

Wines of South America

Argentina

PREVIEW
COPY

Wines of South America: Argentina

Version 1.0

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Approach Guides
New York, NY

www.approachguides.com

ISBN: 978-1-936614-35-6

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Introduction

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The wines of South America continue to garner global momentum, fueled by ongoing quality improvements and continued attractive price points. As part of our series dedicated to South American wines, we take a comprehensive look at the wines of Argentina. Our goal is to provide wine enthusiasts with the critical information required to make to make informed wine selections.

This Approach Guide begins with a review of **Argentina's primary red and white grape varieties** — most notably malbec and torrontés, respectively — and where they reach their highest expressions.

It then continues with **detailed region-by-region profiles**. For each of Argentina's seven regions, this guide offers insight into its **specific terroir, pointing out the best wines and what makes them distinctive**.

Finally, we conclude by offering a straightforward **vintage ratings table**, which affords high-level insight into the best and most challenging years for wine production in Argentina.

This guidebook's approach, based on that of our wine app for the iPhone and iPad (www.agwine.com), is unique: rather than tell you what specific bottle of wine to order by providing individual bottle reviews, this Approach Guide gives you the information you require to make informed wine choices on any list.

* **Look for the asterisks.** We mark each of our favorite appellations and grape varieties with an asterisk (*) — they have a record for providing quality, consistency, and good values.

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We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to the wines of Argentina.

Salud!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
www.approachguides.com

Argentina's Grape Varieties

In this section, we profile Argentina's primary grape varieties; we have marked signature grape varieties with asterisks (*).

Before we begin, here are a few things to consider:

- Argentina's winegrowing regions, located on the western edge of the country, experience **dry and warm desert-like conditions**; rains are limited by the Andes Mountains to the west, which create a rainshadow effect.
- Argentina's best vineyards are located at **higher altitudes**, where grapes receive greater sunshine and experience large fluctuations in temperatures between day and night; the night's cool temperatures allow grapes to recover from the day's heat and maintain healthy acidity levels.
- In Argentina, **the red-white grape split strongly favors reds**: vineyard planted area is comprised of 70% reds and to 30% whites.
- **95% of vines are ungrafted** (i.e. grown on their own rootstocks), as the country has not been devastated by phylloxera.

Bonarda *

Argentina's second most widely planted grape variety behind malbec, comprising 18% of reds and 12% of total, bonarda is much less well known in international circles. This underappreciated grape variety — known as corbeau, douce noire, and charbonneau in France; and charbono in the USA — is yielding good wines that pair exceptionally well with a range of foods and often hit very attractive (sub-\$20) price points. They are tasty, medium bodied, and high in acidity, with bright fruit flavors of strawberries and raspberries, coupled with anise and mineral notes.

When should you go with a bonarda instead of a malbec? If you are looking for a slightly lighter-bodied wine (but still medium bodied in profile overall) with more pronounced acidity and a flavor profile that favors red fruits over dark fruits, opt for the bonarda. The bonarda is definitely worth experimenting with.

The grape fares best in Argentina's warmer climate zones. **The best versions are from East Mendoza, where most of the country's old-vine bonarda vineyards are found**; San Juan also makes high quality versions.

Cabernet Franc

At home in France's Bordeaux and Loire Valley, cabernet franc is a **low production** grape variety in Argentina; wines based exclusively on cabernet franc **are typically very high quality, with prices to match**. Cabernet franc yields medium-bodied wines with low tannins, moderate acidity, and sophisticated aromas of raspberries, green peppers, black currants, herbs, and violet. Argentina's relatively warmer climate serves to produce darker, fruitier, and less herbaceous single varietal wines than those from France.

Map of Argentina's Winegrowing Regions



North – Salta *

Introduction

The tiny northern Salta (SAHL-ta) region (meaning ‘very beautiful’) is the fourth largest wineproducing region in Argentina, comprising only 1% of vineyard area and wine production. **Although production levels are low, the region carries a highly regarded reputation.**

With winegrowing concentrated in the **Calchaquies Valley**, Salta is home to some of **the highest altitude vineyards in the world** (1,300-3,000 meters / 4,264-9,843 feet), with vineyards creeping into the high reaches of the Andes. Grapes grown at these especially high altitudes develop **thicker and darker skins** as a natural defense against the sun’s more powerful ultraviolet rays; these more developed skins afford the resulting wines more concentrated aromas, colors, and flavors.

