

Argentina: Patagonia

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Stretching from the 36th to the 45th parallel, Patagonia makes up a third of Argentina's landmass but accounts for less than 2% of its vineyards, with only 3,600 hectares under vine. While Patagonia often conjures images of forests and lakes, this applies only to its western sections. The majority of the region is cold desert steppe, marked by dramatic diurnal temperature swings and arid conditions, as well as long daylight hours, persistent winds and cool temperatures. Early plantings focused on Merlot, Malbec, Sémillon and Trousseau, but in the last 20 years, the focus has shifted squarely onto Pinot Noir, offering immense promise and serious challenges.

Unlike other Argentine regions where altitude shapes viticulture, Patagonia is defined by latitude. The Andes are at a lower elevation in the region, exposing them to westerly winds from the Pacific. Red varieties dominate, making up roughly 80% of plantings, with whites accounting for most of the balance alongside a small proportion of traditional criolla grapes. Viticulture here is primarily estate-based, minimizing grape transport and allowing for more precise and controlled vinification.

Neuquén is the epicenter of modern Patagonian winemaking, with many vineyards planted in the last two decades near the confluence of the Neuquén and Limay Rivers. San Patricio del Chañar is the primary growing zone, defined by its dry climate—just 4.7 inches of annual rainfall, roughly one-third of Mendoza's average. Frost is a constant concern, managed with sprinkler systems, while high winds increase evaporation, fortunately reducing disease pressure.

Río Negro, Patagonia's oldest wine region and one of the oldest in Argentina, was first established in the late 1800s. It hosts about 1,400 hectares of vineyards—roughly equal to the rest of Patagonia combined—but that is less than a tenth of its former size in the 19th century. Unlike the arid Neuquén, Río Negro has a greener landscape with soils composed of sand and clay that offer balanced drainage and water retention. Strong winds remain a challenge, mitigated by poplar windbreaks and protective nets.

Chubut, Argentina's southernmost wine region, has just 100 hectares under vine. The region's potential for high-quality Pinot Noir and Chardonnay is exemplified by Otronia—the world's southernmost vineyard at the 45th parallel. Trevelin, Chubut's first GI, lies near the Chilean border and comprises just six hectares, planted to cool-climate varieties like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc. Despite its tiny scale, Trevelin's combination of mountain, forest and maritime influences yields some of Patagonia's most distinctive wines.

Since I wasn't able to visit Patagonia during my trip to Argentina, my impressions are drawn solely from the wines in the glass and conversations with Patagonian producers at regional tastings in Mendoza. As a region aspiring to excel in Pinot Noir, I found Patagonia's quality more varied than any other in Argentina, which is understandable given the difficulty in working with the grape and the global standards it must contend with. Yet the standout examples highlighted in this report confirm that the region's potential is being realized, and I look forward to exploring it further in person on future trips.

(Banner photo of the Otronia vineyard site in Chubut courtesy of Wines of Argentina)