

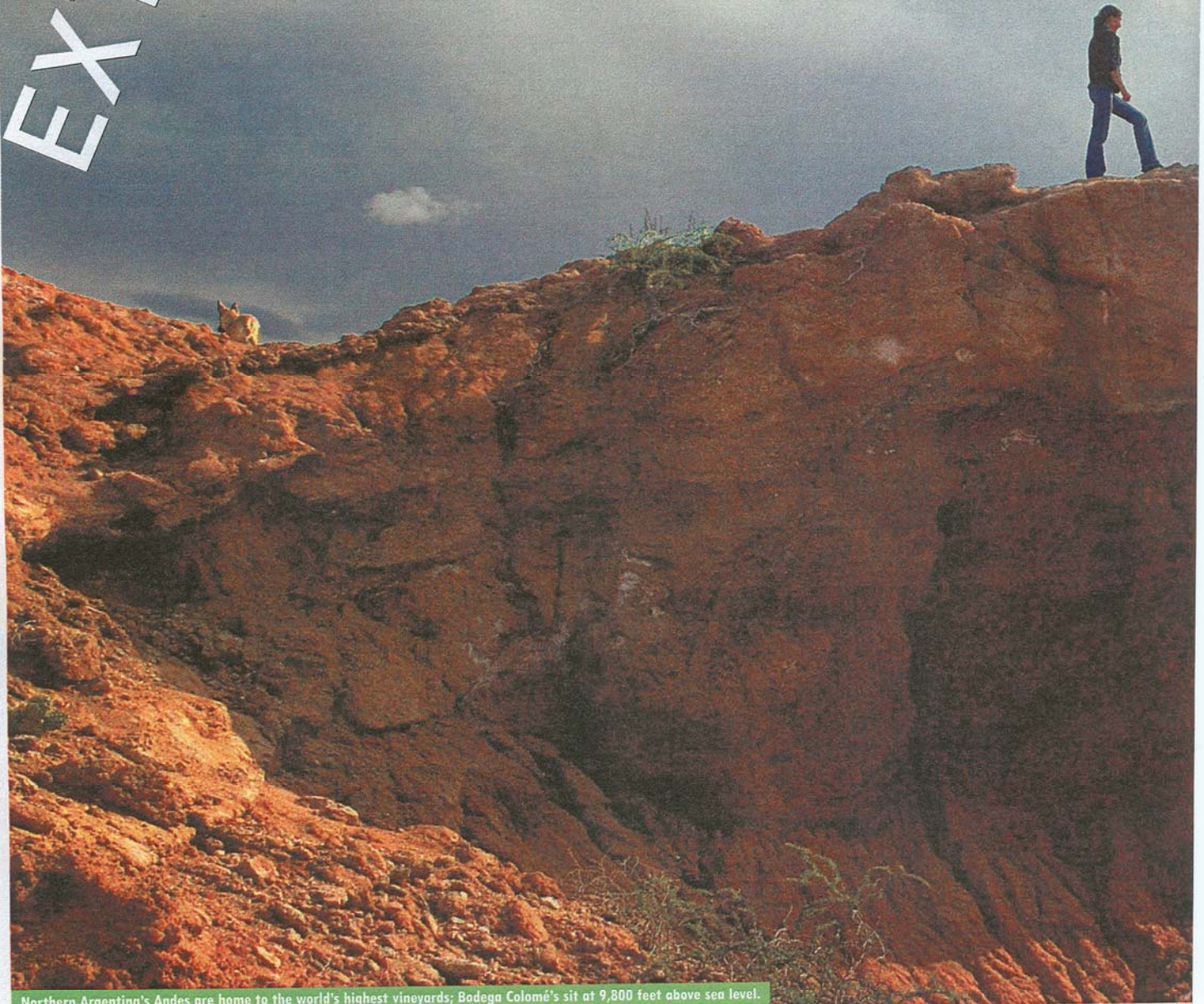
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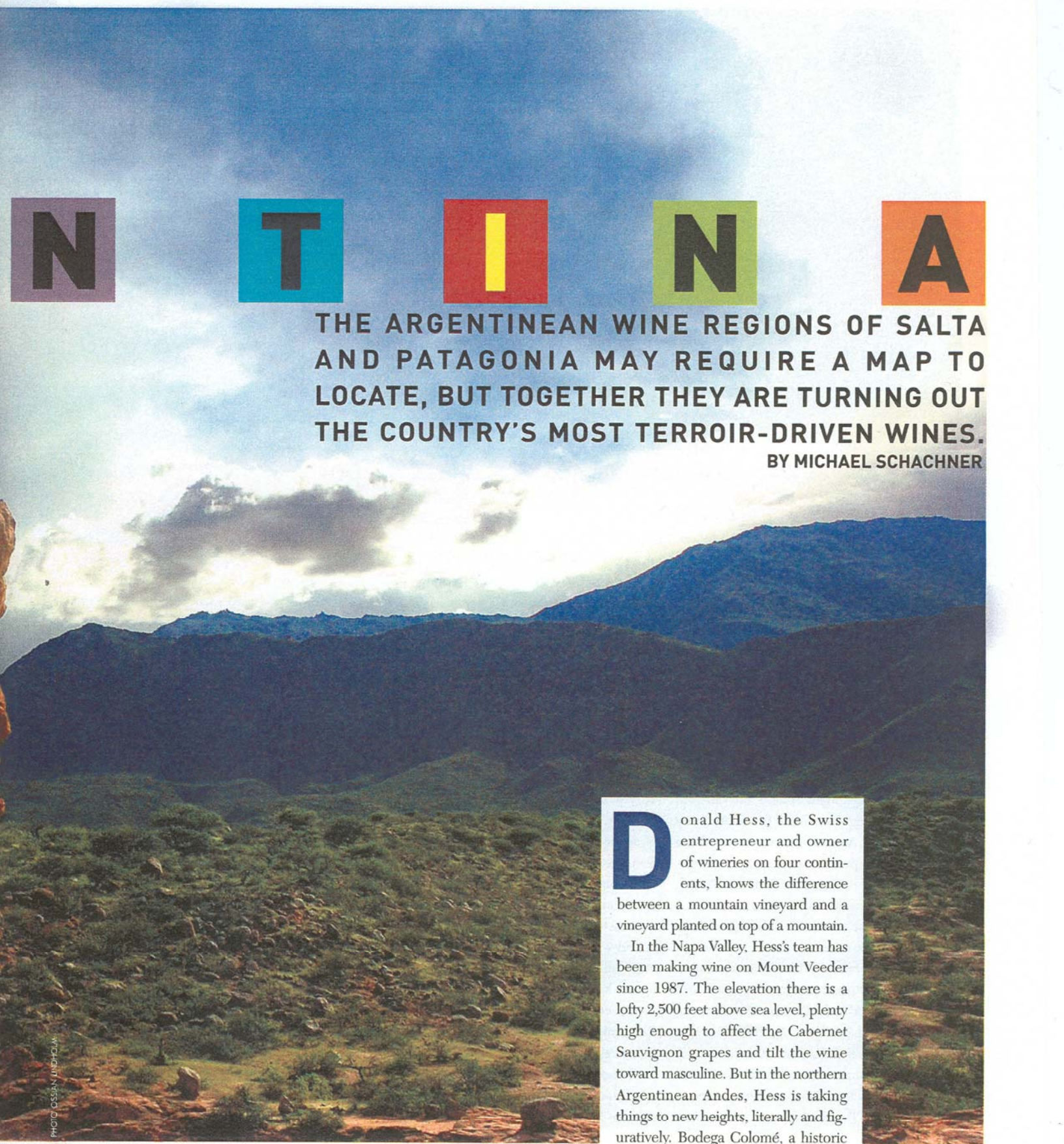
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Northern Argentina's Andes are home to the world's highest vineyards; Bodega Colomé's sit at 9,800 feet above sea level.



