

SOUTH AMERICA'S RISING STAR

Within the wine world, Uruguay is more of a novelty than a major player. Nevertheless, this tiny country's Tannats and Albariños have emerged as potential gamechangers.

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER

According to the stats, Uruguayan wines should not demand much attention. Among South America's quartet of wine-producing nations, Uruguay ranks a distant fourth in production behind Argentina, Chile and its hulking neighbor to the north, Brazil.

In terms of wine exports, the figures are even less compelling. Fewer than 25,000 cases of Uruguayan wine were shipped to the United States in 2013, although that number is climbing.

But before you dismiss Uruguay, let's say your next meal is a barbecue that mimics the typical grill fests that are so popular in much of South America. Let's also assume you want to pop open a bottle of South American red wine to match that juicy rib-eye or skirt steak. Why not consider Uruguay?

Uruguayan reds are as meat-friendly as wine can get, particularly varietal Tannat—a European grape brought to Uruguay 140 years ago by Basque immigrants—and blends based on Tannat.

Meanwhile, Albariño, which thrives in Spain's Galicia region, has adapted well to Uruguay's Atlantic Ocean-influenced climate and has emerged as the country's best white wine. With seafood and fresh cheeses, Uruguayan Albariño is a delicious companion.

A MODERN SHIFT

While commercial wine has existed in this country of only 3.5 million people since 1870, the past 15 years have seen Uruguay's wineries pushing the tide toward quality.

Wineries including Pisano, Bouza, Establecimiento Juanicó, Artesana, Finca Narbona, Giménez Méndez, J. Carrao, Bodega Garzón and a handful of others are, for the most part, producing modern, internationally styled wines of good quality. These

wines are generous and reflective of Uruguay's warm, humid, fertile conditions.

While such climate may not register as "ideal" for growing top-level grapes, at least according to the unofficial terroir handbook, Uruguay enjoys favorable geographic positioning in the Southern Hemisphere.

If you were to draw a line from Santiago, Chile, east through Mendoza, Argentina, then through Uruguay, across the Atlantic to South Africa, and ultimately ending in Australia and New Zealand, everything lines up between the 30th and 35th parallels.

So, in terms of latitude, Uruguay is in the high-rent district.

What haven't always been so upscale are Uruguayan wines. Production was, until the late 1990s, fairly crude and geared toward a thirsty, undiscerning domestic market. Vineyard yields were enormous, thanks to the country's aforementioned fertile soils and warm weather, but the end products lacked focus and clarity.

Not so today.

NEW WORLD MEETS OLD

"We are in the New World, but if you look at our weather and terroir, we are a lot like Bordeaux," says Fernando Deicas, president of Establecimiento Juanicó-Familia Deicas in Canelones, Uruguay's largest and best-known wine region. "The Río de la Plata, which separates Uruguay from Argentina, is our Gironde. The maritime influence is strong, and the clay and calcareous soils in Canelones are a lot like St-Émilion."

During a visit to Uruguay in December 2013, I found the Juanicó wines still to be on the rustic side, but with potential. The winery is working with American consultant Paul Hobbs to improve quality. Its best release is Preludio Barrel Select, a six-grape Bordeaux-style blend based on Tannat.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Not far from Juanicó, and just outside Uruguay's capital city of Montevideo, is Bouza, one of the country's top wineries and one of its few major exporters (it sent 30 percent of its 10,000-case production to the U.S. last year). Founded by a Galician family in the 1990s, Bouza has produced top-notch Albariño and red wines since 2003.

Winemaker Eduardo Boido's specialty is a leesy, yet honest, Rías Baixas-style Albariño that displays touches of vanilla, honey, melon and citrus fruits. It's flowery and aromatic, but also minerally and well cut.

BODEGA GARZÓN



URUGUAY BY REGION

Uruguay's four major wine regions encompass about 20,000 acres of wine grapes. The largest and most prominent is the South Region, comprised of the Canelones and Montevideo zones.

This is the country's most traditional wine region, established in the 19th century by Italian and Spanish immigrants. About 75 percent of Uruguay's wine production comes from here.

The Western Region, which borders the Río de la Plata and includes the subzones of Colonia and San José, is the next largest, with about 2,500 acres of vines. The Northern Region has about 1,000 acres of vines, but no internationally focused wineries of note, while the Eastern Region has about 750 acres of vines, mostly on one property, Bodega Garzón.

"We are in the New World, but if you look at our weather and terroir, we are a lot like Bordeaux...the clay and calcareous soils in Canelones are a lot like St-Émilion."
—Fernando Deicas

"Our vineyards are almost all in Montevideo, but now we are moving east toward Maldonado," he says. "We think that area's higher elevation, rockier soils and ocean influences are positive compared to Canelones-Montevideo."

Fully committed to the Maldonado region is Bodega Garzón, which sits just outside the village of Garzón, about 30 minutes inland from the beaches of trendy Punta del Este. The enterprise is part of a massive, multifaceted agricultural conglomerate, Agroland, which also produces commercial olive oil, almonds, honey and eucalyptus trees.

Alejandro Bulgheroni, an Argentine oil billionaire, is the force behind Agroland. His right-hand man on the winery portion of the business is Carlos Pulentá, a veteran of the Argentinean wine industry and the owner of Bodega Vistalba in Mendoza. Their winemaking consultant and partner is internationally renowned Alberto Antonini from Italy.

READY FOR PRIME TIME

"What is different about the Garzón area compared to the rest of Uruguay is that our soils are ballast (gravel derived from granite) and drain quickly," says Nicolás Kovalenko, who manages Bulgheroni's Uruguayan enterprises. "We don't have heavy soils that hold water and create big crops. We are young, but Antonini feels we can make world-class wine here, especially Tannat and Albariño."

Last but not least, one of the country's best producers with a solid American presence is Pisano, run by three jocular brothers.

"Our style is robust and big-bodied, just like us," says Daniel Pisano. "We are a typical Italian family operation. One brother makes the wines, one tends the vines and I'm in charge of sales and entertainment."



RECOMMENDED URUGUAYAN WINES

BOUZA ALBARIÑO (MONTEVIDEO). The closest thing in Uruguay to true Spanish Albariño. The 2013 was superb when tasted at the winery in December 2013, but the 2012 was already fading. Imported by Elixir Wine Group.

PISANO RPF RESERVA PERSONAL DE LA FAMILIA TANNAT (CANELONES). Ripe and bright on the nose, with smooth tannins, this bullish yet focused wine defines the Pisano house style. The 2009, tasted at the winery, was impressive, as were several other Pisano wines. Imported by Saranty Imports.

ESTABLECIMIENTO JUANICÓ-FAMILIA DEICAS PRELUDIO BARREL SELECT (CANELONES). A six-grape blend with Tannat, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc making up the lion's share. The 2004 and 2006 vintages are both in peak condition. Imported by S Selections.

BODEGA GARZÓN ALBARIÑO (MALDONADO). Light in body, this fresh white wine is focused on zesty acidity. The 2013, from very young vines, shows the potential of the variety and the winery. Imported by Blends Inc.

ARTESANA TANNAT (CANELONES). The winery is American-owned and has an all-female team of winemakers. Dark, extracted and full in body and flavors, the wine is just right for pairing with grilled, grass-fed Uruguayan beef. Imported by Epic Wines.