Just how good are Argentine wines today?

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Argentina is the world's second biggest wine producer outside Europe after the US, but the longstanding native thirst for wine in a country dominated by Italian immigrants has until recently distracted Argentine bodegas from the need to get together and actively export. Argentine wine has been doing pretty well in the US on its own account. The big, bold style of wines made in the bright sunlight of Andean vineyards is going down well as a good-value alternative to California's naturally bumptious wines. Exports to the US, the most important market for Argentine wines, increased more than 40 per cent last year.

But exports from Argentine bodegas to their second most important market, the UK, have been falling, while their big rivals less than an hour's flight across the Andes in Chile have been doing infuriatingly well, both in terms of volumes and reputation. Clearly something needed to be done and last year, after many a fit and start, a London office was finally established for Wines of Argentina, the tellingly English name of the country's wine exporting arm. Ex Oddbins wine buyer James Forbes was hired to run it and last week I took part in one of his first initiatives, the Wines of Argentina Awards, a blatant copy of what his Chilean counterpart had instituted in 2003. Eight of us, wine writers and traders, were flown across the Atlantic to put our palates and peculiarly British sensibilities to work and to host a seminar on the quirks of the UK wine market.

I did see the Andes, but chiefly through the windows of Mendoza's Park Hyatt where we spent three days locked in a room judging more than 100 wines a day in panels of three, two from Britain with one of Argentina's top winemakers. This entailed considerable ingenuity on the part of the Awards' efficient organizers so as to avoid any winemaker judging his own wine, while ensuring that every wine was judged separately by two different panels. I can confirm that this was done and that the competition was run with utter probity even though the list of gold medal and trophy winners below includes wines made by two of our Argentine judges, Daniel Pi of Tropiche and Pedro Marchevsky of Dominio de la Plata.

What in particular pleased the 300 Argentines who packed out our seminar after the judging was that we found 368, or 77 per cent, of the 477 wines entered, by 127 wineries, good enough to win a medal – even if only 24 of them were gold, and 145 silver. The overall standard was really pretty high and the wines very much more sophisticated than on my last visit five years ago. Winemaking faults were relatively rare. Of the shocking 108 bottles that were rejected as faulty the vast majority were spoilt by TCA, the mouldy-smelling compound associated with random cork taint. Some wines had the telltale horsey smell of brettanomyces, and a few wines reminded us of the old days of rustic winemaking, but contrary to expectations very few seemed unacceptably hot and over-alcoholic. The most common winemaking fault was an uncomfortably dry finish caused by either over-extracted fruit or under-seasoned oak – something I noticed when judging the first Wines of Chile Awards.

Bodegas were allowed to enter up to five wines only and virtually all of them seem to have decided to enter their finest Malbecs, many of them blended with other grape varieties, generally Cabernet, Merlot and/or Syrah. This meant that there was rather a dearth of white wines, which was a shame as I have long been particularly impressed by Argentina's best Chardonnays, particularly those grown on the stony soils of some of the higher vineyards which can offer much of the appeal of a top California Chardonnay at about a quarter the price. **J & F Lurton Chardonnay Reserva 2005** is a great example of this style, made by a French-owned outfit and winning a bronze. It should be available in Europe and Canada soon for around 10 euros a bottle while **Argento Chardonnay 2006 Mendoza** won a silver medal and is currently on sale at Majestic in the UK for just £5.99.

Sauvignon Blanc is a fashionable novelty within Argentina but it is difficult to imagine its being one of the country's export strengths when the world has so many cooler regions more obviously suitable for Sauvignon.

Our panel tasted only two Viogniers, but they were both impressive, with **Santa Ana Reserve Viognier 2006 San Juan** eventually winning a silver medal. It was fascinating for me and Henri Chapon of the Hotel du Vin group to taste a range of Torrontés, Argentina's heavily-scented signature white grape, with Pedro Marchevsky and engage in a doctrinal dispute over how full bodied and how acid it should be. My favourite was the luscious, gold medallist **Colomé Torrontés 2006 Salta**.

Like other British judges such as Oz Clarke and Robert Joseph, we were impressed by many of the Cabernets and Merlots that came our way, and therefore surprised not to see more gold medals awarded to them. Presumably our particular preferences were different and so cancelled each other out. Our flight of 2005 Mendoza Cabernets was truly uplifting and had Pedro beating his chest with pride. I particularly liked **Pulenta Estate, Gran Cabernet Franc 2005 Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza** which ended up with a silver medal (note that this is a different winery, run by Carlos's brothers, from Carlos Pulenta's new one in Vistalba which produces the Torrontés range).

There were also some lovely Syrahs among the 17 entered, especially from San Juan, and seven rather less convincing Tempranillos - both varieties having seemed so exotic when I last visited Argentina. Argentina's way with Syrah is less intense than Australia's in general – perhaps, again, closest to California's. My panel was not exposed to any of the seven Pinot Noirs entered, most of them from coolish wine country in Patagonia, but I have already recommended here

the previous vintage of the **Alamos Pinot Noir 2006 Mendoza**, a silver medal winner from some of Catena's highest vineyards in Mendoza and just £6.99 at Majestic.

In realising her export potential, for so long hampered by isolation on a national and individual level, we all felt that Argentina could profitably capitalise on the current trend towards pink and, especially, pale red wines. What could be more delicious on a hot day than a chilled light red made from one of Argentina's most common red grapes, the fruity Bonarda or possibly even Malbec, the country's rich, spicy calling card. Malbec or Malbec blends was just about all we tasted on the second day and, while Pedro urged us to pronounce on a single style of Malbec that would go down best in the UK, it was thrilling to see just how much it can vary according to the region in which it is grown, from the spicy, round Malbecs of Vistalba through the sour cherry flavours of Agrelo to more delicate examples from La Consulta's cooler vineyards. All these districts are in Mendoza – the dominant but frustratingly varied appellation for Argentine wine.

We clearly approved of Daniel Pi's enterprise in bottling three single-vineyard Malbecs each year under the Tropiche label as we gave golds to two of them, although with the major caveat that, like far too many of these wines, they come in a ridiculously heavy Mendoza-made bottle that really was hard to lift at the end of a long day's tasting. In a more sensible bottle, **Fabre Montmayou Malbec Gran Reserva 2005 Mendoza** from another French owned company whose **Infinitus Malbec Syrah 2005 Patagonia** also won a gold medal, was the most popular win at the awards ceremony on our final night.

If we liked the Malbecs and enjoyed their variety, we seemed to like Malbec blends even more to judge from the number of gold medals awarded. But perhaps the most exciting aspect of the trophy winners picked from the 24 gold medal winners is that only the Luigi Bosca wine retails at more than £10 a bottle.

See also the full list of trophy and medal winners