The History of the Argentine Wine in 3 Glasses

At the outset of the twenty-first century, Argentine wines began to command serious attention worldwide from the experts as well as from the wine-consuming public. The fact that Argentina is capable of producing superb wines should come as no surprise. Its diverse Andean wine regions have almost ideal conditions for production—excellent soils, a dry climate with substantial variations between daytime and nighttime temperatures and near absolute control over water. What is surprising is Argentina’s long-term hesitance achieve recognized levels of excellence. Whether in the early stages of the industry’s growth at the end of the nineteenth century or one hundred years later, quality wine production was hardly the norm: only in the 1990s did Argentine wines began to realize their enormous potential.

Why then did it take so long to achieve significant production of quality wines? It certainly was not for a lack of attention to the concept; the word “quality” has always been present in the vocabulary of major producers, winery associations, and even the Argentine government. That said, from the earliest years, wineries faced a crucial dilemma: produce large quantities of mediocre wine, or much smaller quantities of good to excellent wine. Over the years, several critical variables have had particularly strong
influences on this quantity-quality equation. They include human and technological resources, national and local government policies, and probably most importantly industry perceptions of the nature and growth potential of the consumer market.

This paper explores the evolving interplay of these factors focusing on the three key periods in Argentine wine’s development: the “Founding Period” (1885-1915); the “Years of Massive Growth” (1950-1980); and the “Wine Revolution (1990-2010). We begin by “tasting” a prototypical glass of wine from each of the three watershed periods, concentrating on appearance, aromas and flavors. I then use a variety of sources, from primary historical documents to oral histories of key figures, to analyze the crucial variables that went into the making of these widely distinct glasses of wine. The result is a broad synthesis of the first one-hundred-and-thirty years of wine’s modern history in Argentina.