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A Coming Out Party for Argentine Pinot Noir

Pinot noir is that most delicate of grapes, known to flourish in only a few small corners of the world: Burgundy, the Willamette Valley, Marlborough, and the Sonoma County coast. Now it has found a home in Argentina, too, with some wonderful results.

The sandy alluvial plains of Neuquen and Rio Negro, on the northern edge of Patagonia, have offered the most fertile ground for pinot noir so far. In Rio Negro, home to some of the country's oldest wineries, the vines date back to the early 20th century. Just across the border in Neuquen, the vineyards are much younger; many are the product of a push for development by the provincial government a decade ago. But the first pinot noir produced formally in barrels, following the French style, was in Rio Negro: the Marcus Gran Reserva of Humberto Canale in 1999. At the time, the Canale winery, which also specializes in merlot, was already 90 years old.

Pinot noir has inevitably spread to Mendoza, the province with the most wine production. There the results have been more mixed. Federico Nino, Casa Bianchi's regional manager for international business, recently told us that his winery had to stop production of its Valentin Bianchi Pinot Noir despite its enormous popularity. The wine was simply too fragile to maintain uniform quality throughout the the journey from barrel to consumer. Laura Catena's Luca Pinot Noir has also offered uneven results -- just look at the gap between our review and some others.

Overall, however, Argentina's pinot noir has become fantastically promising as technique has met terroir. We decided to make it the focus of Twitter's nationwide #WineChat tasting on October 9, with one entry each from Mendoza, Neuquen, and Rio Negro. We started with Trapiche's 2012 varietal, then tasted

Familia Schroeder's Saurus 2011, and finished with **Bodega Chacra's Barda 2011.**

The contrasts between these wineries couldn't be more stark. Trapiche is one of Argentina's biggest, with 1,000 hectares planted and scores of other suppliers to produce up to 30 million liters of wine at a time. Familia Schroeder, winner of the best pinot noir producer award in a recent Patagonian salon, is one of the new operations in Neuquen, with young vines and state-of-the-art equipment.

And **Bodega Chacra is a small project led by Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, whose family makes the legendary Sassicaia wines in Italy; its pinot noir vines date back as far as 1932.**



We found value in all three wines. Christy Canterbury, a Master of Wine based in New York, was "highly impressed" by the Trapiche, which sells for less than \$7. "I've never believed in 'value' pinot noir until trying this Trapiche 2012," she tweeted. "Trapiche pinot noir is a gem! Amazing value and perfect pinot noir poise."

Two wine bloggers from the Midwest, Cliff Brown and Kovas Palubinskas, enjoyed the kaleidoscope of flavors in the Saurus, which retails at about \$14, too. Cliff tasted cherries, eucalyptus, spice, wild flowers and earthy underbrush, while Kovas found flowers, a bright berry vanilla nose, blueberries, dark cherry, and red berry flavors.

But the Barda, at about \$22, won the night. "Barda pinot noir from Patagonia is one of my fave Argentinian wines," said Christy. "Sheer delight to quaff... or ponder." And Cliff gave the definitive verdict: "The Barda isn't just a good pinot from Argentina, it's a good pinot, period." That kind of reaction should be enough to put Argentine wine on the map for good. Salud!

| Daniel Altman