



ARGENTINE WINE ENCOUNTERS

There's plenty to see, do and taste in the most southern country of South America, but to get a taste of Argentina's wines, you don't have to go much further than Buenos Aires

BY LANCE BERELOWITZ

ADMIT IT: THERE'S SOMETHING addictive about Argentina. I'd been feeling a distinct yearning to get back, so here I am in Buenos Aires some two years after my last visit. In particular, I'd been missing the city's kinetic energy, the grand architecture, the smoky *parrillas* (steakhouses) and yes, the wine bars.

It's ironic that most visitors to Argentina who seek a real wine experience don't visit the country's wine regions. Instead, virtually everyone spends time in Buenos Aires. This vibrant city has it all; it's a febrile petri dish of cultural, political, artistic and gastronomic creativity. Far fewer visitors get to Mendoza however, both the city and province at the base of the Andes Mountains that is ground zero of the Argentine wine industry. Fewer still get as far as Salta in the far north or the Rio Negro

wine region in the far south. Too bad, for Argentina is much more than its capital city.

Still, for those who want to taste the best of Argentine wines without leaving the capital, you just need to know where to go.

We've based ourselves in the neighbourhood known as Palermo, which has morphed into a series of trendy sub-areas such as Palermo Hollywood and Palermo Soho. Palermo is a yet densely packed, vibrant urban neighbourhood. It's made up of short blocks and mostly low-rise buildings, bound by tree-lined streets that are not quite perpendicular, giving the area a slightly off-kilter yet decidedly human-scaled feeling, as if the original surveyor was drunk. Maybe he was. The streets are lined with bars, restaurants, cool-looking shops and small boutique hotels, often in elegantly renovated old houses.

First stop after our long flight is the perfect little pool hidden in the bougainvillea-framed courtyard of our boutique lodging. Refreshed, we're ready for an urban adventure. ▶



Courtesy of Buenos Aires City Tourist Board

Clockwise: Buenos Aires café, Palermo street life, Botanical Gardens

It's our first evening, and after a short walk we find ourselves outside the discreet Miravida Soho Hotel. It's located on a scruffy little plaza, which my wife – who's a *porteña* (a Buenos Aires native) – tells me used to be a notorious streetwalker hangout. I guess the sex workers have moved on, or perhaps just behind closed doors. Although we're not staying here, we ring the doorbell and when someone opens up and I explain our mission, we're ushered inside to a cozy wine bar. Here we spend the next couple hours happily sampling wines that lift the roof off my palate.

Take Bodega Tacuil's RD 2013 and its Doña Ascension 2012, for example – two sides of the same

for it – a Chacra Treinta y Dos. (Yup, that's 1932, if your Spanish is rusty.) These biodynamic wines are the most elegant, terroir-based pinot noirs yet made in Argentina. Eat your heart out, Burgundy.

Across the railway tracks in party-central Palermo Hollywood, we seek refuge at Ser y Tiempo, another wine bar that offers tasting flights paired with food. Our dashing young sommelier pours us a fascinatingly varied line-up of wines. While Malbec has become Argentina's international calling card, there is much more to this country's wine offerings, and if you haven't tried a Torrontes (aromatic white), Bonarda or Cabernet Franc, you're in for a treat. You will not regret

My glass of Bodega ChacraBarda Pinot Noir shows just what can be achieved with old-vine pinot noir grapes grown in the Rio Negro region of Patagonia, when handled with gentle care in the winery.

Cabernet Sauvignon-Malbec coin: the former sees no oak, while the latter does, and the difference is instructive. According to the hip young sommelier serving us from behind the bar, at some 2,600 metres above sea level, Bodega is Argentina's highest winery, located in Calchaqui, Salta, the most northerly and highest altitude wine region in the country.

A few blocks over from our hotel along Calle Goritti is Pain et Vin. Co-owner Eleonora Jezzi, a *porteña* sommelier, married Israeli baker Ohad Weiner who, when they moved back to Buenos Aires, was surprised (as was I) to discover how hard it is to find good bread in this city (just don't tell any *porteños* this!). He set about fixing this, and the result is Pain et Vin, which is both wine bar and bakery. A small but carefully curated wine selection is offered by the glass, bottle or for sale to go. They also serve the best bread we've tasted in the city. Civilization doesn't get much better than this.

We've booked a tasting with Eleonora, and after warm introductions all round, we pull up high-top stools at the communal table in the simple, clean room, and put ourselves in her capable hands. She offers us a flight of delicious wines. My glass of Bodega Chacra Barda Pinot Noir shows just what can be achieved with old-vine pinot noir grapes grown in the Rio Negro region of Patagonia, when handled with gentle care in the winery. *Perfect pinot.*

We learn that Chacra was created by Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, scion of the Incisa family of Sassacaia wine fame in Tuscany. After the tasting, we pick up a bottle of Chacra's Cincuenta y Cinco Pinot Noir which, as its Spanish name suggests, is from a venerable vineyard that was planted in 1955. There's also – wait

it (unless you overindulge, that is). Our flight is accompanied by Argentina's version of tapas: salty cured meats, sharp cheeses and various other savoury delights. In the process, we come to realize that this format is a very inexpensive way to dine out in increasingly costly Buenos Aires.

