

# Argentina: Bottling the Brutalism of Uco Valley

By [Matthew Luczy](#)

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The concept of "bottling the place" is a common refrain in the wine world. Although this can be an abstract idea, a fortunate reality of wine is that the regions producing it are often visually arresting, culturally rich, and historically layered. Yet the notion of "place" is wildly variable; it may describe an ancient village with cobbled streets and stone walls enclosing its vines, or represent a celebrated vineyard mere steps from industrial buildings and quarries. In Argentina's Uco Valley, the place in question is undeniably striking, stark and visceral. Amid the region's minimalist grandeur, the idea of transforming landscape into liquid form feels inescapably intriguing. The upper echelon of the region's contemporary winemakers translate the brutalist intensity of their desert surroundings into liquid form with dexterity, drive and worldly perspective, underscoring that great terroir is as much about those who shape it as the place itself.



*Stake-trained Malbec vines in Gualtallary at Zuccardi's Finca Agua de la Jarilla*

After two immersive weeks in Mendoza, I was exhilarated by Argentina's progress, particularly over the last decade. Producers' overwhelming consensus is that the Uco Valley has become the epicenter of a new chapter in Argentine winemaking, driven by its cooler climate and geologic complexity, expressed by clear shifts toward transparency in the cellar. The stylistic evolution since Malbec's global rise in the 1990s is so profound that it feels as if we are only now seeing the grape's full potential, over 150 years after its establishment in the country. This meteoric rise is not to the exclusion of other varieties, with Cabernet Franc being a clear standout, as well as increasingly captivating Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Sémillon.





*Alejandro Vigil, director of winemaking for Catena and El Enemigo*

The sweeping changes in Argentine wine speak to the industry's adaptability and ambition. A pivotal shift occurred in 1993 with the government's lifting of a prohibition against planting outside the traditional "Primera Zona" of Luján de Cuyo and Maipú, thus unlocking the potential of the relatively untouched and comparatively affordable lands of Uco Valley. Soon after, persistent economic instability depressed prices and catalyzed an export boom. The spotlight turned to Malbec as producers began supporting the grape in monovarietal form, igniting global demand and sparking

renewed interest in both Malbec and the region in which it now arguably reaches its apex.



*The team at Per Se: David Bonomi, Santiago and Edy del Popolo*

When presented with hundreds of examples of Malbec spanning the entire country, clear themes quickly emerged that recalibrated my perspective. In Argentina, the variety has achieved naturalization and effectively eclipsed its past perception as a variety originating in Cahors and Bordeaux. To my palate, expressions from the Uco Valley show greater kinship with Syrah from Hermitage, Saint-Joseph or Côte-Rôtie than with Bordeaux or Cahors. At their best, they offer a compact, umami-rich texture, floral and herbal aromatics and a savory backbone with firm yet immensely refined tannins nearly absent of grain but with no shortage of gripping tenacity. Top expressions exhibit elegance, restraint and purity, often drawing comparisons to the Côte d'Or and Piemonte. In these wines, Malbec's chameleonic nature and Uco Valley's geological complexity are on full display, in stark contrast to the comparatively lavish, export-friendly styles of past decades. It's not merely a



marketing ploy; it has become every bit Argentina's grape, and it is now being rendered in high fidelity.



*The Michelinini Brothers: Juan Pablo, Gerardo, Mathías and Gabriel*

Today's winemaking ethos has shifted decisively from compensating for suboptimal fruit to cultivating great fruit from the start through close collaboration with agronomists. Long macerations with whole clusters in concrete fermenters and foudres—often untoasted—are increasingly common, as are vertical presses and lengthy élevage regimens. Many standout wines I tasted came from vines planted within the last decade, so consistently that my surprise became a recurring topic in conversations, highlighting that youth in a special place can surpass age in an everyday one. Thoughtfully managed irrigation practices encourage deep-rooting, contributing to texturally complete wines, especially when compounded by high-density, stake-trained plantings originating from massal selections.



*Eduardo Stoller of Ver Sacrum and La Cayetana at his vineyard in Los Chacayes*

While I found red wines generally at the forefront of the Uco Valley, it also shows immense promise for white varieties, with Gualtallary Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc currently offering the most fully realized examples. Although there are several reference points for each of these varieties, the Sémillon I encountered was the most exciting of all. Several bottlings originate from extremely old vines established long before Uco Valley's modern renaissance, best exemplified by Escala Humana's Credo Sémillon from El Peral. Vineyards at higher altitudes with greater humidity are conducive to the development of flor, a consistent character among Gualtallary's finest white wines, adding a wild, exotic touch to the region's hallmark floral perfume, minerality and herbaceous lift.



*Germán Mansera of Escala Humana at his newly established estate vineyard in Gualtallary*

This report contains over half of all reviews from my tastings of Argentine wines—a figure that speaks for itself regarding Uco Valley's dominance. The focus here is on the 2021, 2022 and 2023 vintages. 2021 was cooler and more humid than average, resulting in wines of striking finesse, freshness and effortlessness—qualities that stood out especially in vertical tastings. In contrast, 2022 experienced significant frost events and, while warmer and drier than 2021, still maintained a relatively cool profile overall. The resulting wines show slightly riper fruit and more tenacious structures. The 2023 vintage was warmer overall, marked by low yields and an early harvest three to four weeks ahead of the average. It struck me as a stylistically more



complete 2020—a vintage with comparable conditions but complicated by the disruptions of COVID-19.



*Sebastián Zuccardi at the winery in Paraje Altamira*

As I noted in [my coverage of Chile](#), the New World versus Old World dichotomy is particularly thought-provoking when applied to South America. This split often places the newer regions in a position of perceived deference, despite the agility typically observed in these areas when adopting and refining the accumulated wisdom of



others. If there is such a thing as a Middle World, it would be Argentina; in style and sensibility, it leans decidedly toward the Old World, as wine is deeply woven into the fabric of daily life. There's a cultural affinity for structure, tension and refreshing bitterness—possibly explaining the national obsession with Fernet Branca—and this sensibility resonates through the wines, which reflect not only a place but also a people. Simultaneously, there is a palpable New World-esque spirit and drive eager to distill lessons learned abroad and apply them at home in search of quality. In the words of Sebastián Zuccardi during our tasting in Altamira, "We are not seeking to make the world's best wines, but the deepest and purest expression of our place." In their finest moments, the wines of the Uco Valley embody this spirit and, in doing so, find themselves among the world's great examples of site expression.



*One of the countless massive boulders excavated at Zuccardi's Piedra Infinita, just outside the Gravascal parcel*