Argentina: Sense of Place… But Beware!

LUIS GUTIÉRREZ

31st Oct 2019 | The Wine Advocate | Issue 245 End of October 2019

The path toward more site-specific wines that show their origin through non-interventionist viticulture and winemaking continues as a strong tendency in Argentina. A few days before writing these lines, I received the news that the new San Pablo IG (Indicación Geográfica, the name of the appellations of origin in Argentina) had been approved. The quality pyramid is taking shape from a generic “Malbec from Mendoza” past into a hierarchy of regional, village and single-vineyard bottlings. Trained palates can identify wines from some places and specific soils in certain wines; people now talk about one vintage being better in Altamira while the previous one could have been better in Gualtallary. More and more wines have a sense of place.

But such changes are always slow, and it’s a bumpy road with many pitfalls and temptations along the way. And there are no shortcuts or magic recipes. Thinking that all the wines from Gualtallary are going to be great is as naïve as believing all wines from Bordeaux are world-class.

I mention Gualtallary because right now it's the most fashionable place to produce wine in Argentina. But Gualtallary—like Bordeaux, Rioja or Douro—is too large and diverse to make generalizations. Furthermore, there are some additional issues with Gualtallary, because the name is still a registered private trademark, and the place is not yet a controlled appellation of origin. The INV (Instituto Nacional de Vitivinicultura) has come up with a—hopefully temporary—workaround and has approved Gualtallary as an IP (Indicación de Procedencia), not a fully-fledged IG, so the name can be used on labels.

Even when it eventually becomes an IG, the place needs further subdivisions, because it's large and diverse—soil and altitude are very variable, and so is the quality of the wines produced, like elsewhere. Believing that there is a magic formula to produce world-class wines, be it with grapes from Gualtallary, using Cabernet Franc, fermenting full cluster or using concrete is nonsense. Because there is no formula.

First, you have to identify the places with really high potential. And just think how site-specific Burgundy is, where two vineyards separated by a path can be

classified very differently in the quality hierarchy. Acquiring that knowledge is going to take a long time. And not even the subzones (people talk about the need to split Gualtallary into four or five different subzones) are defined yet, mainly because they could not approve the appellation itself.

And then there will be the need to be more specific within those subzones or sub-appellations—and even within a vineyard, which tend to be quite large in Argentina, there might be better and not-so-good parts, because the soils can be very different.

Some, like Catena or Per Se, are doing their homework and studying the soils in their vineyards and have already released separate bottlings with different qualities (and prices) from within the same vineyard. Many others are doing the same, but it's not yet something that is systematic or driven by the appellation—because the appellation doesn't exist yet!

In the meantime, some wines are supposed to be produced with fruit from Gualtallary, but there is no guarantee or control about the real origin of the grapes. And even within Gualtallary, you might find some wines that are produced from great places and others from less-great places. And for the consumer, it's all the same.

And all this without going into the "producer, producer, producer" mantra. What do I mean? Even when the places have been identified for their potential, it's no guarantee of a great wine. Why? Because the place has the potential, but you need someone with the knowledge, experience and intuition to translate that potential from the vineyard into the bottle. That's why, at the end of the day, the most important name on a wine label from Burgundy—the place on earth where there's a better understanding of the potential of each plot of each vineyard—is that of the producer.

IG San Pablo and Guillermo Corona

A sign of the good progress in the search for the expression of the place is the fact that the IG San Pablo appellation of origin was approved in September 2019. It's one of the coldest places in the Valle de Uco, a cooler part of Mendoza, because there is no *precordillera* (foothills) in front of the Andes. In the classical part of Mendoza, Luján de Cuyo and so on, these foothills or secondary mountains moderate the cooling effect of the Andes. In the Valle de Uco, this cushion does not exist, hence the cooler climate in the valley.

The vineyards of San Pablo are directly exposed to the Andes Mountains.

