The last vineyard

Planted by the conquistadors and ripened by an economic crisis, how did a much-maligned grape go on to become a full-bodied superstar? A new book explores how Argentinian wine became an international success story. **Matt Chesterton** meets the American author Ian Mount for a drink.

Like a week in politics, a decade is a long time in winemaking. In fact, in Argentina, a decade is a long time in *anything*.

Ten years ago if you'd asked Joe drinker what malbec was, he'd probably have guessed one of the bad guys in *Lord of the Rings*. The only people who knew or cared much about Argentinian wine were those who worked in the local industry and a small but noisy band of international champions. Those who cared least about Argentinian wine were, in the main, Argentinians. Like their Italian and Spanish forebears they drank wine – table wine – with most meals, and the only theoretical dilemma they faced was whether to pick red or white. (Theoretical because they always picked red).

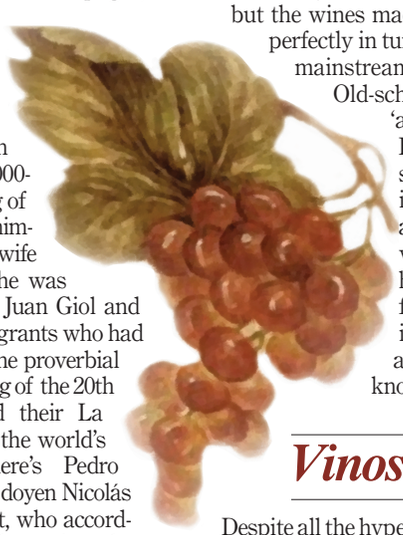
The story of how this ugly duckling of an industry grew into a resplendent swan is one of those told in *The Vineyard at the End of the World*, a sparkling new history of Argentinian wine by Ian Mount, an American writer and long-time resident of Buenos Aires.

Mount identifies the economic crisis and subsequent devaluation of the peso in 2001/2002 as a game-changing moment for the local wine industry. After the prosperous 1990s, when the peso was pegged one-to-one to the US dollar, he says that '2001 was like a very cold shower. The peso was suddenly worth a quarter of what it had been before, and the middle classes saw their savings wiped out. But for wine exporters it meant that their local production costs were cut by 75 per cent while the sale value of their products remained stable. So their profit margins were absurd. An export boom was almost inevitable.'

No successful wine industry was ever built solely on the back of a favourable exchange rate, however – which is why Mount begins his story not at the turn of this millennium but at around the middle of the last one, when the 'New World' was being mapped and colonised. As well as swords, slaves and smallpox, the *conquistadores* brought with them vine clippings, and being thirsty men by nature, they made cultivating them a priority. The place where these vines did best was a nameless expanse of desert in the rain shadow of the Andes, later christened Mendoza and now Argentina's biggest wine-growing region.

'It has the correct mixture of heat, altitude, dryness and sunniness that inspires grapes to greatness,' says Mount. 'Growing grapes organically is pretty much the default option; people don't need to use pesticides or herbicides. Bugs go to nice moist places in France.'

Although Mount profiles Mendoza and Argentina's other wine-growing regions – particularly Salta – in some detail, his book is less about maps and more about chaps. A constellation of characters illuminate the pages, from rogues to heroes, voluble scientists to quiet romantics, peasants who made fortunes to aristocrats who lost everything. We meet Michel Arizmendi, who, in addition to building a 32,000-litre winery at the beginning of the 18th century, flagellated himself regularly and locked his wife in a private prison while he was away on business. There's Juan Giol and Gerónimo Gargantini, immigrants who had arrived in Argentina with the proverbial nothing, but by the beginning of the 20th century had bootstrapped their La Colina de Oro bodega into the world's largest winery. And there's Pedro Marchevsky, wine industry doyen Nicolás Catena's former viticulturist, who according to Mount knows more about vines than any other Argentinian he's met. "The wine critic Miguel Brasco said to me, 'I've seen strange things when I've been around Marchevsky. He walks into vineyards and the vines stand to attention, like roses do around English gardeners.'"



