THE AGE
inside The Age

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THE AGE
Traveller

Vintage adventure

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Divino intervention ... Vines of Mendoza's vineyard in Uco Valley. Photo: Michael H. Evans

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The night bus from Buenos Aires to Mendoza takes about 14 hours. This would be a nightmare journey were it not for the big, super-soft reclining armchairs, as comfy and lived-in as old La-Z-Boys. An onboard waitress attaches tray-tables to them at dinnertime, which is always a bit later in Argentina.

Speeding out of the capital at close to midnight, we're served a tough but decent steak and a cheap but highly drinkable cabernet sauvignon. For all the things now going wrong with this country - strike action, corruption, hyperinflation - the meat is never bad, the wine is always good and the public transport can sometimes be a pleasant surprise.

Next morning we awake in the desert, opening the curtains to see cactuses lining the road and a horizon of mountains ahead. This is wine country and Mendoza is at the heart of it - a city surrounded by vineyards, in the shadow of the Andes.

Advertisement

Almost every bar in town is effectively a wine bar and Vines of Mendoza has positioned itself as the first stop for most visitors. Opened in 2006 by a former campaign adviser to the failed 2004 US presidential candidate John Kerry, it is one of the only custom-built tasting rooms in South America. Sniffing a glass of Recuerdo malbec that I chose purely for the price, I'm told by one of the staff that this particular vintage comes from their own vineyards in the nearby Uco Valley. "But we don't like to say 'house wine' here," she says. Over and above the notes of cloves that were added at the winery - an unusual touch - the place smells of money.

According to our server, Florencia, most customers are tourists and each one is a potential investor. If you like the wine, you can also buy four hectares of the land it came from and set to work making your own. Which is to say, a person might just pop in to sample the produce and leave with a completely new life. "It happens," Florencia says, having recently quit a law degree to study winemaking instead. "The wine changed my mind."

Perhaps this is a romantic way of looking at a lucrative business, but good wine tends to put stars in your eyes. Our stay at the Cavas Wine Lodge coincides with the so-called "supermoon" - when the lunar surface passes close to Earth and looms larger in the sky. It floats over our private roof terrace like a huge white balloon, glowing pinkish in our glasses of rosé.

Every room here is a separate structure with a pleasing organic shape, as if it had grown out of the same earth as the vines below. On the patio of the main building, owner Cecilia Diaz Chuit recounts her decision, after Argentina's economic crash of 2001, to move from Buenos Aires with her husband, Martin, to do something different with their lives.

"The crisis made a lot of young people feel the same way," she says. "If the whole system can fall apart any minute, then you might as well go and take a risk on your own terms."

At that time, there were no luxury hotels among the wineries that orbited Mendoza, so the couple built their own from scratch. Seven years after opening, some guests come just for the views or the peace, especially at this time of year - after the harvest, when the leaves have turned red and gold. "A few of them don't even drink wine," Chuit says. "But only a few."

Down in the cellar, we're given a brief education in Argentine wine by an in-house sommelier named Georgina. We start with a torrontes, made from the only grape that is native to this country. All the others, Georgina says, were transplanted from the older vines of Europe. Certain connoisseurs will say that none of these is especially distinctive - that no other wine truly tastes of Argentina. I'm not qualified to say, but I know that I don't usually like white, and the torrontes, from the Salta region, tastes pretty good to me.

Georgina doesn't much care for white wines either, and we move on to the local malbecs. "Mendoza is the land of malbec," she says, sounding genuinely proud. Even if it's not a native grape, it has been grown here for more than 150 years. Most Mendocinos will admit that it was pretty rough and ready for at least a century. The shift from quantity to quality has happened in less than 20 years.

The flow of visiting wine lovers has given rise to finer restaurants. The menu at the Cavas, for example, has been artfully composed to complement the wine list and it is only a short drive to Brindillas restaurant - or a longer bike ride through the autumn poplars - where the chef, Mariano Gallego, has just returned from his two-Michelin-star restaurant in Tokyo to cater for the bubbling trade near his home town.

Riding back to the lodge after a fine six-course lunch matched with six Mendoza wines, it occurs to me that I might like to lie down and die in one of these sun-dappled vineyards.

This is just the wine talking, of course, and this part of the country might now be too cultivated for my tastes - and budget.

The Uco Valley, barely 80 kilometres south, is still the wild west by comparison. Route 89, the road that takes us there, didn't exist a few years ago. Running down the side are advertisements for new wineries and bodegas, recently or soon to be opened.

One of those signs has been spray-painted with a black arrow pointing into the valley, and a single word: "EUROPA". The graffiti is presumably sarcastic, a reference to the fact that much of this land is now owned by foreign investors and developers. Big wine companies from France, Spain and Italy have bought swaths of the valley floor, to grow their grapes in dry yet fertile Argentine soil. Apparently, some locals don't like this.