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THE ARGENTINEAN WINE REGIONS OF SALTA AND PATAGONIA MAY REQUIRE A MAP TO LOCATE, BUT TOGETHER THEY ARE TURNING OUT THE COUNTRY'S MOST TERROIR-DRIVEN WINES.

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER

Donald Hess, the Swiss entrepreneur and owner of wineries on four continents, knows the difference between a mountain vineyard and a vineyard planted on top of a mountain.

In the Napa Valley, Hess's team has been making wine on Mount Veeder since 1987. The elevation there is a lofty 2,500 feet above sea level, plenty high enough to affect the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes and tilt the wine toward masculine. But in the northern Argentinean Andes, Hess is taking things to new heights, literally and figuratively. Bodega Colomé, a historic

PHOTO: GISSAN UNDFLOW



A fiery sunset over the high desert of Rio Negro demonstrates the ruggedness and raw beauty of Patagonian wine country.

winery that Hess bought in 2001, has old-vine vineyards ranging from 7,200 feet all the way up to 9,800 feet. According to all sources, these vineyards in the province of Salta are the highest in the world, eclipsing even those of Nepal.

"I think we can safely say that Colomé is like no place else on earth," Hess said in September, when he launched a trio of new wines in the United States. "With 350 sunny days a year, cold nighttime temperatures, and vines that were planted as far back as 150 years ago, there's nothing like it."

Some 1,500 miles south of Salta, in the side-by-side Patagonian regions of Neuquén and Rio Negro, the elevations are nothing extraordinary. In fact, the land here is basically an

extension of the high-desert *pampas* for which Argentina is best known. But with thousands of acres of open space and plenty of water from the Neuquén, Limay and Negro rivers, a small number of wineries that began sprouting up around the turn of the millennium are now starting to export.

And what interesting wines they are making. Unlike the New World heavyweights from better-known Mendoza—or even the sun-drenched mountain wines from Salta—the Patagonian wines are, in general, defined by pulsating fruit riding on a bed of zesty acidity.

"Patagonia's reasonably warm temperatures, wind and dryness lead to grapes of intense color and concentration," asserts Lucas Neme-

sio, an owner of Bodega NQN in Neuquén, which produced its first vintage in 2003 from vines planted not many years before. "It's a windy region, so rain, even when it falls, isn't an issue. It dries almost immediately."

The other key terroir element in Argentinean Patagonia, which sits a good 500 miles north of Chilean Patagonia and thus is significantly less cold and volatile, is the incredible swing between daytime and nighttime temperatures, especially during the prime growing months of February and March. Called thermal amplitude, the difference between peak daytime temperatures and nighttime lows can top 70°F. And that's not a misprint; the mercury in Patagonia can actually hit 100°F in the



late afternoon and fall almost to the freezing level by the middle of the night.

As a result, the Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and other international varieties grown here take on their own character and personality. The wines are less buxom and more streamlined than their global competi-

tion, sort of like Chianti compared to New World Cabernet, or Wolfgang Puck compared to Escoffier.

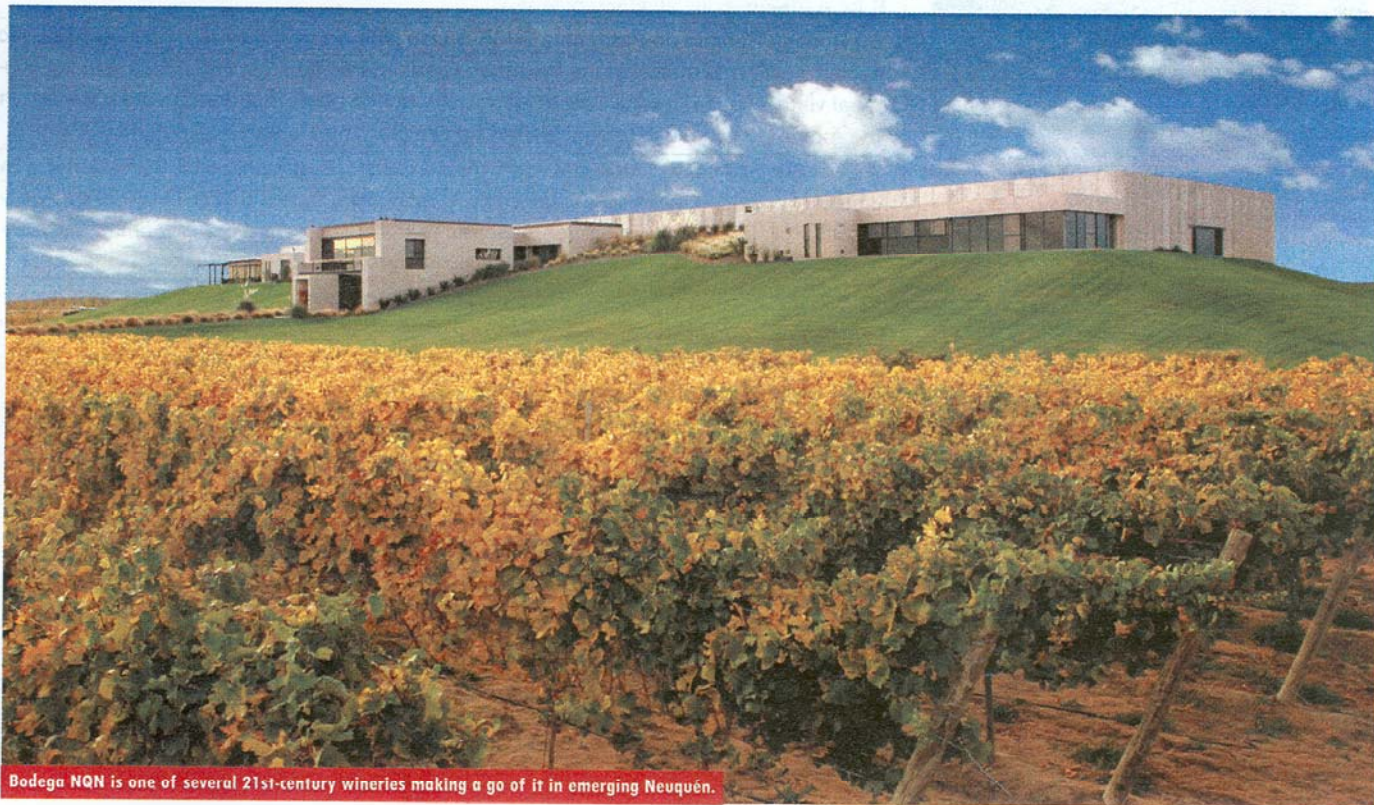
"Our southern position gives us an hour more of sunlight than any other Argentine wine region," notes Roberto Schroeder of Familia Schroeder, which like NQN is a fledg-

