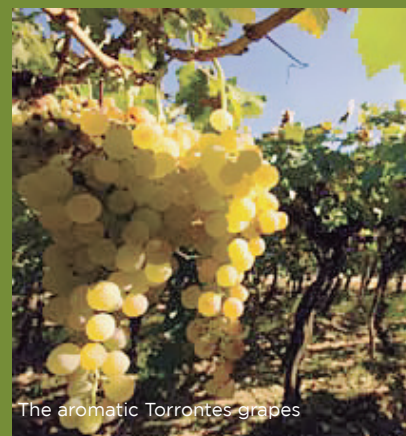


Mendoza

Mendoza, in Argentina's Cuyo region, is the capital of Mendoza Province and the heart of Argentina's wine country, famed for Malbecs and other bold reds. Its many *bodegas* (wineries) are popular for tastings and tours and you will find many opt to do this on bicycles! You may have been to many wine regions before, but believe me, Mendoza is just different

Text & Photographs: **Farzana Contractor**

Nothing better than a carafe of Malbec...



The aromatic Torrontes grapes

Think Argentina and wine and you think Malbec! Think Malbec and you think Mendoza! But there is more to this country, which has been producing wine for over 450 years, than just Malbec and Mendoza. For starters there are vineyards making great wines at great heights, high up in the Andes in the North and right down to the south of the country in Patagonia.

Argentina, unlike other wine-producing countries, does not possess a wine route where wineries are located densely in one or two regions and are found almost alongside each other. Here the wine routes refer to diverse isolated viticultural oases roughly joined from north to south by many kms of distance.

It starts from the Calchaqui Valleys in Salta, passing a few villages in Catamarca, to enter Rioja, which has three wine valleys, more than prudently separated by distance. The route then veers a bit to the east to take in Cordoba province, to return to its origins in Mendoza, with its four distinctive regions, but more about that later. From Mendoza after a long trajectory, the wine route reaches Neuquen, to enter Alto Vale (Upper Valley) of the Rio Negro. From here the route opens to take in new vineyards in La Pampa on the one hand, (still not open to tourism) and Chubut, on the other, the



The culinary master, Victor Hugo



world's southernmost vineyards.

That in a nutshell is all about the very interesting wine trail of Argentina. 10 provinces forming a web of fascinating landscapes, offering a variety of wines.

But without doubt, it's Mendoza which steals the wine show. Argentina's wine exports – mostly Malbec from Mendoza – have grown 300% in the last five years.

As of July 2005, Mendoza has been named the eight Great Wine Capital of the world. It cultivates 150,000 hectares of vineyards and has some 1200 wineries,



Under the walnut tree



Cheers to Cecchin

distributed over five regions, of which four offer wine tours; Eastern Zone, the High Zone, Uco Valley and Southern Zone.

The High Zone, the cradle of Malbec, is so called because it is the producer of fine wines and concentrates the greatest number of wineries. It includes Maipu, Lujan de Cuyo, Godoy Cruz, Guaymallen and Las Heras, all skirting the lovely city of Mendoza, famous for its trees, parks and plazas, but more especially for its ancient irrigation channels, a legacy of the city's forefathers, going way past into ancient times.

The irrigation channel system is worth a study in itself, suffice it is for now to know that it is the waters from melting of the Andes snow, running through these channels that is used in keeping the



Alberto Cecchin, the boss man



The tasting room and cellar at Bodega Cecchin



Like being on a movie set, the wild west



vineyards watered.

Uco Valley, with San Carlos, Tunuyan and Tupungato is the youngest of the wine regions and also the highest (above 3000 ft). It can be said, this region is in 'full bloom', since there are major expansions going on here, not just in the wineries, but also lodgings and hostels to cater to the increasing visitors. I went to a rather exclusive wine hotel in this region called, Casa Antucara, which you will read about a little later in this article.

Mendoza also celebrates a harvest festival, big time! Called *Fiesta de la Vendimia*, the event is considered a unique world event, which takes place in the first week of March. Thousands of wine lovers from the country and overseas arrive in Mendoza and there is plenty of food and wine, music and dancing. If I mistake not, this festival started in 1939.

When you visit a new wine destination, it becomes imperative that you have a good guide who knows his wines and the region well. I could not have asked for a better one than Mariano; full of life, laughter and little, little stories. I had a field day with him and my minder Eliana, from the Tourism department, driving around Mendoza for three days.