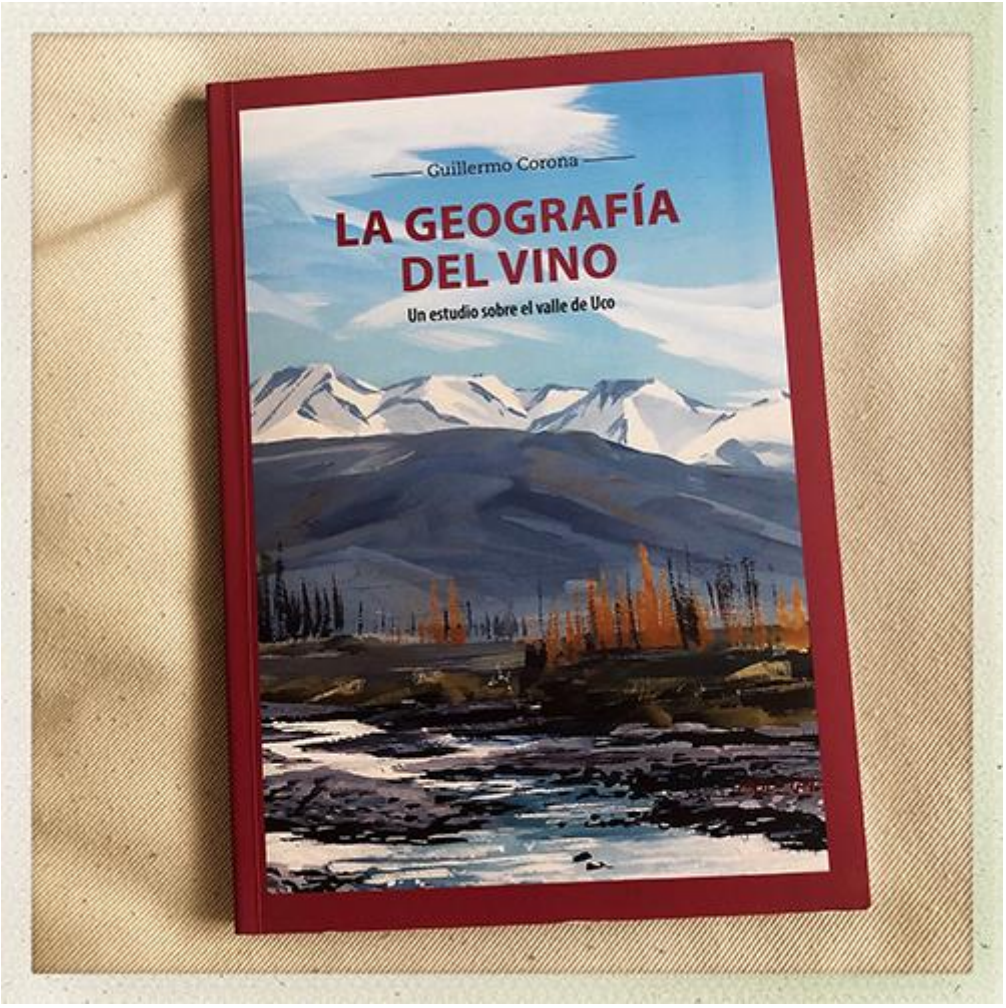
The condition of San Pablo is even cooler than the majority of subzones within Valle de Uco because of its high altitude and also because the mountains are closer to the vineyards and have a clear cooling effect. The Las Tunas River is the border with Gualtallary, and the appellation includes lands up to 1,700 meters in altitude. This is a relatively new development; not much land is under vine, and there aren't that many growers there. So, the main vineyard owners have promoted this, basically Salentein, Tapiz and Zuccardi. A smaller appellation—comprising 510 hectares of vineyards today—with fewer players is a lot easier to get through. It took them about four years.

The Las Tunas River is one of the natural borders of the newly created San Pablo IG.

One new, although unusual, development has been the rise of Guillermo Corona, a geologist who works in the petrol industry. Guillermo Corona has been amassing tons of information about the geology and weather in the different wine regions in Argentina and started publishing some very detailed posts on his Instagram account, geografiadelvino. He soon attracted the attention of many, including the majority of the local winemakers, and became extremely popular.

Left to right: Sebastián Zuccardi, Guillermo Corona and Alejandro Vigil (of Catena and Aleanna)

He's now helping many winemakers to understand the geology of the places and has released a self-published book called *La Geografía del Vino*, an in-depth study of the Valle de Uco that contains very valuable and detailed information about this leading part of Mendoza. What drives him is passion, the force that moves so many things in the wine world, as he's doing this incredible work in his free time. He had been working on his own, and nobody mentioned him in my previous visit some 16 months ago. But this time, everyone seemed to be talking about Guillermo Corona. Welcome to this crazy wine world, Guillermo!