In addition, the region’s climate is especially conducive to bringing grapes to optimal levels of ripeness, while maintaining high levels of acidity: large fluctuations in temperatures between day and night (warm days at 30°C/86°F and cool nights at 10°C/50°F), minimal rainfall, prevailing winds, and exceptionally high levels of sunshine (up to 340 days per year). Soils consist of fine sand over an alluvial clay base.

High quality production is concentrated in three sub-areas, distinguished chiefly by their altitudes: **Cafayate** (1,700 meters/5,577 feet), the largest sub-area by far; **El Arenal** (2,700 meters / 8,858 feet); and **Molinos** (2,400-3,000 meters / 7,874-9,843 feet). As altitude increases, diurnal temperature swings become greater, introducing risk to the grapes, while creating an opportunity for increased intensity and concentration in the resulting wines.

Red Wines

Although Salta is virtually synonymous with torrontés-based whites, select red grape varieties are achieving very good results, producing full-bodied, expressive, and tannic wines.

- * **Malbec.** Malbec is Salta’s most planted red grape variety, accounting for 28% of total. The region’s world class malbec-based wines adhere to a distinctive style, less fruit-forward and generous than their more famous Mendoza counterparts; they are more intense and aromatic, with notes of mineral and earth. They are special wines.
- * **Cabernet sauvignon.** Cabernet sauvignon represents 19% of Salta’s vineyard planted area. As in Catamarca, cabernet sauvignon achieves excellent results in Salta’s climate, where flavors of intense dark fruit, peppercorn, and earth predominate; these powerfully aromatic wines naturally favor earth over fruit and have a strong bite of natural acidity. We would certainly experiment with this variety in Salta, as this is where some of the most exciting wines are being made.
- **Tannat.** Although tannat (4% of vineyard planted area) achieves its highest levels in nearby Uruguay, the best Argentine versions hail from Salta. As compared to Uruguay versions, those from Salta are more approachable, with softer, sweeter tannins and greater aromatic

Cuyo – Mendoza *

Introduction

Making up the southern part of Cuyo — Argentina’s core winemaking zone, its name meaning “land of deserts” in the mikayac dialect of the indigenous Huarpe people — Mendoza (men-DOSA) accounts for a staggering 71% of Argentina’s vineyard area and 66% of wine production; to put this in perspective, the next biggest region, San Juan, comprises 22% vineyard area and 21% of wine production.

While there are a range of soil types in Mendoza, the best are alluvial with a high stone content (30-50% of soil volume), which provides optimal draining, and small amounts of clay and chalk, which provides moisture and micronutrients that add complexity to the wines.

There are **five subregions** within Mendoza, **the primary differentiator being their relative altitudes**, which is determined by their proximity to the Andes Mountains to the west. Higher altitude vineyards experience greater daily fluctuations in temperatures (warm days and cool nights) that are more favorable in Argentina for the growing of optimally ripe grapes; further, they tend to have rockier soils, which ensures optimal drainage of the vines. Keep this mind in the subregion profiles that follow.

Wines of Central Mendoza

Central Mendoza (650-1,060 meters / 2,133-3,478 feet, with most wineries on the high end of this range) is concentrated just outside Mendoza City along the path cut by the Mendoza River on its long run down from the peaks of the Andes.

This is **the premier winegrowing area in all of Argentina and where malbec achieves its greatest heights**.

Luján de Cuyo

Located in the southwest corner of Central Mendoza, this is one of only three controlled denominations in Argentina. Luján, the absolute **epicenter of Argentina’s malbec production**, generates the most aromatic, full-bodied, and intense versions available. **Cabernet sauvignon** also achieves world class results here, the best Argentina has to offer.

Departments of particular note within Luján de Cuyo include the following:

- **Agrelo.** Agrelo makes some of the best wines in Luján, many from old vines, particularly in the Alto Agrelo.
- **Carrodilla.** This department has the biggest daily temperature fluctuation in Luján de Cuyo, which yields wines of great intensity and aromatic complexity.
- **Chacras de Coria.** The department’s sandy soils have higher levels of clay, which affords

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Los Angeles Times

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