I have to start with Bodega Cecchin, though it was not the first of the trip. But it did seem to endear itself to me, and so. Bodega Cecchin is unusual, for sure. The fact that it is an organic one reflects in every aspect. The whole approach is so rustic, so charming, so homely. With old wine presses for garden artifacts, the vines growing naturally and looking fairly wild, the different sheds for different activities, scattered around, the kitchen a fair distance from the *al fresco* restaurant with the old wooden tables and chairs, casually placed under a large ancient walnut tree, just at the edge of the vineyard, all summed up to a delightful experience. At the wine tasting, which was just a one on one with me and the winemaker, I had a cat come up and rub itself against me, purring away. I don't recall ever bumping into an animal, a pet or a stray, anywhere before, where they make wine. Okay by me.

The chef, Victor Hugo was sporting enough to pose even while he was hot and sweaty and really busy in the kitchen. In fact he let me wander around and in the bargain I discovered a huge refrigerator, in working condition, the kind which has what looks like a door to a room and is something they used in mid 1900s, to store large chunks of meat, even a full goat. There was also primus stoves around, the kind I have not seen in ages.

The meal Hugo cooked for us, Mariano, Eliana and myself, was just outstanding. The beef was cooked perfectly, the salad, homegrown, therefore organic, and the caramel custard a perfect finale.

The total experience, sitting there out in the open under the Mendoza blue skies, birds in the air (guess they come to catch the worms and other microscopic organism in the 'live' mud), a large happy family at the next table with talkative kids, all added to the mood of a happy place. The entire Cecchin family was out and about, serving with love and many smiles, filling and refilling our carafe of red wine, endlessly. It could be a little difficult to find this winery because it seemed to be off the main road and on a dirt track, but it would be well worth searching for it!

Talk about searching for a winery, right inside a vineyard and you have Clos

de Siete. First it was the security check at the main gate, slow and thoroughly impressive. Had to be, among others, one of the owners here is Michel Rolland. After receiving directions and a diagram to the exact winery we were to visit, we got lost. Yes, inside the vineyard. But then we are talking a 1000 hectares. Is that 2,500 acres or something like that?

It's an interesting concept, this vineyard. Under seven owners there are five wineries, in here. One owned by Rolland, but he is consultant to each of the others.

It's located beautifully, with the snowcapped Andes as the background.

I noticed the vines were tightly closed with nets from the sides, leaving just enough space to grow from the top. This was to prevent the vines from hailstone damage, which is aplenty in this region. DiamAndes, that's the one we were expected at. A rich winery, this. In terms of cellar, tasting room, lab, visitor centre, the slick audio visual set-up and the architecture of the entire complex itself was so impressive. The architect, in fact was so taken up by the location, he started building the winery in his mind. He used the lay of the land to build different levels, using natural light and stone from around, a soft pink almost matching the peachy pink of the Rosé, *L'Argentin de Malartic 2014*, I was to sample later.



The public relations girl at DiamAndes



Mariano, the wine guide at Mendoza, as robust as a good Malbec





The pretty Casa Antucara



Roses, roses, everywhere



A tree-lined welcome to Casa Antucara



View from the top



Sculptures galore...



DiamAndes opened in 2010 and there is an investment of US \$25 million riding here. The sophistication shows.

The stainless steel vats are unique in South America, since they are insulated, all top opening and loading, requiring no pumps, since gravity is used, with grapes settling in, level by level. Gravity is also used to fill the barrels which are stored at a lower level and the bottles are kept at the lowest level. So the wine seems to just flow on...

For a winery that large there is only 27 full time staff, yet the place is run as efficiently as possible. Of course at harvest time they hire more than a 100 hands, since most of the work here is done manually.

Some places are special, you know so, instantly. The moment I stepped out of the car, I got the feeling Casa Antucara was an extraordinary place.

Charming, yes, but something more. Being there was meditative, its surroundings exuded a sense of peace and tranquility. I learnt the owner, Anne Caroline Biankeri, spent years collecting



More artifacts



Out, on the porch of the casa, watching the Andes



exquisite art and artifacts, travelling the length and breadth of the world in pursuit of unique pieces to display in her eight-bedroomed *casa*, juxtaposed with the most perfumed and beautiful roses in unique Morano vases, strategically kept on tables and niches. The roses come from the gardens of the *casa* which itself is set right in the middle of the vineyard, with an inviting swimming pool, with more rose bushes of various colours surrounding it and the Andes in the distance, looking pretty as a post card.

If the interiors of Casa Antucara are beautiful, the art in the outdoors is stunning. Pictures don't do the place justice, a visit will put everything in perspective. I highly recommend a few days at this place, far away from the maddening world.

