



Argentina's poolside reds

It started as a small ripple of reaction against an increasingly uniform national wine style. But, reports Patricio Tapia, a growing band of Argentinian producers of all sizes are now aiming for a fresher, cleaner, more individual taste

EDUARDO SOLER IS a tourist entrepreneur in Mendoza. A great lover of the mountains, he takes his clients for long walks at the foot of the Andes. He has even climbed Mount Aconcagua, South America's highest summit. In fact, he has climbed it twice, 6,900m up in the Andes.

However, since 2011, Soler has also shared

Above: Gen del Alma's Ji Ji Ji, an equal blend of Malbec and Pinot Noir; and Cara Sur's Bonarda, made using 40% whole bunches

his passion for the mountains with his work as a wine producer at Ver Sacrum, a Maipú winery that focuses on Mediterranean varieties such as Garnacha or Monastrell – grapes that have little significant representation on the Argentinian wine scene.

But not only that. The wines of Ver Sacrum are like delicious and fresh juices, light and



Above right: Ver Sacrum's Los Chacayes vineyard in Uco Valley was planted in 2012



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Eduardo Soler of Ver Sacrum

perfumed; the kind of reds that are drunk to quench the thirst on summer days, beside the swimming pool. 'The project was born as a game: make the wines that we like to drink daily,' Soler says of his small project that barely produces 6,650 bottles across three wines: a Garnacha, a Monastrell and a blend of those two plus Syrah. 'I was tired of that heavy, over-extracted, overripe and oaky style,' he adds. 'When I started, one of the conditions imposed was not to do any more of the same.'

Produced without great technical complexities – using concrete eggs, natural yeasts, some carbonic maceration, early harvests to preserve the freshness and no malolactic fermentation (to maintain even better that acidity and nervy character that comes from the vineyard) – these reds slip down as readily as water. But they are also the logical consequence of a trend that has been building over at least five years in Argentinian wine.

As previously reported in *Decanter*, Argentina lived its commercial glory during the last decade, exploiting a style of hyper-concentrated wines full of sweetness, the result of grapes harvested belatedly in the season, to which would be added a good dose of new wood. Under the influence of consultants such as Michel Rolland and Paul Hobbs, this style was responsible for the success of Argentinian wine, especially with

respect to Malbec, the grape that this country has chosen as its oenological emblem.

And although wineries initially adopted this style for their most ambitious wines, very soon it was also being applied to the simpler cuvées. Wines that were being produced at 12% or 13% alcohol soon began to reach 14%, 15% or more.

And where production costs could not accommodate new barrels imported from France, oak chips would be used. Anything in order to replicate that full, concentrated style that was sweeping the world market at the time, especially in the US, a country that enthusiastically welcomed this type of wine and made Argentina a leading player. In 2002, more than 6.5 million litres of wine were exported to the US, while in 2010 volumes reached almost 90 million, about half of which was made with Malbec.

Against the grain

Just as Soler's motivation to start Ver Sacrum was that he was tired of that type of wine, so there were many other producers who felt the same. And this was when the word 'standardisation' began to creep into the dialogue in Argentina.

Then came winemakers such as Matías Michelini (Passionate Wines), his brother Juan Pablo Michelini (Zorzal) and Alejandro Vigil (Catena) who began to question the ➤

prevailing wisdoms, proposing new styles of wine, whether fresher and lighter or more focused on showing the different regions of Argentina – trying to intervene as little as possible in the cellar and letting the wine's origins speak. Malbec was the preferred tool to show this new style, but other varieties including Bonarda, Cabernet Franc and even Pinot Noir have also been influenced by this crisp and fresh persona.

'For me the change came when I started to taste wines from areas like Jura in France or Ribeira Sacra in Spain. That opened my mind to the idea of looking for an identity, that our reds should be showing their origin,' says Vigil, who is today in charge of the wines of Catena and also partners with Adriana Catena at Bodegas Aleanna, a winery focused on wines from the Gualtallary area, especially with Cabernet Franc. 'And in that task, we realised that the excesses of new barrels or over-maturity prevented us from showing clearly what was happening in the vineyard.'

Vigil feels that the one wine of his own that started more clearly to show this new style is

the Bodegas Aleanna, Gran Enemigo 2010, a blend of 85% Cabernet Franc with Malbec. The grapes were harvested three weeks earlier than usual (something he has maintained in his later wines) and aged in old wood, 2,000-litre foudres. After six years, this red remains radiant in red fruits, underlined by a sharp and firm acidity, far from the sweet and heavy wines of the past.

Lighter touch

Gerardo Michelini (another member of the clan) and his wife Andrea Mufatto have also been enthusiastic about this new way of presenting Argentina's reds. In 2013 they began their Gen del Alma project. 'We like wines with freshness and tension. We think the world is saturated with fat and sweet wines,' Michelini says.

Today the winery produces about 50,000 bottles a year, under nine different labels. Perhaps the most emblematic among them is Ji Ji Ji, a half-and-half blend of Pinot Noir and Malbec, all from the Gualtallary area, one of the highest parts at the foot of the Andes in the Uco Valley.

Ji Ji Ji is made with zero intervention. 'We wanted to do the opposite of what most people do in Uco. All clusters go in whole, without pumping over. There is no wood; it is produced in concrete eggs. We intervene as little as possible. Almost nothing,' says Michelini.

The wine was made using carbonic maceration – the same technique that gives fresh and fruity wines in Beaujolais, and the result is a light-coloured red, with pronounced and very fresh acidity. Although in Argentina the general mindset is that only the heavy reds go well with barbecued meat, this is the perfect wine to counter that view.