ling winery based in San Patricio de Chañar. "We have the highest temperature variations in the world, while the winds create small berries with thick skins. So the structure and polyphenols are incredible. We feel our wines are blessed."

Feeling blessed is an emotion not lost on Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, a scion of the wealthy Tuscan family that produces Sassicaia. Not content to be simply a guardian of his family's lauded Bolgheri estate, in 2002 Incisa followed the lead set a couple of years prior by his cousin, Countess Noemí Marone Cinzano, and her winemaking boyfriend Hans Vinding Diers. However, whereas Cinzano and Vinding settled in Rio Negro to make world-class Malbec at Bodega Noemia de Patagonia, Incisa envisioned making Patagonian Pinot Noir, something the world had virtually never seen.

"I had tasted a Pinot Noir that Hans had made for Humberto Canale," a Rio Negro pioneer whose wines have never really caught on in America. "And the wine haunted me for weeks," said Incisa. "It was what I thought about before going to sleep and it was what I woke up thinking about. I knew that I had to pursue it."

Undaunted by a dearth of information on



Bodega NQN is one of several 21st-century wineries making a go of it in emerging Neuquén.



Donald and Ursula Hess (top) acquired Bodega Colomé in 2001, while Lucas Nemesio is running Bodega NQN in Patagonia with his father-in-law, Luis Maria Facaccia.

how much Pinot Noir actually existed in Rio Negro, Incisa managed to locate an available 85-acre vineyard with Pinot plantings from 1932, 1955, 1967 and 1999. With Vinding as winemaker and the Frenchman Thomas Christen as technical director, Bodega Chacra, named after a square-shaped vineyard surrounded by wind-breaking poplars, was born.

The 2004 vintage of the wine (all from the 1932 plot), the first made by Incisa and his mates, exists in such small quantity (slightly more than 100 cases) that I agreed not to formally rate and review it. Priced at \$120 and available only by mailing list, it's a unique Pinot Noir to say the least. Dark as Shiraz or Cabernet, but with exotic spice notes, massive blackberry and boysenberry flavors, and lush

A MIXED CASE FROM SALTA AND PATAGONIA

92 Bodega Colomé 2003 Reserva (Calchaquí Valley); \$90. Black in color and saturated with deep cola and tar aromas. The palate is borderline medicinal due to extreme ripeness, but if you like a rich, sun-drenched red with heft and body, this is it. The blend is 80% Malbec and 20% Cabernet Sauvignon, and it was made from vines with up to 150 years of history behind them. Weighs in at a whopping 15.5%. Drink now.

92 Bodega Noemia de Patagonia 2004 Noemia (Rio Negro); \$110. Noemia's signature Malbec, now in its third vintage, is one of the country's best. It starts out herbal and smoky, with a lot of dark French oak. The mouth is powerful and pure, with at least three layers of complex flavors and textures. The fruit is both subtle and loud. Simply an excellent wine of world-class character. Best in 2008-09.