Groundbreaking work, Guillermo Corona's self-published book about the Valle de Uco.

The Weather in Mendoza

Sometimes it takes time to see the real character of a vintage, as the wines render their puppy fat and show their true colors after some time in bottle. And some vintages behave better than expected, while others are worse.

Tasting through some late-released **2014s**, I found greater ripeness and a faster evolution than in the rest of the recent vintages. 2015 comes through as much more balanced and cooler. 2016 clearly broke the mold: It was the wettest and rainiest vintage on record. Many vineyards were not irrigated that year, as it rained three times more than normal. But it was not a year without variability—it was clearly better in the Valle de Uco and even in the higher-altitude parts than it was in Luján de Cuyo. It's a year of extremes, where some produced their finest wines to date and others decided not to bottle their top labels.

2017 and 2018 represent over 65% of the wines I tasted for this article, and those are the vintages currently on the market, with 2019 making a first and early appearance. The classical Mendoza vintage—dry and warmish—made a

comeback with 2017, after three consecutive rainy vintages. Yields were further reduced by some frost, so there is a danger of over-ripeness and too much alcohol in some wines, but good vineyard work paid back. The cycle changed again in 2018, which was not as warm and dry as 2017, and the wines from 2018 are cooler—they are even cooler in 2019, a vintage that promises to be one of the finest in the decade.

I was there during the 2018 harvest (in March), and some people were ecstatic about the quality of the 2018 grapes. But as I've seen elsewhere (re: Ribera del Duero), when some had finished harvesting, others still hadn't started. Temperatures were dropping at night, and on the night of March 24th, temperatures finally went below freezing: -4 degrees Celsius in El Cepillo and -3 degrees Celsius in Altamira. But it was two weeks earlier than in the last few years, something that hadn't happened in 20 or 30 years and caught most people by surprise.

As for 2019, the early reports were even better than those about the outstanding 2018 vintage. Edgardo del Popolo, who works with Susana Balbo and is 50% of the team behind the Per Se project, which he shares with David Bonomi (Norton), was very explicit: “It was an extraordinary harvest. In my 28 years of winemaking, I hadn’t seen a better year than 2019. The weather was great; it was a cool, dry year, like 2013 but with the freshness of 2016. 2016 was great, but it rained a lot; and 2013 was also great, but it was very dry. 2019 is like the best of both. I harvested Malbec like I had never seen before; I had never seen red grapes with 24 brix (that’s about 14.4% potential alcohol) and a pH of 3.2. It’s very rare, and I don’t think we’re going to see parameters like this ever again.”

Per Se… Again!

Talking about Per Se, one of the most extraordinary projects in Argentina, their wines now have a clearer sense of place. Let me explain. The wines are amazing, if excruciatingly difficult to find. But the source of the grapes has changed over the years, as they were previously using grapes from vineyards they didn’t own or control. So, they changed slightly even within their style, as the grapes didn’t always come from the same place. They finally planted their own vineyard on the land of the Monasterio de Gualtallary, in a place I think will become one of the grand crus of Gualtallary. And now each of their wines comes from a specific section within that vineyard, as the soil varies. La Craie is produced from the shallower soils, whereas Iubileus comes from a slightly less stony part, with a little more soil, and I can understand the wines better and my engineer’s mind now makes sense of the reasons.

Some of the soils in Gualtallary have a high limestone content.

What has happened with 2017 very much fits in with those *terroirs*. It's a warmer and drier vintage than 2016, and I found myself liking Iubileus better than La Craie (for the first time!). So, my guess is that perhaps the slightly deeper soils of Iubileus behave better in that kind of vintage, while the very poor part of La Craie might get stressed, giving the wine a faint sensation of greater ripeness. Not to mention the tiny plot they call Uni de Bonnesant (which I am not scoring, as it's only a couple of hundred bottles, and they told me it's a wine that belongs to the priests and is therefore virtually impossible to find in the marketplace), which has almost no topsoil and I found close to overripe.

