

An Unexpected Pleasure

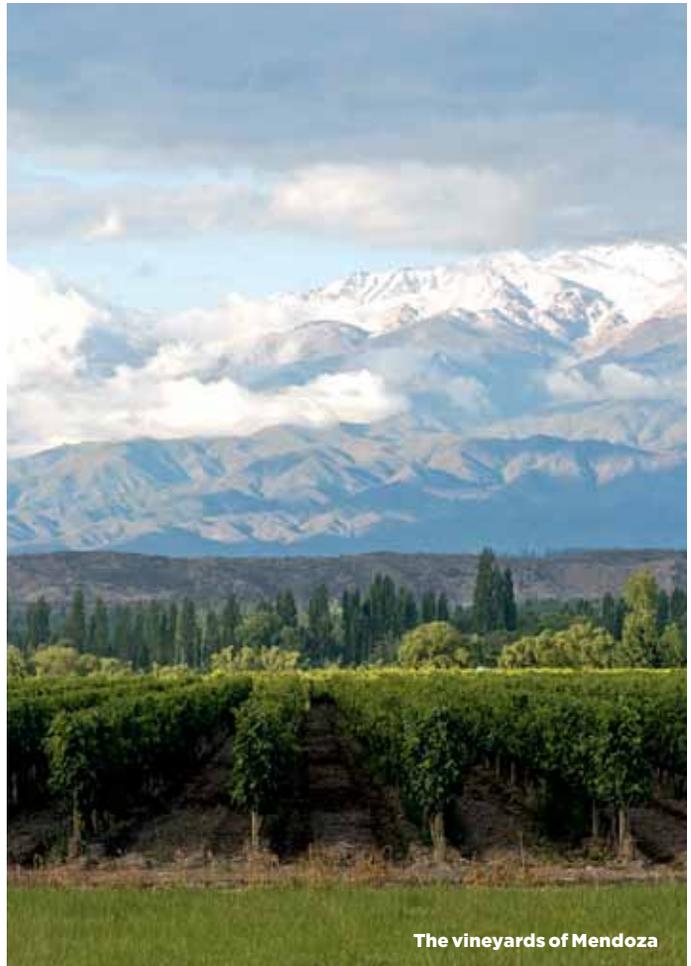
In the valleys just east of the Andes lies a wine lover's paradise: Mendoza, Argentina.

By Scott Jones

★ | Buenos Aires is often tagged the “Paris of South America,” and with good reason. The culture, neighborhoods, culinary scene, and nightlife in both cities are second to none. Another shared trait is their proximity to world-class wine country — in the case of Buenos Aires, the Mendoza province in western Argentina. Plenty of top-notch *vinotecas* (wine bars) and restaurants in Buenos Aires pour wines from Mendoza, but an easy, two-hour flight from the grand city on the coast gives you an opportunity to experience the region and its wines firsthand.

The city of Mendoza, also the capital of the province, is the gateway to Argentina's most renowned wineries and its tourist-friendly wine country. Add in an almost constant view of the snowcapped Andes and you have the recipe for a memorable side trip from bustling Buenos Aires.

Now if your perception of Argentine wine amounts to inexpensive, ho-hum reds and whites,



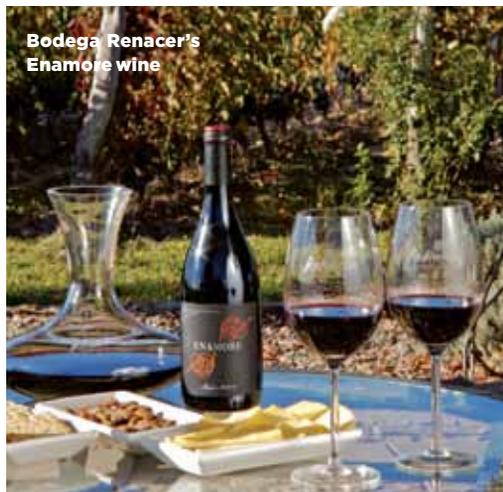
The vineyards of Mendoza

it's time to reconsider. A commitment to quality and a deeper understanding of the region's various microclimates have dramatically improved the juice flowing out of Mendoza. Today you'll find great wines with true finesse, especially in the malbec and chardonnay varietals. But don't leave without trying bonarda (a rich, easy-drinking red) and torrontés (an aromatic, midweight white), also important grapes in the region.

