



ARGENTINE CRUSH

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Americans are establishing vineyards in Argentina, on land beneath the Andes.

A Argentine Crush

The Andes overlook one of the wine world's newest hot properties by Liza B. Zimmerman

"I STUMBLED ONTO THE TASTING ROOM FOUR DAYS AFTER IT OPENED," says Barry Chaiken of the visit to a wine bar in Mendoza, Argentina, that inspired him to buy a vineyard. Chaiken, a doctor who lives in Boston, found himself deciding to grow grapes in the Valle de Uco as he sipped some of Argentina's finest wines at the Vines of Mendoza.

The Valle de Uco and the town of Mendoza are both situated in the Mendoza region, about 650 miles northwest of Buenos Aires. With the jagged Andes as its backdrop, the area attracts visitors with its laid-back vibe, great steaks, and vibrant wine industry. Mendoza is by far the largest and most important wine-growing area in Argentina and arguably the most significant for high-quality wine in South America, with a reputation made on the intense reds produced from the Malbec grape, although Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, and Italian varietals can also be found here.

Michael Evans, the CEO of the Vines of Mendoza, was drawn to the region's beauty, its winemaking potential, and its affordability. The company's wine bar lists 90 Argentine wines by the glass (at \$5 to \$50), though the Vines of Mendoza, which Evans heads with two partners, offers more than just wine tasting—it also provides a wine club and sells vineyard estates.

The original idea, Evans explains, "was to buy a little piece of

property, make some wine, and put a little B&B on it." But the plans got bigger, and the company now has 1,300 acres of vineyards in Valle de Uco. Thirty investors, including Barry Chaiken, get titles to a plot of land, a consultation with acclaimed winemaker Santiago Achaval, the right to plant whatever grapes they choose, three years of maintenance. All of that can be done for \$150,000, a fraction of what it might cost elsewhere. "The price point," Chaiken says, "was acceptable to me, as was the risk."

Vineyard owners, 80 percent of whom are from the U.S., can be as involved as they like in overseeing production of their wines with the company's winemaker. Most come to the vineyard once or twice a year, often for harvest. Chaiken plans to make 500 to 700 cases of wine annually and hopes to head down at least once every year. "I wanted this to be a passion," he says, "not a job."

www.winesofmendoza.com