

Argentina: San Juan, Salta and Beyond

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Within the vastness of Argentina's wine landscape, the northern regions of the country represent both the literal and figurative pinnacle of its focus on high-altitude viticulture. Its primary winemaking center is Salta, located in the Calchaquí Valley, where vineyards reach the highest elevations in the country, ranging from 1,600 meters to over 3,100 meters. The main hub of Salta is Cafayate, best known for Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon and increasingly refined, mineral-inflected expressions of Torrontés. The region's arid climate and intense solar radiation contribute to low yields, thick grape skins, high anthocyanin content and firm tannins, resulting in intensely flavored wines, the best of which retain a tensile, focused core.

In the country's northernmost section near the borders with Chile and Bolivia, the minuscule region of Jujuy is home to under 50 hectares of vines in the Quebrada de Humahuaca, a dramatic high-altitude valley bisected by the Tropic of Capricorn. Flanked by mountains that block Atlantic moisture, this region experiences persistent dry winds and wide diurnal shifts that help preserve acidity. Its deep Incan heritage and strong mestizo traditions lend cultural depth and historical continuity to this emerging frontier.

Far south of Salta, San Juan lies within the greater Cuyo region that includes Mendoza, although its wines more closely resemble those from the north. It is Argentina's second-largest wine-producing province, characterized by rugged, mountainous terrain featuring a strong calcareous presence. Historically associated with bulk wine, the region has shown increasing promise. Among its standout zones is the Pedernal Valley, located at 1,200–1,500 meters and known for its colluvial slopes and pure limestone soils, and the isolated Caligasta Valley, situated between the pre-cordillera foothills and the Andes.

Although it wasn't logistically possible for me to visit Argentina's northernmost regions on my initial trip, the wines reflect a maturing approach to high-altitude viticulture, delivering power with increasing control and nuance. Of Argentina's key winegrowing zones, the northern regions tend to show flavor profiles more

similar to the Uco Valley than the Primera Zona and greater overall consistency than I found in Patagonia. While the naturally full-bodied styles can exude elevated alcohol levels, I was generally impressed by the balanced, cohesive nature of even the most powerful examples. For readers seeking characterful wines with lifted aromatics and deep yet focused textures, northern Argentina offers much to explore.

(Banner photo courtesy of Wines of Argentina)