92 Michel Torino 2004 Ciclos Malbec-Merlot (Cafayate); \$25. Chocolate and mint with the essence of coffee drives the bouquet on this beautiful red. In the mouth, this Malbec-Merlot blend is ripe as can be, with cassis, blackberry and chocolate all making their mark. The finish is secure and just mildly tannic, while the overall take is that this is a ribald, rich South American red. *Editors' Choice.*

91 Bodega Colomé 2004 Estate (Calchaquí Valley); \$25. A bold mix of cherry and black currant that's cushioned by full tannins and a lot of spirit. The blend is 66% Malbec, 20% Cabernet and 14% Tannat from high-altitude vineyards in a remote, high-elevation section of Salta. A truly excellent, modern-styled Argentine red. Drink now.

91 Bodega Noemia de Patagonia 2004 J. Alberto (Rio Negro); \$38. Not a hair is out of place on this pure and potent Malbec. The bouquet is crusty and rich, with berry and bitter-chocolate aromas. The palate is chock full of mulberry, black cherry, nutmeg and cocoa powder. And the finish is smooth and rewarding. Good through 2008.

90 Bodega Colomé 2006 Torrontes (Calchaquí Valley); \$13. A fabulous Best Buy. However, because it's brand new and production was only 600 cases, you're going to have to work to find it. If you do, expect a melon-driven, fuller-bodied white with clean lines, good acidity and a long finish. Aromatic and complex to the point that you might mistake it for a Rhône-valley Viognier. *Best Buy.*

90 Bodega Noemia de Patagonia 2005 A Lisa (Rio Negro); \$24. A crisp-styled Malbec (with 10% Merlot) that does the Rio Negro region of Patagonia proud. A Lisa is in its inaugural vintage, and the wine boasts toast, mineral and black fruit both on the nose and in the mouth. Not exactly streamlined but tighter than most Malbecs. Drink now-'08.

89 Familia Schroeder 2004 Saurus Select Malbec (Neuquén); \$13. Among the new crop of Patagonian Malbecs, this wine shows a sly style. It's not that full of bells and whistles but it does offer plenty of ripe, crisp red fruit including cassis, cherry and strawberry. Blended in are touches of tobacco and leather. *Best Buy.*

88 Bodega NQN 2004 Malma Reserva Malbec (Neuquén); \$20. Gets going with a lot of barrel and leather, but maybe not as much fruit as one might hope for. Makes its point with a round, creamy mouthfeel that supports jammy plum and blackberry flavors. A very good Malbec that will be better once the vines age.

88 Michel Torino 2004 Don David Reserve Malbec (Cafayate); \$15. Inky black in color, with a pretty nose defined by toast, minerality and stout plum and berry fruit. Round and vigorous in the mouth, with vibrant dark-berry flavors. A muscled-up wine from Salta with just enough finesse to balance everything out. Ready to drink.

87 Bodega NQN 2005 Picada 15 (Neuquén); \$8. This lighter-bodied blend has a lot in common with a good Côtes-du-Rhône. It's mildly spicy but also quite fruity; the nose exudes red-berry and cinnamon aromas, while the palate is warm and just slightly oaky. A nice bistro wine. *Best Buy.*

86 Infinitus 2004 Malbec (Rio Negro); \$13. Shows some young-vine raciness but also the sappy red cherry that is Rio Negro Malbec. Balanced and nicely oaked, with a comfortable finish that carries both chocolate and vanilla. From the maker of Fabre Montmayou in Mendoza.

tannins, it's about as different from Burgundy or Oregon as Pinot Noir gets. Yet it's a superb wine, one I recommend even at the price and the hoops one must jump through to get it.