Most importantly, there's Catena himself, the man who over the past 30 years has arguably done for Mendoza what Robert Mondavi did for Napa Valley. 'Catena's gracious, intelligent but shy,' says Mount, 'which means people always assume he knows something they don't'.

The making of malbec

Even Catena's enemies will concede that he's a visionary – someone who put into practise the theory that Argentina could do more than just churn out plonk for profit. But the Catena who began to shake up the industry in the late 1980s, hiring Californian winemaker Paul Hobbs (now a superstar in his own right) to help rid his bodegas of their slack working practices, dreamed of making a world-class cabernet sauvignon or chardonnay. Those were the wines the French made and respected. What Catena couldn't or didn't predict was that the grape varietal that would become virtually synonymous with Argentinian fine wine was one France had virtually forgotten about: malbec.

Malbec was brought to Argentina by the Frenchman Michel Pouget in 1853. In the preceding centuries it had been one of the most planted grapes in Bordeaux, but it would never regain its status after the devastating phylloxera epidemic of the mid 19th century. 'In France, malbec is a wimpy grape,' says Mount. 'If it's too cold or moist, the grapes don't grow or they fall off. It's a Goldilocks grape; things have to be just right. And in Mendoza, which lacks both bugs and rain, things are just right.'

Not only is malbec easy to grow in Argentina, but the wines made from it have proved to be perfectly in tune with what the modern-day mainstream drinking classes are after. Old-school wine buffs may prefer the 'austerity' of a classic Bordeaux, but the average supermarket shopper is looking for something big, bold and boozy. Malbecs, with their velvety opulence, instant fruit hit and high alcohol content, fit the bill. Or as Mount puts it: 'They're fruity and happy and drinkable, and before you know it, you're plastered.'

Vinos Aires?

Despite all the hype about malbec conquering the world's markets, the Argentinian wine industry still follows its own version of the Vegas rule: what's made in Argentina, stays in Argentina.

In spite of their reputation for (relative) sobriety, Argentinians consume around 75 per cent of their country's total wine production. That's a lot of hooch. Much of this is good old-fashioned plonk; perfect for quaffing in the garden while the barbecue sizzles away, but not always the kind of wine you want to taste before you swallow.

While it's still a challenge to find a porteño who's a bona fide wine snob (and long may that continue), it's clear that locals are taking more care over what they order, and are choosing to eat in places that offer good wine lists. The sommelier, once an exotic species, is fast becoming de rigueur in the city's upscale restaurants. More radically, at the newly opened **Aldo's** (part-owned by celebrity sommelier Aldo Graziani), the food has been designed to accompany the wine (sold without mark-up) rather than vice versa (*see p30*).

So what are Mount's favourite places to drink or buy wine? 'I like **Las Pizarras** (*see p38*) where you can order wine from small bodegas you'll rarely find elsewhere,' he says, 'Then there's **Social La Lechuza** (Uriarte 1980, Palermo), a traditional parrilla where the owners leave their laundry to dry in the customer bathrooms. But the meat's great and the wine list, while crap, is classic crap – Vasco Viejo, Rincón Famoso, etc. The stuff your Argentinian grandfather would've grown up on if you had one.

'As for stores, I like **Bodega Amparo** (Darwin 1548, Palermo); and **0800-Vino** (*see p94*), run by the knowledgeable Nigel Tollerman, a man so svelte he could almost hide behind one of his own bottles.'

Optimism is a rare commodity in Argentina, but if you're going to find it anywhere, you'll find it in and around the wine industry. 'It's what drove me to write this book,' says Mount. 'You've got four and a half centuries of colourful characters, of hard work and scams, of triumphs and disasters. It's the perfect story, and it has a successful ending.'

We'll drink to that.

WINE TASTING

Combine wine with walking on the new ***Time Out* wine tour** around Palermo (www.winetourtimeoutba.com.ar), or try, then buy at **Anuva Wine**'s fun and friendly tastings (www.anuvawines.com).