Zuccardi

Zuccardi is one of the leading producers in Argentina. It's a family winery in only its second generation, and they have made some of the most remarkable progress in quality since I started reviewing the wines from the country in 2014. During this time, they have built a state-of-the-art winery in Paraje Altamira, helped in defining Paraje Altamira as the first of the IG appellations of the country and subsequently did the same with San Pablo, one of the colder places in the Valle de Uco and where they are producing some of the freshest Malbecs in the country.

Zuccardi's state-of-the-art winery in Paraje Altamira

In only a handful of years, they have completely taken away the layers of ripeness, oak and human intervention from their wines that have showed increasingly better with each vintage. The breakthrough year was the cold and rainy 2016, when the precision of their work in separating wines by soil reached unheard of levels. The improvement was especially remarkable in their Piedra Infinita bottling, which comes from limestone-rich plots within their estate vineyard around the winery. It was precise, detailed, floral, elegant and especially balanced, as blends often do better than wines from a single plot. They are bottling two of these plots separately—Supercal and Gravascal—and they represent the conditions of those specific few vines, but the overall sense of harmony in Piedra Infinita felt better. In fact, I believe it's the best wine they have produced so far, and it deserved a three-digit score.

2016 Piedra Infinita, the best wine produced so far by the Familia Zuccardi

Small is Beautiful…

Small growers can be good, bad and everything in between. A winery is not going to be good just by being small or bad by being large. But small producers add to the diversity of a place and often bring fresh ideas and the need to innovate and

find new ways. What's interesting is that many of them are getting together to promote their wines, like the informal association called Productores Amigos—I have now tasted with them twice, dedicating a whole day to sitting with each of them to sample and discuss their wines. I noticed a general improvement this second time, as though the synergies of working together, tasting each other's wines and sharing experiences is helping them and pushing them to improve. Some of these small producers are often exploring new styles, such as orange wines, flor and clarete.

The flor in Mendoza looks more like the flor in Jura than Jerez

I also noticed an improvement in the wines by PIPA - Productores Independientes del Paraje Altamira, the association of independent growers from Paraje Altamira. They are finding the identity of the place, and most of the wines go beyond the varietal and express the austerity and wilderness of the place more in the shape of aromas of wild herbs and flowers; the wines aren't as fruit-driven and are more austere and spicy, something that I enjoy. Even though they don't belong to the

association, Altos Las Hormigas has planted a large new vineyard there, all driven by the soil. And of course, Zuccardi is one of the main players in the appellation.

The new vineyard in Altamira from Altos Las Hormigas

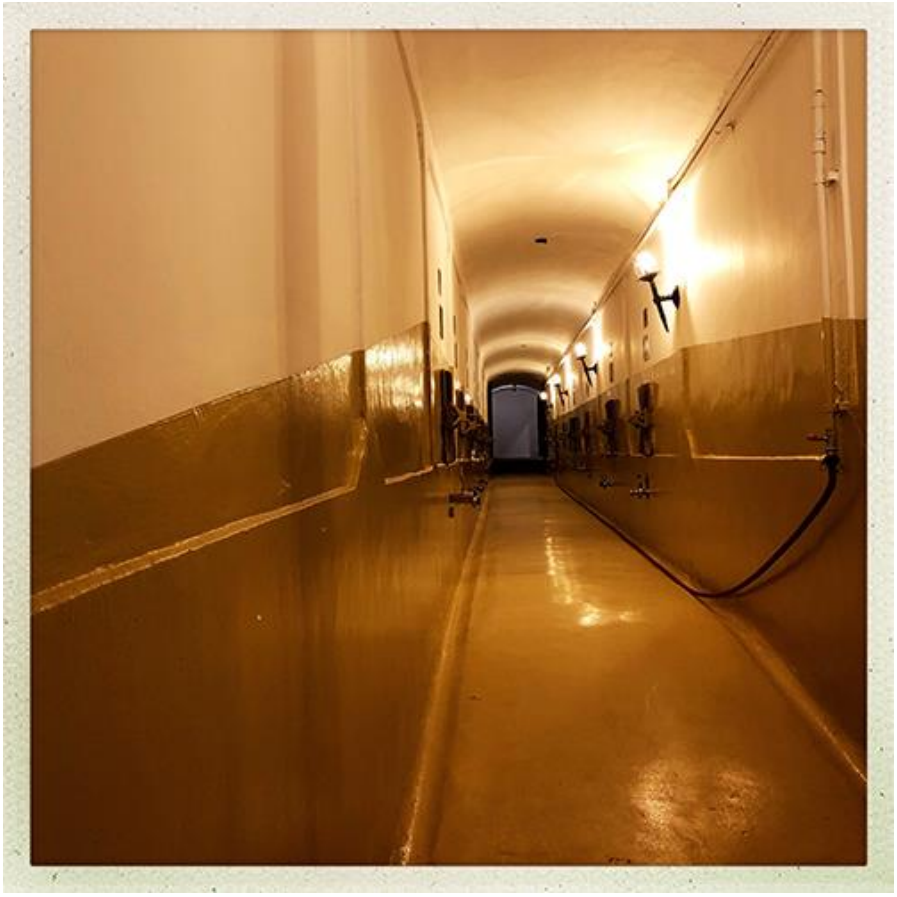
But Large Can Be Beautiful Too!