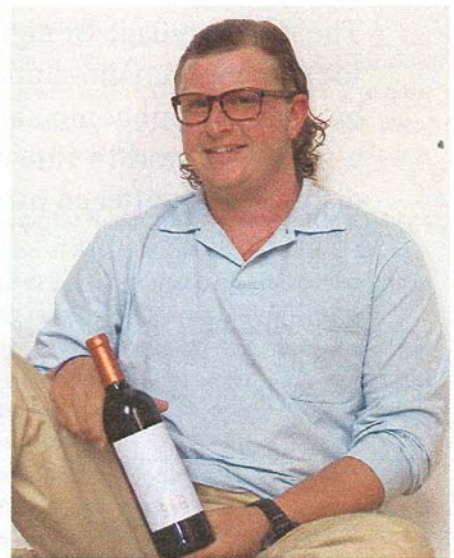
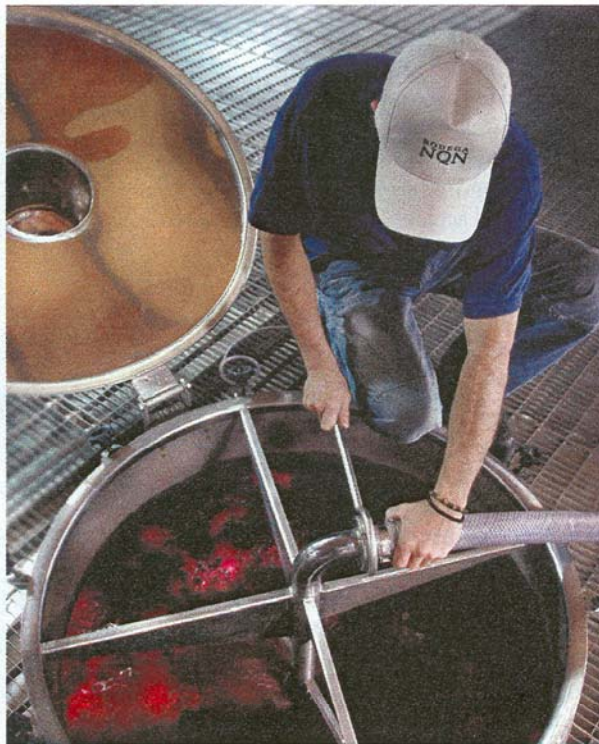
"At this point in time, Rio Negro and Neuquén are not on the map. And I promise you that it's not postcard-pretty terrain. But I also promise that it's a great region for Pinot, and that's what drives me," says Incisa, noting that production for the 2005 vintage doubled and that eventually Bodega Chacra could produce up to a few thousand cases of wine, including a second wine called Barda.

Salta on the Rise

Back in the extreme northern province of Salta, which touches Bolivia, Paraguay and the northern tip of Chile (meaning it can get downright tropical at lower elevations), we are just now discovering what Spanish settlers learned 200 years ago: that the high-elevation Cafayate (pronounced *Kah-fah-shah-tay*) and Calchaquí valleys are capable of producing very good grapes, particularly Torrontes, a highly aromatic hybrid Spanish white, and Malbec, Argentina's signature red grape.

Leading the region away from a focus on dull, unbalanced wines made strictly for the undiscerning domestic market are people like Hess and Michel Rolland, the latter the renowned French enologist who founded Cafayate-based San Pedro de Yacochuya in the late 1990s with his wife Dany and some local partners. In the past, Yacochuya, the winery's ultrapremium Malbec, ranked as a pacesetter for the entire country, let alone Cafayate: the 2000 vintage rated 93 points. But since Rolland and his group have been selling the wine to the Bordeaux *négociant* market rather than having it directly imported into the U.S., its availability has been scattered and inconsistent. Arnaldo Etchart, one of Rolland's partners, says it is likely that the 2003 Yacochuya will be exported to the U.S. through traditional channels. When that happens, you should jump on it. It's likely to be that good.

While San Pedro de Yacochuya and the venerable Salta producer Michel Torino hail from



Top: Working the wine at Bodega NQN. Piero Incisa della Rocchetta (left) came to Rio Negro to get close to Pinot Noir; Hans Vinding Diers (right) makes Incisa's wine as well as his own Malbec, called Noemia.

Cafayate, which sits about 5,500 feet above the sea, the Calchaquí Valley, where Hess and his wife Ursula are transforming Bodega Colomé from a remnant of the past to a jewel of the present, seems to offer the brightest future for the region. But what a trek it takes to get there: four hours by car from the city of Salta and nearly three hours from the town of Cafayate.

"My first thought in 1997, when we decided

to invest in South America, was Chile. But in our opinion, the people were too European and the wines too Californian," explained Hess. "Next we considered Mendoza, which we found too hot and too plagued by hail. But once I took that dirt-road drive from Salta to Colomé and saw the old mountaintop vineyards, I knew right away that we'd come upon our spot."

Founded in 1831, Colomé is said to be the oldest working winery in Argentina, and its vineyards possess some of the oldest pre-phyllloxera Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon vines on earth. In addition, the property has ancient Torrontes grown on old-fashioned *parrals* (overhead grape trellising systems).

With its brutally natural surroundings and 150-year-old vines, Colomé is a throwback to the 19th century in

many ways. But with the full allotment of modern equipment installed in a recently built winery, Hess's resident winemaker, Thibault Delmotte, and longtime Hess Collection winemaker Randle Johnson are making big, modern wines that exude the warm, elevated, dry terroir of Colomé.

Credence to the proverb that nothing good comes easy? The wines of remote Salta and rugged Patagonia are proving that it's true. ■