyo. At the heart of the real Mendoza. Booking is essential.

Terrazas de Los Andes Thames y Cochabamba, Perdriel, Luján de Cuyo; +54 261 488 0058, terrazasdelosandes.com. Owned and run by LVMH. As slick an operation as you would hope to find, with very classy wines.

Atamisque Calle La Gloria 2054 Tupungato, San Jose; + 54 261 527 5336, atamisque.com. High-tech, with a magnificent view of the Andes, brilliantly modern wines and a wonderful restaurant that specialises in trout from its own farm. Star quality.

O Fournier Calle Los Indios, La Consult; +54 262 245 1579, ofournier.com. Sitting like a space ship in the middle of a vineyard, O Fournier is the product of the visionary Jose Manuel Ortega. The barrel room looks like a set from a James Bond movie and the restaurant is a must for foodies and wine lovers.

Salentein Ruta 89 Sin Numero, Los Arboles, Tunuyan; +54 262 242 9500, bodegasalentein.com. With over 500 hectares, situated on the famous Ruta 89 where many new wineries jostle for position, this winery is home to the excellent Killka art museum.

Finca Sopenia Ruta Provincial 89, Gualtallary, Tupungato; +54 262 248 9680, sopenia.com.ar. One of the smaller, more established wineries on Ruta 89.

Beautiful wines crafted by the irrepressible Matias Michellini.

WHERE TO EAT

There are plenty of great restaurants in and around Mendoza to suit every taste, but it is the 'asado' barbecue that is at the heart of Argentine food and wine culture.

Casa del Visitante, at Familia Zuccardi Ruta Provincial 33, Maipu, Mendoza; +54 261 441 0000, familiazuccardi.com.ar. As authentic as a Mendocino 'asado' gets. Try the restaurant dedicated to olive oil. A great day out, with the man himself, Jose Zuccardi, often walking around tables and introducing himself to all. Charm and grace, with brilliant quality food, makes for a great food and wine experience.

Siete Cocinas is inspired by the regions of Argentina – eat your way from Patagonia to the north

Urbano, at O Fournier Finca Santa Sophia, Calle Los Indios, La Consulta 5567; +54 9 262 245 1579, ofournier.com. The time it takes to get to this winery is well spent. Spectacular views support a fantastic food and wine experience, with Jose Manuel's wife, Nadia, creating wonderful dishes in the kitchen.

La Bourgogne Roque Saenz Pena, Lujan de Cuyo; +54 261 405 1999, labourgogne-mendoza.com.ar. One of the poshest restaurants in Mendoza. This relais and gourmand restaurant is owned by Carlos Pulenta, who makes great wines. Perfect for a special occasion.

Azafran Av Sarmiento 765, Mendoza; +54 261 429 4200, azafranresto.com. In downtown Mendoza, this restaurant brings together influences from Patagonia and Mendoza. One of the best wine lists in Mendoza, too.

Francis Mallman 1884 1188 Belgrano, Godoy Cruz; +54 261 424 2698, 1884restaurant.com.ar. Surely the most famous restaurant in Mendoza, on the site of the old Escorihuela Gascon winery. Francis Mallmann is one of the great chefs of Argentina and has helped define the asado (barbecue) with the seminal cookbook *Seven Fires*. Expensive, yes, but probably the most comprehensive wine list in all of Mendoza.

Maria Antonieta Belgrano 1069; +54 261 420 4322, mariaantonieta resto.com.ar. The former head chef of 1884 has set up a wonderful rustic Mendocino restaurant. It's the talk of the town.

Siete Cocinas Av Bartolome Mitre 794, Mendoza; +54 261 423 8823, sietecocinas.com.ar. Inspired by the seven regions of Argentina, with dishes from each, from the north to Patagonia way down south. Great wine list, too. Eat your way round Argentina in one sitting.



Clockwise from above: chef owner Pablo del Rio of Siete Cocinas; the view from O Fournier's restaurant; a Mendoza park; alfajores; finger-lickin' good rotisserie chicken; a grape leaf colour explosion

