

## Finca El Portillo Merlot 2002 Mendoza

2 Feb 2004 by JR

On my visit to Argentina a couple of years ago perhaps the most impressive winery I saw was Bodegas Salentein, one of the most ambitious and thoughtfully- designed buildings in the rapidly-developing heights of the Uco Valley near Tunuyán surrounded by vineyards at altitudes of between 1,050 and 1,500 metres (3,000 to 4,500 feet).

This Dutch- funded enterprise was the first of a host of foreign investors in this viticultural El Dorado and has managed to stake a claim to 2,000 hectares of land, presumably before land prices escalated. (Some of the original land was acquired for as little as 300 dollars a hectare in 1974; by 2002 a hectare here typically cost 5,000 dollars.) They had planted 600 hectares of this by the time I got there but have doubtless planted many more in the last two years.

The winemaker Laureano Gómez was pretty impressive too and, of course, Michel Rolland has had a hand in things, since 1995 I believe. Gómez is crazy about Pinot Noir and has had great success with the Pinot vines planted in Salentein's highest vineyards. Salentein's Pinots have been some of the finest in Latin America.

El Portillo is the name of their lowest vineyard, or *finca*, and the name used for their least expensive bottlings, designed to sell at between 8 and 10 dollars in the US. (I have a note in my notebook that Finca El Portillo Merlot 2000 was on sale in Buenos Aires during my 2002 visit for seven pesos, although this note was taken on the very day that the Argentina peso was devalued from one US dollar to 50 US cents.)

British readers will understand why Salentein's UK importers were not particularly keen on the name Portillo, which happens to coincide with that of a once- extremely- unpopular (now arguably rehabilitated) Conservative politician. Accordingly they have used the name La Pampa for the range instead.

The wine that particularly impresses me at the moment is the recently released **Finca El Portillo Merlot 2002** which has extreme depth of fruit for a wine at this price, is really well balanced and ready to drink and, like the entire range, finishes dry rather than sweet when so many South American wines are, in my experience, unappetisingly sweet. It tastes as though this fruit very nearly made the cut for a superior bottling. (The Malbec 2001 and Cabernet Sauvignon 2001 released concurrently, on the other hand, seem to me to be over the top, losing fruit and drying out - but then 2002 is heralded as a very exciting vintage for Argentina.)

I was also impressed, however, by **Finca El Portillo Sauvignon Blanc 2003** which is even less expensive than the Merlot 2002 and has really true Sauvignon aromas - again without an excess of sweetness. It is available in Britain chez Waitrose as **La Pampa Sauvignon Blanc 2003** at just £4.99. British wine buyers can also taste real red bordeaux blend value from Salentein in **San Pablo Estate 2002** which is currently on sale at Marks & Spencer for just £6.99 but this wine will benefit from a year or two's further cellaring.) To check on availability near you, see the long list of worldwide importers on Bodegas Salentein's copious website at <http://www.bodegasalentein.com/eng/bodegas/ventas.asp>

Sorry - I seem to have gone on a bit this week. Must try harder.

