

BODEGA CHACRA

PATAGONIA ~ RIO NEGRO

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by Jay McInerney

PIONEERING WINE IN PATAGONIA

When I first met Piero Incisa della Rochetta, he was a roving ambassador for his family's winery in Bolgheri, Italy.

Sassicaia became one of the world's most famous wines after the release of its sensational 1985 vintage, a cabernet Sauvignon blend from a part of Tuscany with virtually no oenological pedigree.

It's good to remember how unlikely a place Bolgheri seemed for great cabernet—though it's now home to Ornellaia, Solaia and Angelo Gaja's Ca Marcanda among others—when contemplating Incisa's improbable new venture, Chacra, a winery in the Patagonian desert devoted to pinot noir.

Incisa was drawn there after tasting a pinot made from very old vines in the region, more than six hundred miles south of Buenos Aires, and he discovered vineyards dating back to the thirties. In 2004 he purchased a pinot noir vineyard planted in 1932 by Italian immigrants from Naples. (Italians planting pinot noir? Go figure.) It was in terrible shape, but he knew that old vines produce wines of singular intensity.

And, in fact, the 2004 vintage produced an extremely powerful and dense pinot noir, which I tasted recently at Manhattan's Il Buco, alongside the later vintages of Bodega Chacra's Treinta Y Dos (1932) cuvee. (Sadly, birds got 90 percent of the '04 harvest by the time Incisa showed up with a picking crew.)

In fact, Incisa, whose palate is more old world than new, has dialed back the richness and alcohol in pursuit of balance and elegance in the later vintages although all of the wines still have a piercing intensity, and I suspect they would confound most experienced blind tasters. The '07 vintage, which is currently available, is really delicate and complex

(only 12.5% alcohol), a little like a great Chambolle Musigny but ultimately unique.

After buying the vineyard, Incisa switched to biodynamic farming, introduced the old vines to modern viticultural thinking, and bought additional vineyards, including one planted in 1955. Even after Incisa and his team rehabilitated them, the production from the older vineyards is still very small; recent vintages of the Treinta Y Dos have yielded an average of seven thousand bottles, or about six hundred cases.

The wines are vinified with indigenous yeasts in one hundred percent new French oak. (Another unlikely part of the story, winemaker Hans Vinding-Diers, from Bordeaux, had never made pinot before.)

This kind of pioneering, artisanal winemaking doesn't come cheap; the Treinta Y Dos is priced at \$120. That may sound like an awful lot for a new wine from an unknown region, but thanks to the combination of Incisa's contacts, Sassicaia's reputation and the quality of the wine, the Treinta Y Dos has been pretty much sold out since its first release.



Fortunately Chacra makes a less expensive bottling from younger vines called Barda, which retails for \$25 to \$30. The 2009, which is the current release, is absolutely delicious, a very pretty pinot which strikes a perfect balance between ripeness and finesse. Like the Treinta Y Dos, this gives the impression of a New World body in Old World bespoke tailored clothing.

The very worldly Incisa, who has a master's from NYU, spends about a third of the year in Patagonia and about the same amount of time in Manhattan, seems very happy to be back in the city at the moment. "It gets a little lonely down there," he admits.