

Argentina

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In a nutshell: Big, ripe wines, terrific Malbec and some smart Chardonnay.

Main grapes: Bonarda, Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Torrontés, Chardonnay.

Chile so far dominates wine exports from South America but Argentina makes much more wine.

Only in the 1990s, however, was business confidence in Argentina sufficient to justify the investment needed to drag its wineries into the 20th century, and exports on a serious scale are still quite modest. For a long time, the distinguishing feature of Argentine wine was the extraordinarily high yields, with reliably sun-ripened grapes literally pumped full of melted Andean snow via irrigation channels constructed in the 19th century. Since the late 1980s there has been an increase in planting in cooler – often higher – areas deliberately to prolong the ripening process, and trained carefully on wires for maximum quality of the resulting fruit.

The main Argentine wine region, Mendoza, is less than an hour's spectacular flight over the Andes from Santiago, the capital of Chile, and its wine industry, but Mendoza is much hotter. Some of its most promising zones are at altitudes of more than 1,100 m above sea level, for example in Luján de Cuyo, just south of the city of Mendoza, and in the Uco Valley, about 50 km further to the south, where there has been considerable outside investment such as Clos de los Siete where famous roving oenologist Michel Rolland of Pomerol made lush wines for the mainly French partners. Some particularly successful Chardonnay has also emerged from the high altitude vineyards of Mendoza.

Malbec was for years Argentina's most planted red wine grape and was therefore long regarded by Argentines as distinctly *infra dig* (especially in relation to Cabernet Sauvignon). However, in the last 10 years, encouraged by producers and foreign buyers, it has been given far greater respect and attention and is now considered to be Argentina's signature grape variety, as well as its greatest hope for export markets. Taken seriously and planted in the right conditions, it can produce rich, intensely fruity yet age-worthy wines which can be far more impressive than most Malbec-based Cahors from south west France. Some of the best well-established producers are Luigi Bosca, Navarro Correas, Norton, Nieto Senetiner, Trapiche and Weinert, but Chandon, Catena and many others (see below) are developing newer, more 'international' varieties.

Bonarda, unrelated to the Italian variety of the same name, is also widely planted and can make particularly juicy, fruity reds for early consumption.

Chandon is a subsidiary of the champagne giant and makes enormous quantities of [cuve close](#) sparkling wine from Chenin Blanc and other early-picked white grapes for the Argentine market.

The second most important wine region in terms of quantity is San Juan to the immediate north of Mendoza, but it is even hotter. San Juan Syrah has gained a certain reputation but the region is also home to Argentina's rather coarse vine specialities Criolla and Cereza. These pink-skinned grapes are used for grape concentrate and the deep-coloured, often slightly sweet white that is sold at rock bottom prices, often in cardboard cartons, within Argentina.

Another high-altitude area of interest to export markets are vineyards around Cafayate in the province of Salta in the far north of the country. The local vine speciality here is a form of Torrontés which can yield crisp, flavourful, very aromatic dry whites – absolutely the last thing most wine drinkers would expect from Argentina. Producers such as Colomé are producing well-defined reds from some of the highest vineyards in the world.

At the opposite end of the country, in Patagonia, the regions of Río Negro and Neuquén are starting to show their potential for fine, sculpted reds, including some promising Pinot Noir.

Some favourite producers: Achaval Ferrer, Alta Vista, Callia, Catena Zapata, Clos de los Siete, Colomé, Cuvelier Los Andes, Dominio del Plata, Fabre Montmayou, Norton, O Fournier, Terrazas de los Andes, Vistalba.

See [Wines of Argentina](#) for more information on this region.