

## The highest vineyards in the world

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One of the entries I enjoyed editing most in *The Oxford Companion to Wine* (2nd edn, OUP 1999) was that on altitude. It was fun pulling together information from the four corners of the globe on which had a claim to be the highest vineyard in the world. Growers in Aosta, north-west Italy, and the Spanish Canary Islands probably have the highest vines in Europe at around 1300 and 1600 metres respectively, but these are mere foothills compared with the height above sea level of isolated vineyards spotted in Nepal and Bhutan at up to 2750m.

Last February, however, I had the chance to visit the world's greatest concentration of high-altitude vineyards, in Argentina. The country's dominant wine province Mendoza is on the same latitude as the Sahara, so you would expect the sort of heavy, clumsy wines that Argentina has been producing for its thirsty domestic market for decades.

Since the early 1990s however vineyards are being planted at ever higher altitudes in an attempt to extend the growing season and increase levels of both natural acidity and flavour. Much is made of the beneficial effect of the cool nights this far up the Andean foothills, and of the higher radiation that can make photosynthesis more efficient and plants healthier.

Certainly all the vines I saw in the new, higher subregions of Mendoza such as Tupungato and Vistaflores (all of them vertically trained rather than the old-style overhead trellises designed to maximise yield) looked impressively healthy. A substantial proportion of grower-producers had already cut off excess bunches to concentrate the remaining crop and pursue the fashionable goal of super-ripe tannins. This is no longer a vinous backwater.

With unlimited good-quality irrigation thanks to melted snows off the Andes and no shortage of suitably poor soils, the only major viticultural problem Argentine grape growers seem to have is hail, a perennial summer hazard that is particularly acute in some areas. Many growers have decided it is worth investing up to US \$10,000 a hectare in specially strong protective netting.

The major problem Argentine wine producers now have of course - like all Argentines - is economic. When I visited in February just as the first ferments were getting going, the problem was simply a shortage of cash, not just to pay for imported luxuries such as French oak barrels and corks, but simply to pay pickers and cellar workers. And the government had, in the space of remarkably few days, managed to substitute an export tax for export credits (on the same day as announcing that it could not afford to pay that vast proportion of the population who are civil servants their salaries that month).

One thing Argentina is not short of however is variety. There is a huge variety of grapes, with red Bonarda and Malbec the most planted vines but no shortage of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah/ Shiraz, Tempranillo, Sangiovese, Merlot, Chardonnay, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc and all sorts of interesting oddballs, thanks to the rich multicultural mix of immigrants that made up the Argentine population. And now there is a variety of different environments in which wine is produced.

Altitude has become the big status symbol among Mendoza's wine producers, each daring to plant slightly higher than his neighbour. (Frost damage must be only a vintage away.) Vineyards are commonly higher than 1000 m (in much of Europe 500m is thought of as an upper limit to reliable ripening) and vines are now being planted as high as 1500 m. Precise altitudes even form part of the names of the (extremely good) wines made by the LVMH/ Chandon still wine subsidiary in Mendoza and sold as, for example, Terrazas de los Andes Gran Malbec 1997 Las Compuertas Vineyard 1076m. And virtually any Mendoza wine with pretensions to quality will boast the altitude of the vineyards that produced it on the back label. Other international investors in the new, high wine country of Mendoza include Allied Domecq; Concha y Toro of Chile; Kendall Jackson of California; Jacques and François Lurton, Pernod Ricard and Michel Rolland of France; Sogrape of Portugal; a Spanish olive magnate; a Dutch motor distributor; and, reputedly, a bunch of Walt Disney executives. They can't all be wrong.

But they are all low, positively insignificant, compared with the highest vineyards of Salta province to the north, in the extraordinary north-west corner of Argentina closest to Bolivia. Salta's main wine town Cafayate, a popular Argentine summer holiday resort, is itself at 2135m and many of the vineyards that surround it (typically being converted from the once-popular white grape Torrontés to Cabernet and Merlot) are considerably higher. But none compare with my visit to two neighbouring wine estates two hours' drive further north and west into the mountains.

This foray was remarkable not just because high altitudes bring with them physical changes (shortness of breath, the need to cook everything twice as long as at sea level) but because of the landscape and the people who live there.

In just an hour or two's drive, mainly on tortuous unpaved mountain roads, you can go from lush green subtropical sugarcane and tobacco country, up through jungle to green lakes and pastures looking for all the world like Scotland, to *puna*, the local word for high desert scrub punctuated by *cardones*, a prehistoric plant like a one-fingered cactus, to *alliplano*, the vast, deserted plateaux inhabited only by llama and desert rats that feel like the top of the world, but can't be because they're bounded by the Andes, their towering, colourful folds looking just like melting icecream.

The great majority of this land is uncultivated - indeed even in relatively overcrowded Mendoza to the south 95 per cent of the land is still desert - but here and there are oases, green *fincas* representing one owner and his many dependents. Each of the two wine-producing estates, in a long valley reaching far into the Andes from the eerily quiet (no cars, few trucks) town of Molinos, provide homes and a living for hundreds of locals. (And with girls encouraged to procreate as soon and as frequently as they can by the local priests, those hundreds are becoming thousands.) One of these vineyards, Colomé, is at almost 2300m. The next, Tacuil, overlooked by a ruined Inca fort if you please, is at 2597m and, according to the sign recently erected by its owner, the highest vineyard in the world. I met him, and he definitely hasn't read *The Oxford Companion*. His wines say it all, but I think we will be hearing more of Colomé from its new owner, Donald Hess of the Hess Collection in Napa Valley.