Nonetheless, dine out we do. Our good *porteño* friends, Diego and Valeria, take their food and wine seriously, and they suggest we meet up with them at Las Pizarras, an inconspicuous, tiny white-walled bistro where owner-Chef Rodrigo Castilla cooks fresh and simple yet delicious market food. Don't expect a printed menu; just choose from Rodrigo's dishes of the day chalked up on the large *pizarras* (blackboards), or better still, let him choose for you. Our meal is accompanied by a spicy, mineral, intense bottle of Bodegas Humanao Gran Reserva 2010, a Malbec-Cabernet Sauvignon blend from 70-year-old, high-altitude vineyards in Salta.

And, as always on our visits to the Paris of South America, we eventually make our way to what is, by now, an obligatory meal at Don Julio, a fabled parrilla and Buenos Aires standard-bearer. Hardly undiscovered (every foodie seems to know about the place and you will most likely need to wait for a table, which is made a whole lot nicer with the complimentary sparkling wine they hand out to patrons-in-waiting on the sidewalk), what makes this steakhouse stand out from so many others is that – remarkably – long-time owner Pablo Rivero takes his wines just as seriously as his meats. And that is saying something in this city of carnivores. It never fails us. On repeat visits over the years, we've signed several of those empty bottles, ordered by deeply satisfied patrons like us, that line its walls. ▶

YOUR WORLD. YOUR WAY. *your moment.*




L to R: Don Julio's courtyard, tira de asado



Make sure your char-grilled meats are accompanied with a bottle of something special. We order an old favourite, Achaval Ferrer's Quimera, an elegant, delicate Malbec-led Mendoza blend. It's sublime with our *tira de asado* (thick-cut beef ribs) and *ojo di bife* (ribeye steak). And don't miss the melt-in-your-mouth *mollejas* (sweetbreads), if you dare.

If you spend time in Palermo, sooner or later you're likely to find yourself in its beating heart: Plaza Serrano. We happen to be in town for the annual Superclásico clash between Boca Juniors and River Plate – Buenos Aires' two most famous soccer clubs, which nurture a notoriously fierce rivalry – and I head to Plaza Serrano, grab a cold beer on one of the sports bar patios, and immerse myself in this most passionate of tribal contests, along with a few hundred of my newly found tribe-mates. I just need to make sure I'm shouting for the right team.

Tucked away in yet another atmospheric old house just off Plaza Serrano, Lo de Joaquín Alberdi, or "Joaquín Alberdi's Place," remains my favourite wine shop in Buenos Aires. Here, I taste whatever Joaquín decides to pour at the bar and it's almost always a revelation. He'll happily sell you something special to take home in your luggage. If you're lucky enough, your visit will coincide with when he cooks up a mean *asado* (barbecue) on the roof terrace upstairs. If so, it's not to be missed. In fact, after a few evenings at this convivial place Joaquín just might become your new best Argentinian friend.

Mendoza may be just a short flight from Buenos Aires, but it's another world. And for me, another trip. This time, I'm heading home to Vancouver with a couple of bottles from Joaquín tucked into my bag that will remind me of both Argentina's wine diversity and its amazing capital city. But I know I'll be back. It's an addiction. 



Boca Juniors' "Bombonera" stadium

SAVOUR THE EXPERIENCE

- ▶ Visit the **Museo Evita** courtyard for one of the most convivial outdoor spots in BA for a classic breakfast of freshly squeezed *jugo de naranja* (orange juice), rich coffee and *medialunas* (croissants). Unless you're a diehard fan of Eva Peron herself, give the actual museum a miss.
- ▶ Take a day trip up the **Rio de la Plata to Tigre**, with its watery walkways, huge London plane trees, atmospheric old boating clubs and dining platforms perched over the river.
- ▶ Get lost in the **Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve**, home to some 200 bird species, and go bird watching in the heart of the city. Afterwards, grab a smoky *choripan* (grilled sausage in a bun) from one of the food trucks lining the pedestrian promenade that edges the reserve.
- ▶ **Vamos a la Cancha:** Attend a *futbol* (soccer) match, preferably one in which Boca Juniors are playing, to savour Argentinians' high-octane tribal energy. But watch out for pickpockets, and sometimes fan violence after the game. Just to be on the safe side, Tangol agency offers escorted soccer match tours.

Courtesy of Buenos Aires City Tourist Board



For some, it's sitting down to the first five-star dinner of the trip, and being transported by the rich, unexpected flavors awaiting you. For others, it's sailing into an exotic, remote port without another ship in sight. And for you, it's the little things.
Discover your moment.

ENJOY THE FINEST CUISINE AT SEA™ ABOARD OUR INTIMATE AND LUXURIOUS SHIPS.



For more information, please contact our Bon Vivant Travel Specialist
Ask about Canadian Resident rates, exclusive complimentary Shore Experiences and Pre-Paid Gratuities