



Argentina's Winemaking History

by Alejandro Darago

We could say that viticulture in Argentina began in 1556, when the Priest Juan Cidron of the La Merced Order brought the first grape vines from Santiago de Chile, together with cotton seeds and fruit trees. Around 1580 local merchants, taking advantage of the indigenous labor, began developing viticulture in Mendoza. At the same time the Church started cultivating the vines next to the chapels, to produce sacramental wines for Mass.

But the modern wine industry in Argentina started in 1852, when the Mendoza Governor asked the French Agronomist Miguel Pouget to import to Mendoza French varietals and to create a Training Farm to teach agricultural techniques. All these grapes were known as "French" grapes (even though the fact that Pouget imported around 120 different varietals), making a difference from the traditional indigenous grapes called "Criollas." Pouget elaborated wines with the "French Varietals" and won the first Bronze medal for an Argentine wine in the Paris exposition of 1889.

In 1920, Argentina had over 250,000 acres of vines planted, half of them were Malbec. In this period the wine industry started to develop seriously, but produced mostly lower-quality wine. Buenos Aires was a great consumer which encouraged Mendoza to produce big quantities at low price and quality. In order to afford this demand, the industry fostered cheaper grapes like "the Criollas," but for a great part of the consumers the color was of some importance. Because of this the wineries used French grapes to add more color and the best for this purpose was the Malbec, which not only helped to increase the color but the aromatic profile as well. Between 1940 and 1980 INTA (National Institute of Agriculture techniques), worked to clear the chaos of "the French grapes" identifying and organizing the different varietals in the area. At the same time the great success of the wine consumption in the market (90 liters per capita) finished with an overproduction crisis, which forced the winegrowers to pull out thousands of grape's acres, losing in that way a valuable grape treasure.

Finally we can say that Argentina started its wine export industry in 1996, when it had to find a new path for their wines, as domestic consumption fell from over 100 bottles per capita to around 35. They realized the great potential in the vineyards led by Malbec, which demonstrated a great quality potential. After more than 100 years in the country Malbec had developed its own profile different from all the existing vineyards in the world. At the same time the Argentine government became more free trade, reducing import and export tariffs. Visionary domestic and international investors and winemakers brought the modern technology and the know-how to start making world-class wines for the international markets.

The most recent history came after the 2002 economic crisis in Argentina, when the international market became much more attractive and convinced the majority of the wine industry to take advantage of all the potential of Malbec, the new state-of-the-art technology, and the long winemaking tradition, to show the world the great and diverse potential of Argentine wine. VINO del Sol, as "The Argentine Wine Specialist," was formed to play a part in this in the United States.

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