



## THE LONG AND WINE-DING ROAD

*By: Sorrel Moseley-William*

The air is crackling with energy, and it has nothing to do with the Andes having some kind of temper tantrum. Mendoza is in its prime at this time of year, and as the official Vendimia celebration took place last night, thousands are in town to get a piece of the action.

Mendoza is going through a boom right now. Although you may think that wine is its number-one export, in fact it's oil. But between the two developing industries, there's plenty going on – drive south towards the wine-growing region of Luján de Cuyo and housing estates as well as private neighbourhoods are sprouting up everywhere.

In a city where the air is clean and sky is clear – with 300-plus days of sun a year – it's little wonder that many are seeing it as an alternative haven from Buenos Aires. Last October, chef Mun Kim shifted soils by moving to Mendoza to open a regional version of his hugely popular Asian fusion restaurant in collaboration with Casarena winery, for example.

Another eye-catching opening has been The Vines of Mendoza's tailor-made tasting room. Having always offered a space in which to sample local offerings, The Vines has now raised the game, with a purpose-built tasting arena, which houses a blending parlour – so much fun to mix and match to create your own vintage! –, a private tasting room and a public space, the ideal spot to hang out and meet other grape addicts.

Meanwhile, Argentina's most exportable chef to date, Francis Mallmann, opened a new restaurant in Valle de Uco at The Vines' vineyard estate just last Friday. Focusing of course on grilled meats, Siete Fuegos is all about cooking with fire. Would you expect anything less from Argentina's grill king? Showcasing the seven styles of grilling developed over centuries, you can tuck into tender cuts of meat as well as delectable seafood – let's not forget that one of Mallmann's dishes at November's Masticar food fair was a fishy one – the man is to be trusted with any kind of fillet.

Naturally all these wonderfully seared dishes are washed down with some world-class wine that the Uco region is producing – expect to dip into seven (the magic number here) and make sure you have a chauffeur home.

Another restaurant making waves in the Chacras de Coria district is Nadia OF. Owned and run by Nadia Harón, wife of José Manuel Ortega, president of O. Fournier Group winery, she offers a sensational seasonal six-step menu with delights such as melon gazpacho with mint and tomato water snow and watermelon juice and a hearty English-sounding Oxtail in its reduction, with a bouquet of greens with Dijon mustard. Although wine is included in the tasting menu, interestingly Nadia OF doesn't offer a list, preferring diners to bring their own bottle.

With just three days in Mendoza, buzzing about the countryside dipping into bodegas for tastings and chat, Club Tapiz was high on my list of return-tos. Two years I dined at the restaurant, which is some 15km from the winery – it is often the way that experiences aimed at tourists are nowhere near to the day-to-day grape crushers and enologists. On a gourmet trip at the time, the courses were so memorable and fish-based that I pledged a return.

Ah, the joy of driving up to park at the side of sturdy vines and a beautiful estancia. The two-floored Club Tapiz sports vine murals in the interior, and the burgundy walls give a sense of dining inside a great big glass of Malbec. But such was the warm climate, there was only one option for us – what a privilege to dine under shady trees, next to the lawn.

A short and sweet menu comprises six starters and seven mains. Bella went for the arugula salad with figs, brie and roasted tomato (35 pesos), true manna from heaven. With perfectly fresh ingredients, the tomatoes were tangy and delicious; a yummy combination was her verdict.

This sucker for goat's cheese (42 pesos) naturally went for that option. The dish itself was as pretty as a picture, truly stunning presentation, with the cheese, crunchy toasted pumpkin seeds and olive tapenade all lined up, waiting for my fork's orders. A mouthful of all three elements, plus a few tasty orange petals, was heaven in the mouth, textures fusing together. Another winner.

We opted for the same main, ravioli-filled braised lamb (95 pesos), and it was such a relief to step away from the usual ricotta and spinach stuffing suspects. With a sun-dried tomato and walnut butter, textures again blended, the tender lamb teaming up with walnuts, and there was no skimping on the fresh basil, giving an authentic Italian flavour.

Other mains included a hunk rib-eye (99 pesos), butter-sautéed trout which I would try next time as there is an abundance of the fish in the area (86 pesos), and kid with a potato and leek mille-feuille (145 pesos).

A glass of Tapiz wine is 25 pesos – my Merlot was airy and light, while Bella's fruity and fresh Malbec got a thumbs' up for working in tandem with the lamb ravioli.

Once you're done eating, do make sure that you don't wander off for a look at the Renaissance-style villa built in 1890 and its stunning back lawn and pool, otherwise it may end up costing you more than just a meal.

Club Tapiz

Maipú, Mendoza

Tel: (0261) 496-3433

[www.club-tapiz.com.ar](http://www.club-tapiz.com.ar)