The modern consumer in Argentina has a fixed idea of a type of wine to go with steak and this corresponds to the stereotypical image often held by consumers in export markets of what an average-priced Argentinian red should be. Against that image is the one advanced by José Zuccardi, president of Santa Julia winery, part of the Zuccardi Group. 'It is fundamental for us that the wines speak of the place, at all the different levels,' he says. 'This is what enables the construction of a true identity, and therefore a brand proposal based on these individual differences, rather than any kind of standardisation.'

Worth the risk

Santa Julia is not exactly a boutique winery: with a million cases produced annually, it is among the largest in Argentina. Since the 2013 vintage, the style here has been changing, challenging the idea that the

'We like wines with freshness and tension. We think the world is saturated with fat and sweet wines' Gerardo Michelini (below with his wife Andrea Mufatto)



Tapia's picks: top 10 'poolside reds'



Bodegas Aleanna, Gran Enemigo, Gualtallary, Uco Valley, Mendoza 2012 95

£45.83 **BI Wines**

Rich in floral and herbal notes, this blend of Cabernet Franc plus 15% Malbec moves towards tobacco leaf and earthy notes. Medium body, firm and tight, this is the wine you need for a slow-cooked meat. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13.9%

Gen del Alma, Ji Ji Ji, Gualtallary, Uco Valley, Mendoza 2015 93

£18.50 **Dalling & Co, Drinkmonger, Slurp, Speciality Drinks**

An unusual blend of Pinot Noir and Malbec, this comes 100% from the chalky soils of Gualtallary. It is bright, floral and fruity, with tension and a lovely freshness all the way through the palate. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 12%



Tintonegro, Limestone Block Malbec, Uco Valley, Mendoza 2014 92

£14.12 **Just in Cases, Winedirect**
With tannins that cling to the palate like the claws of a kitten, this mainly Malbec plus Cabernet Franc is radiant in its fresh red fruit. A bright celebration of strawberries and herbs. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 14%

Ver Sacrum, Ver Sacrum Garnacha, Maipú, Mendoza 2015 92

N/A UK **grenachista@gmail.com**

If you need a red for smoked trout, this is the one. From three different vineyards around Mendoza, this is textbook Garnacha, generous in floral and sweet strawberry flavours. Light and refreshing. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 13%

Cara Sur, Bonarda, Barreal, San Juan 2015 91

£23 **Argentine Wine Online, Butlers Wine Cellar, Corks of Cotham, Drinkmonger, Good Wine Online, Hawkshead, Slurp, The Wine Twit, Whalley Wine Shop**

A new take on Bonarda, this comes from very old vines in the Barreal area, to the north of Mendoza. It has plenty of spices, fresh blackberry flavours and hints of mint. Refreshing and nervy. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 13.6%



Santa Julia, Reserva Malbec, Uco Valley Mendoza 2016 91

£16.98 **Bottled & Boxed,**

Gifts International

Tight and refreshing, this is filled with violets and black cherry notes. The texture is light as the acidity underlines all its crunchy flavours. This is definitely a summery kind of drink – one to chill down.

Drink 2017-2018 **Alc** 13%

Santa Julia, Tintillo, Mendoza 2016 91

N/A UK **www.santajulia.com.ar**

The blackberry and spicy notes from Bonarda plus the refreshing and vibrant

notes of cherry and violets from Malbec in this crunchy, tense and quaffable adult juice. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 13%

Passionate Wines, Bonarda Pura, Tupungato, Mendoza 2014 91

£18.50 **Argentine Wine Online, Drinkmonger, Hawkshead, Selfridges, Slurp, St Andrews**

Wine Co, Ten Green Bottles, The Vineyard
Made using carbonic maceration from an old vineyard in the heights of Tupungato, this is the closest a wine can get to blackberry juice. Soft, ample and refreshing. **Drink** 2017 **Alc** 12%



Susana Balbo, Crios Malbec, Uco Valley, Mendoza 2015 90

£16.25 **Argentine Wine Online, Inverarity Morton, Kwoff,**

The Market Square Food & Wine, The Secret Cellar

Soft in texture, ripe in flavours, but with an inner energy made of vibrant acidity and generous violet notes, this is a pure expression of Malbec, ready now to refresh any barbecue.

Drink 2017-2019 **Alc** 14.5%

Los Toneles, Tonel 22 Malbec, Mendoza 2014 89

£9.15 **Castang Wines**

Filled with black fruits and an intense, full-throttle acidity. Pungent tannins to complement a texture made for grilled meat. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 13.8%

For full details of UK stockists, see p117

consumer only likes sweet reds with lots of wood. A striking example is Tintillo 2016, a blend of Bonarda and Malbec, and again made with the method of carbonic maceration. This Tintillo is the classic fruity wine, refreshing and light, full of tension in acidity. Another wine for the poolside.

But the changes at Santa Julia are not only evident in its new wines – there's a much riskier bet being made. Its star red, the Santa Julia Reserva Malbec (100,000 cases produced), has also undergone significant changes. From the 2015 vintage, the grapes have been harvested earlier for fresher fruit, and it is no longer made with new wood – and the result is a radiant, luminous Malbec, ready to be drunk

in quantity, by the bottle rather than by the glass. 'The response of consumers has been extraordinary, far from the predictions of those who considered this style was unattractive. Wine lovers have adopted it quite naturally,' asserts Zuccardi.

The new trend of fresh and easy wines in Argentina is a revolution that began at the level of small producers, but today it is also starting to take hold at large wineries such as Zuccardi, Catena and Trapiche. However, beyond the fact that these wines are easy to drink, and are arguably better for matching with food, what they are really revealing is a hitherto completely unknown level of flavours: a new, brighter face of Argentinian wine. **D**

Patricio Tapia is the DWWA Regional Chair for Argentina