On the outer deck of his small wine lodge and restaurant, Pablo Cerruti offers me a welcome glass of 2011 Tomero sauvignon blanc. Tomero, he says, is an old word for the men who once worked hard to irrigate places like this. "People used to kill for water around here," Cerruti says, looking out across the vineyards to the desert beyond, and the distant and dormant Tupungato volcano. "Maybe not so long ago."

As recently as the turn of the millennium, this area was a sparsely populated plain on the Argentine side of the Andes, high above sea level. So few strangers passed through that a couple of tourists on a motorbike were still being talked about two years after they rode off into the dust. Or so Cerruti has been told, by a hippie who lives across the valley.

Cerruti is a relative newcomer himself, another city boy from Buenos Aires. He retired from a long career in the ministry of finance and moved here with his family in 2006. By that time, drip irrigation systems were changing the landscape, allowing farmers and vintners to control moisture levels in a region that gets less than 300 millimetres of rain a year (the average vine needs 600 millimetres or more). Red and white grapes were suddenly swelling in the desert, the malbecs and semillons ripening especially well.

Industry and infrastructure have grown fast around them, but even now the Uco Valley remains pioneer territory, at the frontier of Argentina's wine country. In that spirit, Cerruti and his business partner, Sergio Viegas, chose this site for the peace it seemed to promise them. "We wanted a change of life," Cerruti says. "Like that movie The Beach, except this is the desert and we are much older."

Viegas, a former urban architect, designed and built the lodge from local stone and wood, without the benefit of electricity. In the absence of a power grid or freshwater supply, he might have been working in the 18th century (though the finished rooms were subsequently wired and plumbed with all the mod cons). They named it Tupungato Divino, that second word a Spanish play on "wine" and "heaven", suggesting that both can be found here, or that each can be found in the other.

Neither owner claims to be a wine expert. Their neighbours bring them bottles to sell and their customers tend to be well-informed buyers. Surrounded by rival wineries, Cerruti says they are scrupulously "neutral" and try to be friends with everyone. They don't have a wine list and they don't go by the descriptions written on the labels, which are always full of what he calls "verso" (flowery rhetoric). They form a "personal relationship" with each one.

Asked if he has a secret preference, Cerruti says it depends on "the moment". This evening, by the fireplace, he opens a Calivista malbec from the farm nearby, which was made with the paid guidance of local master winemaker Mauricio Lorca (a common practice in these young vineyards). It tastes exactly right to me, with a simple dinner of meat and cheese empanadas baked in a clay oven. But I'm no expert either. Afterwards, Cerruti lets me try the hobby wine they make from their own hectare of vines outside.

"It's more like a joke," he says, scooping me a glass directly from the barrel at the back of the restaurant. "We don't usually serve it to guests. We don't even have a name for it." The harvest was barely three weeks ago and this year's batch still tastes close to raw red grape juice, supersweet and fizzing with the fermentation process. "I like it," I tell him.

"No you don't," Cerruti says. "You are speaking verso."

I mean it, though. Cerruti's nameless vintage somehow evokes the freshness of the air around Tupungato Divino, the virgin earth of the Uco Valley, the plum-coloured clouds we watched gathering over the volcano at sunset. In other words, it tastes like Argentina.

FAST FACTS

Getting there

Lan Airlines has a fare to Mendoza from Sydney for about $2065 low-season return, including tax. Fly to Santiago (about 16hr, including transit time in Auckland) and then to Mendoza (1hr); see lan.com. Melbourne passengers pay about the same and fly Qantas to and from Auckland to connect. Australians pay a reciprocity fee of $US100 ($96) on arrival. Bus companies run services from Buenos Aires to Mendoza. We travelled on the "executive" night bus operated by Sendas, 850 pesos ($176) one way; see vytsendas.com.ar (Spanish only).

Touring there

Vines of Mendoza, popular with tourists, is the classiest place in the city to sample the wines of the region and identify which vineyards you'd like to visit; see vinesofmendoza.com.

Cavas Wine Lodge is a beautifully designed and superbly run wine lodge and restaurant ideally located amid the wineries and bodegas just outside the city. Staff can arrange vineyard tours by car, bike or on horseback. Double rooms, including breakfast, cost from $US436; see cavaswinelodge.com.

Brindillas restaurant has a growing reputation as the best in the Mendoza region and one of the finest in the country. The tasting menu costs less than $US30 a person; see brindillas.com.

Tupungato Divino in the Uco Valley, 70 kilometres from Mendoza, is a small lodge with two freestanding bedrooms (another two are under construction), and a separate restaurant with a great wine selection. A double room costs $US150 a night in high season (December to April), and $US120 from May to November. The on-site restaurant is open for lunch year-round and dinner service is only for guests; see tupungatodivino.com.ar.