I also took the opportunity to cross off some of the items on my to-do list by visiting producers like Escorihuela Garcón, Nieto Senetiner and Trivento. The first two are traditional old names, and the third is a Chilean investment in Mendoza since 1996, where the work of some young local winemakers—Matías Ciciani, Santiago Mayorga and German Di Cesare—is a breakthrough for their wines.

The Escorihuela Gascón winery is located in the center of Mendoza and hosts Francis Mallmann, one of the top chefs of the country.

Escorihuela Gascón is one of the most traditional names in Mendoza. But with the work of winemaker Matías Ciciani and his team, they have made a transition to biodynamic farming in their 80 hectares of estate vineyards in Los Indios, in Valle de Uco, where they produce the Pequeñas Producciones range of wines mostly from those vineyards. They are also moving in the direction of organic farming in their other vineyards in Cafayate and Agrelo. The wines keep a traditional style that has been updated in the line of less ripeness and oak, but there are different ranges with different styles: the more traditional Gran Reserva and the more modern Pequeñas Producciones.

The Nieto Senetiner range is classical with an updated style of clean, fresh wines that represent the variety and vintage faithfully. They were one of the pioneers of the Bonarda grape and are recovering the variety with some place-designated bottlings. The wines offer great value for money. The Cadus range has been turned into a completely separate project, and the group also includes Ruca Malén. I wanted to visit them, because they were some of the highlights of my previous articles, and the wines feel like different animals in the hands of Santiago Mayorga and his team.



The traditional Nieto Senetiner winery is seeing a new life and updated wines, keeping the classical profile

Trivento is one of the largest wineries in Mendoza and belongs to the Chilean Concha y Toro group. They have some 1,600 hectares of vineyards in different parts of Mendoza, depending on the range of wines produced. In 2019, they harvested 22 million kilos of grapes, which represents some 60% to 70% of their needs. They showed me some figures that were impressive, as they are very large and move a remarkable quantity of everything—grapes, bottles, water, people. I learned that they use 350 liters of water for each kilo of grape produced!

I also visited one of the last remaining old-style vineyards in Mendoza, where some vines are intermixed with olive trees: Planted in 1912 on the banks of the Mendoza River, this vineyard is used for their top-of-the-range Eolo, which shows unprecedented freshness in 2016.

The Eolo vineyard from Trivento, planted in 1912

Wine Tourism and Gastronomy

The country is in political and economical turmoil (but then, who isn't?), and it can sometimes have unexpected side effects. Unfortunately, economic crisis means some vineyards that were organically farmed have gone back to using herbicides to lower the costs.

But people don’t give up, and they work really hard. I’ve seen good progress in wine tourism; many wineries have restaurants and facilities for visitors, offer guided tours and tastings as well as sell wines. As for gastronomy, I’ve noticed some sophistication. The traditional *asado*, the feast of grilled meats, is still king, of course, but I’ve also seen some chefs trying to be more creative, investigating the local produce, often going back to the roots of traditional food, and creating some new dishes (even some vegetarian ones!) in case you get tired of eating meat three times per day. But let me tell you this: you might get tired of eating *asado* when you’re there, but as soon as you leave, you already miss it!