



NAPA DEL SUR

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Intoxicating views, gracious inns and stunning wines make Argentina the ideal place for wine lovers to sit, sip and savor
By JUNE NAYLOR Special to the Star-Telegram

MENDOZA, Argentina --The moment you arrive in this celebrated capital of Argentina's booming wine business, the comparisons to another renowned wine region begin. You'll barely make it inside the door to Vines of Mendoza, a tasting room opened by developers from California, when you hear it: This is the next Napa.

After you've roamed around the vineyards here for a few days, you're inclined to agree that this frontier is the one to discover now, before everyone else arrives and overwhelms it. Winemakers are delighted that Americans have become passionate about their wines -- you rarely see a wine list at home today without at least one malbec from Argentina -- and they offer great hospitality to persuade you to kick back and soak up their bounty.

The best season for visiting comes in the next couple of months, as harvest takes place in South America's early fall (our early spring) and seasonal changes in the sunny scapes at the Andes foothills take your breath away as easily as the wines capture your palate. The Argentine wine community understands what globe-trotting wine lovers want, as evidenced by the comfortable elegance that's supplanted more primitive elements in the region. At the end of even the most bone-jarring, rutted road there's a wine bodega with a chic little inn and a savvy chef putting luxury on a plate.

Go, see, sip, savor. Discovery has never tasted so good.

Wandering around

Some 70 percent of Argentina's wines are made in Mendoza, on the western side of the country, about a 90-minute flight from Buenos Aires and about an hour's flight from Santiago. It is both a wine region at the foot of the Andes and a charming town with history imbued by the Incas and the Spanish -- seen in the old canal system still in use. You'll find a growing stash of destination wineries, inns and restaurants that you won't want to leave. While Argentine wines come

from the country's northern reaches down to the Earth's end at Patagonia, Mendoza is home to the Lujan de Cuyo and the Uco Valley, where vineyards produce most of that vaunted malbec, the crown jewel in the country's viticulture crown.

Here, it's sunny more than 300 days each year, and the Andes keep the rain out of the valleys, giving the soil ideal rocky, sandy conditions for growing grapes, while the snow runoff provides necessary water. At each stop, you can't help but swoon at the vineyard vistas, with towering ranges of snow-tipped mountain peaks as a stunning backdrop.

Downtown, a few steps away from the sleek and sexy Park Hyatt, indulge in the guidance offered at a clever new operation called Vines of Mendoza. In the cool, contemporary tasting room and on a sunny patio, servers pour flights or glasses from a selection of 50 Argentine wines. The Vines staff, many of whom relocated from California wine country, can begin your orientation process, and soon you'll be ready to sign up for the Vines wine club, so you'll receive four shipments of six wines each -- meaning you don't have to haul anything home.

Vines is also selling property in the Uco Valley. If you want your own little vineyard, say 4 to 10 acres, but don't have expertise or time to run it, they'll do it for you with an initial buy-in of about \$40,000 per acre. A small wine-centric resort hotel is planned, too, in the style of Calistoga Ranch, to open late this year.

After picking some favorite wines, you can begin plotting your self-guided touring options to visit the winemakers and their grapes, but you can save time and gain in-depth background on the region by booking a personalized tour with Tasting Mendoza, a company catering to wine and food fans.

Among places to visit is Mendel Wines, a small, family-run bodega just outside of Mendoza where 80-year-old malbec vines produce grapes for small batches of high-quality wines. This quiet spot is perfect for coming to understand malbec, begun here as a French varietal about a century ago. Characterized by an intensely purple hue, with shades of black, violet and red, the wine seduces with its fruit, flower and plum tones. At an ancient table in an old bodega room, you can sip Mendel's malbec, which may be at first alive and fresh on the tongue and then smoother the longer it unwinds in the glass. This wine begs to be paired with spicy mussels or the deepest dark chocolate.

Also near Mendoza, Bodega Carlos Pulenta has contemporary ranch-house styling, olive groves and abundant lavender shrubs crowding the walkways. Check out the traditional mud-brick ovens, still used for baking empañadas, which are as compelling as the exquisite restaurant and the rock-encased wine cellar, reached by smooth rosewood stairs. Here, the wines of choice bear the VistAlba brand, crafted entirely from estate grapes to make blends of malbec, cabernet sauvignon, bonarda and merlot, much smoother than the pure malbecs; note that this label is one you're likely to see more and more at home these days.