Lunch here was outstanding. Elegance personified, without the unnecessary fuss. Superior crockery, quality crystal, perfect place settings and a traditional meal at that! With light

white wine, the best from their winery. It's an experience I am not likely to forget in a hurry.

The first thing I noticed about Trapiche was the llama tied to a tree with a long rope, grazing on the lawns. I forgot about the winery and immediately went to have a closer look-see. It was the first time I was ever looking a llama in the eye. It is a shy animal, moves away if you approach it, but I managed to shoot a few pictures without invading its privacy too much. After I had my fill, I went along for a tour of the winery.

With more than 130 years of experience, Trapiche it would seem, has earned its place as a pioneering brand in the introduction of French wines, the production of varietal wines, the import of French oak barrels and the use of stainless steel vats. Set amidst vineyards and located in Maipú, this Florentine style building from 1912 is an icon of





Humitas – a local delicacy made from young corn which they call *choklo*



Mendoza's wine architecture. They follow biodynamic practices here, which stand out as the purest forms of ecological agricultures, which are aimed at preserving the natural properties of crops by eliminating the use of chemicals, herbicides and fungicides and calculating the moon cycles for the harvest. Practices that look to sustain the ecosystem balance



and biological diversity and to recover bacterial activity in the soil. The winery is surrounded by olive trees and vineyards managed under those practices, which include the use of organic plant and animal (llama) fertilizers from a farm located at the back of the winery and owned by Trapiche. The tasting room has a glass floor from where you look down at the cellar and it has also has a narrow terrace attached which overlooks the rail track, with a wagon standing on one end, kept there as a reminder of its historical past. Trapiche had the railway in its backyard from where it transported its wines to the rest of the



Bodega Trapiche, with its old railroad



The way to do it in Mendoza, cyclists from Brazil



Glad to meet you Mr Llama

country. In the area of Lujan de Cuyo, is the Cavas de Weinert winery in a beautiful setting of nature offering a well-organised tour of the winery. They have an impressive stock of bottles of over 30 years. It has an old and very interesting wine cellar where the wine passes through traditional oak barrels, some really huge. 80% of Cavas de Weinert production is exported, with its main buyer being Norway. I did not get down to tasting their wines since it was a rush-rush visit, but those who did told me this wine has lots of flavour and body, very rich, but very different from what's going around. The Lagarde winery, around for over a 100 years, is a pretty place, very Spanish in look. It is the original winery built in 1897 when Jose Angel Pereira founded it. The winery remained with his family until it was handed to the Pescarmona family in 1970. Lagarde is one of the oldest and most traditional wineries in Mendoza and one of the founder members of the first DOC of Argentina. Today, third generation family member, Sofia Pescarmona runs the winery. The winery, its old vineyards and courtyards are a true reflection of the traditional Mendocino lifestyle. Lagarde only use their own fruit to offer four ranges of wine from entry level through to their top-tier wines. Especially interesting is the sparkling wine process, with new modern



machines, a venture in which they have made considerable investments.

I tasted two; *Lagarde Champenoise Extra Brut* and *Lagarde Dolce*. The former, 50% Chardonnay, 50% Pinot Noir, soft yellow colour with golden reflections, with an aroma of honey and citrus fruits... nice. The *Dolce*, 100% Moscato Bianco, and like its name was sweet, fresh and fruity, with overtones of apricots and ideal for drinking with desserts.

At lunch, seated beside the vines, under a huge mulberry tree, which had ripe fruit literally 'pouring' on me, and for sure, I will not be able to wear that white shirt again!



But the sparkling wines, were superb, put me in a great mood. And so was the leisurely, wine-pairing gourmet lunch. The *Grilled Beetroot Cake* with fresh cheese with *Lagarde Malbec 2013* was super. As also the *Henry Tardio 2011* with the warm *Dulce de Leche*, my dessert, was fabulous. The lunch was definitely the highlight of the visit to Bodega Lagarde.

The good thing about Mendoza is the vineyards are not too far away from the main city. You could reach one in about 15 minutes. And the city itself, with its wide, leafy streets, lines with art deco and modern buildings, is buzzing with fantastic

restaurants in its various squares and plazas. And just in case you like to know these things, *Seven Years in Tibet* directed by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud, was shot in and around Mendoza. Several dozens of sets were built, ranging from a 600-long recreation of the Tibetan capital city of Lhasa (built in the foothills of the Andes), to a 9,000-sq-ft recreation of the Hall of Good Deeds in the Potala, the ancient palace of the Dalai Lama (built in an abandoned garlic warehouse outside the city).

Interesting, how you learn so much when you travel!