Many first-time visitors find Mendoza's laid-back atmosphere a revelation. To put it in California terms, the main wine-country destinations of Luján de Cuyo, Maipú, and Uco Valley have all the grand estates of Napa, in both classic and modern styles, with the more relaxed, jeans-and-boots vibe of Sonoma.

Unlike Napa, however, wineries along this high-desert landscape are spread out; it's often a 30-minute drive between producers, in some cases up to an hour. If you're used to powering through ten or more wineries a day, you'll need to adjust

GETTING THERE
US Airways flies direct to Rio de Janeiro with connecting flights via partner TAM to Buenos Aires.



Bodega Renacer's Enamore wine

PHOTOS (FROM TOP), COURTESY OF MENDOZA TOURISM AND BODEGA RENACER WINERY

Wine & Dine |

your expectations. Visiting three or four, including a leisurely lunch, is a more realistic goal. (Note: Some wineries close on the weekend, and many of the larger ones require reservations, so be sure to call ahead.)

The wide-open spaces are part of Mendoza's charm, so an easy pace is called for. Plus, you'll have ample opportunity to balance out the wine tasting with the local cuisine. Don't miss the mom-and-pop *asados* serving up grilled grass-fed beef topped with the always-present *chimichurri* (a robust garlic, parsley, and olive oil sauce) or local shops turning out golden meat-and-olive-filled empanadas from wood-fired ovens. The eateries are easy to find in the rural towns along the way, even if your Spanish is rusty.

Keeping travel time in mind, there are a few ways to approach a visit. A two-day stay primarily centered on the city of Mendoza is the best bet for a tight schedule. The city has a decidedly European feel with tree-lined streets and large plazas, as well as plenty of tasting options (including many hard-to-find and boutique wines) at local shops and vinotecas like Mendoza Wine Connection, Vines of Mendoza, and Sol y Vino. Take a quick cab ride to neighboring Godoy Cruz to visit Bodegas Escorihuela Gascón and CARO, a joint venture between Bodegas Catena Zapata and Château Lafite Rothschild.

The sweet spot, however, is a four-



day stay, based in Mendoza city (the Park Hyatt is a terrific spot to cool your heels), with day trips to Luján de Cuyo and Maipú. Luján de Cuyo has a high concentration of wineries and is broken into *norte* (north) and *sur* (south).

Combine a visit to northern Luján de Cuyo with nearby Maipú to get the most bang for your buck. Producers to seek out in these two areas include Alta Vista, Bodegas Nieto Senetiner, Trapiche, Vistalba, and Familia Zuccardi. The expansive southern portion of Luján de Cuyo is worth a day of its own. Some of the notables include Bodega Catena Zapata, Bodega Renacer, Bodega Norton, Viña Doña Paula, Dolium, Bodega Septima, and Finca La Anita.

A more extensive, weeklong exploration of the countryside should include the Uco Valley and the high-elevation vineyards in Tupungato and Tunuyán. Overnight stays in a local *posada* (a

country inn) ensure an authentic, rustic wine-country experience, though some are quite posh. This option allows visits to wineries such as Bodegas Salentein, Rutini, Masi Tupungato, and O. Fournier.

Transportation options are numerous and range from rental car to tour bus to bike. If you're comfortable following a map and managing your intake of wine, then a rental car is a solid choice. If driving is not your idea of fun, ask the hotel concierge to arrange a private car or taxi. You'll spend about \$125 a day for the service, but taking this route gives you access to someone who knows the area and may very well have an inside scoop on Mendoza's hidden gems. ★

Scott Jones, former executive editor of Southern Living, is the president of Jones Is Hungry (jonesishungry.com), a culinary media company.



Ten to Try

The wines below represent a mere fraction of Mendoza's high-quality output, but this mix of grape varieties and price points is a good place to start.

Red

VIÑA DOÑA PAULA

Malbec (\$18)

BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA

Alta Malbec (\$50)

BODEGAS NIETO SENETINER

Bonarda Reserva (\$14)

FAMILIA ZUCCARDI

Emma Bonarda (\$30)

BODEGA RENACER

Enamore (\$30)

White

ALTA VISTA

Premium Torrontés (\$13)

FAMILIA ZUCCARDI

Serie A Torrontés (\$15)

BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA

Alta Chardonnay (\$35)

TRAPICHE

Broquel Chardonnay (\$18)

BODEGA FRANCOIS LURTON

Gran Lurton Corte Friulano (\$25)