The must-go place near Mendoza is the winery offering the most talked-about wines from Argentina, those from Dominio del Plata. These are the creation of Susana Balbo, one of the foremost winemakers in her country -- and one of the few women with such a profile in the world -- and her partner-husband, renowned viticulturist Pedro Marchevsky. Together they're making stunning wines, such as Crios de Susana Balbo Torrontes, similar to a viognier, fruity but dry, and Ben Marco Expresivo, a silky wine that hints of chocolate, cherries and leather. Best of all, you can find these wines easily at stores in North Texas.

Eating -- and sleeping it off

Casas Wine Lodge near Mendoza stocks exceptional Argentine wines for pairing with a menu that sparkles with freshness and pure flavors. Plan on a relaxed lunch that should begin with a plate of red, silky beef carpaccio with shaved

Parmesan, a perfect pairing for the Tikal Patriota, a bonarda-malbec blend. Sitting on the warm patio and looking beyond vineyards at the snow-tipped Cordon del Plata will leave an impression you'll revisit again and again in your mind.

Although it's scarcely 3 years old, Cavas rapidly became the premier inn in Mendoza country (its first guests were from Dallas, in fact). All 14 casitas have mountain views from private patios, with al fresco showers and plunge pools, and rooftop decks with fireplaces. In the small but fine spa, treatments are made with red wine and malbec seeds.

At Bodega Carlos Pulenta, Restaurant La Bourgogne is the domain of chef Jean Paul Bondoux, whose fame in Buenos Aires and Mendoza has come from creating French dishes with local products. Devotees praise his pumpkin ravioli with prawns, and rabbit over cabbage with herbed butter and Dijon. The Posada at Bodega Carlos Pulenta offers two exceptionally comfortable, contemporary private rooms with breathtaking views of vineyards and mountains.

At Terruna Restaurant, within the Mendoza countryside inn called Club Tapiz, you eat pork stuffed with dates and rack of lamb glazed in grapefruit beneath oversized, bold paintings while looking out at palm trees in the courtyard or mountains beyond the vineyards. The small inn at Club Tapiz occupies a century-old home, where a huge living room filled with leather couches, chairs and a fireplace is overseen by a giant painting of Eva Peron leaving home for her date with infamy as a young woman. A gorgeous swimming pool is bordered by vineyards, an olive grove and a small spa; rooms are small and colorful but lovely.

It's a civilized frontier, to be sure. Just be sure to get there ahead of the crowds.

If you go

Getting there

LAN and American offer the most routes from D/FW Airport, starting at about \$1,530 this spring. You may have connections in Mexico City and Santiago, but some routes connect just in Santiago, www.lan.com or www.aa.com.

Wine tasting

In the Mendoza area: Vines of Mendoza, www.vinesofmendoza.com; Bodega Ruca Malen, www.bodegarucamalen.com; Bodega Carlos Pulenta, www.carlospulentawines.com; Mendel Wines, www.mendel-wines.com; and Dominio del Plata, www.dominiodelplata.com.ar.

Dining

Cavas Wine Lodge, www.cavaswinelodge.com; La Bourgogne at Bodega Carlos Pulenta, www.carlospulentawines.com; Terruna Restaurant at Club Tapiz, www.tapiz.com.ar; Bodega Ruca Malen, www.bodegarucamalen.com. Plan on \$25 per person at lunch and \$50 per person at dinner, without wine.

Lodging

In the Mendoza area, Cavas Wine Lodge, www.cavaswinelodge.com, from \$350; Club Tapiz, www.tapiz.com.ar, from \$150; La Posada at Bodega Carlos Pulenta, www.carlospulentawines.com, from \$200.

Touring

To set up a personalized tour around Mendoza, contact Dolores Montero at www.tastingmendoza.com; info@tastingmendoza.com. Prices vary according to touring options. For more touring ideas, visit www.welcomeargentina.com/mendoza/outings.html.