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Journal

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URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/food/561154food05-09-07.htm>

Wednesday, May 9, 2007

Sip the Flavors of S. America

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

In South America, Atlantic-facing Argentina snuggles up to Pacific-coast Chile. Both countries form the lower portion of South America and dominate its wine industry. Everything is reversed here, with the hot and arid northern climes gradually giving way to the Antarctic-chilled waters of Cape Horn in the extreme south.

Most of Chile's wine production surrounds Santiago from Valparaiso above the capital to Concepción below it. Grape cultivation covers roughly the same region as it did in 1548 when wine grapes (*vitis vinifera*) were first imported from Europe. Nonetheless, it is in the past 20 years when the wineries turned their attention to making quality wines that Chile has been making news in the wine world.

Most grape varieties can be found here, but Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Malbec are the most common reds; Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay the most popular whites. Carmenere, a French grape imported in the 1850s, is sometimes labeled erroneously as Merlot. I tried a Santa Rita Carmenere but wasn't impressed, although it had some unique taste components.

The Maipo, Rapel and Maule Valleys are the major producing regions in Chile responsible for about 85 percent of the total wine crop.

There are many low-end bargains in Chilean wines. These are often not very inspired offerings, but they do provide good value. Not surprisingly, the reserve wines are impressive both in taste and price, although less expensive than French and California wines of similar quality.

A "reserve" wine, as the name suggests, is made with more care, using hand-picked grapes, often from the best vineyards. Reserves are the pride of a winery. Generally, the wine maker will nurture low-yield vineyards with judicious pruning to increase the complexity and quality of the grapes. The lower yields of grapes per acre also increase the cost. This does not mean every reserve wine is successful; sometimes it seems wine making has the same odds of producing a good wine as Hollywood does predicting the next blockbuster.

Argentina, like Chile, is going through a renaissance of wine making, but here Malbec is king. The most noticeable feature of the wine-growing regions is the altitude in which many of the grapes are grown. Ascending to nearly 8,000 feet, these are the highest vineyards in the world. All the wine

regions hug the Andean foothills from Salta in the north to Patagonia, which extends to the Strait of Magellan. The purity of the water, distance from cities and pollution, and scarcity of northern-hemisphere vinifera diseases make for a healthier product with pronounced fruit-rich flavors.

Mendoza is the primary region, producing 80 percent of the country's wines. In France, Malbec is primarily used in small quantities in blends, but in Argentina, it is a primary grape, and stands alone. Here Malbec produces wines of structure, complexity and quality that can sometimes rival French Grand Crus. Malbec wines have ripe plum notes with rounded tannins, often with mint nuances. They fill the palate and can stand up to beef dishes and strong cheeses.

Malbec has made a big splash in the wine world, but many reasonably priced Malbecs can still be had. Compared to those being produced in California— is there any wine fad that California has not jumped on with both feet?— the Argentina versions are definitely the better buy.

If you want to get in on the ground floor, another grape variety to seek out is Torrontós, a white wine grape indigenous to Argentina. While its origin is still debated, it is a close relation to the Mediterranean Moscatel grape. The nose is a flower bouquet of rose, jasmine and geranium, with spicy notes. Torrontós is versatile enough to be used in the production of sweet and sparkling wines, as well. Torrontós goes well with spicy, well-seasoned food such as Thai, Indian, Chinese and Vietnamese dishes. The \$8-\$10 price tag is also very attractive.

When tasting wines from other countries, it's a good idea to compare wines from the same country, if not region, to learn the taste components the terroir stamps on the wine. Terroir is a French word that argues that the soil, slope angle and orientation, sun and rain exposure, and other factors instill in the wine a particular set of taste components not found anywhere else. Not every wine expert agrees with this interpretation, however. Check out the Wikipedia (wikipedia.org) definition for an excellent discussion of terroir.

When next at your favorite wine store grab a bottle of Argentina Malbec to go with the slab of beef on your barbecue, and imagine yourself around a campfire on the Pampas. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe, and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com.

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