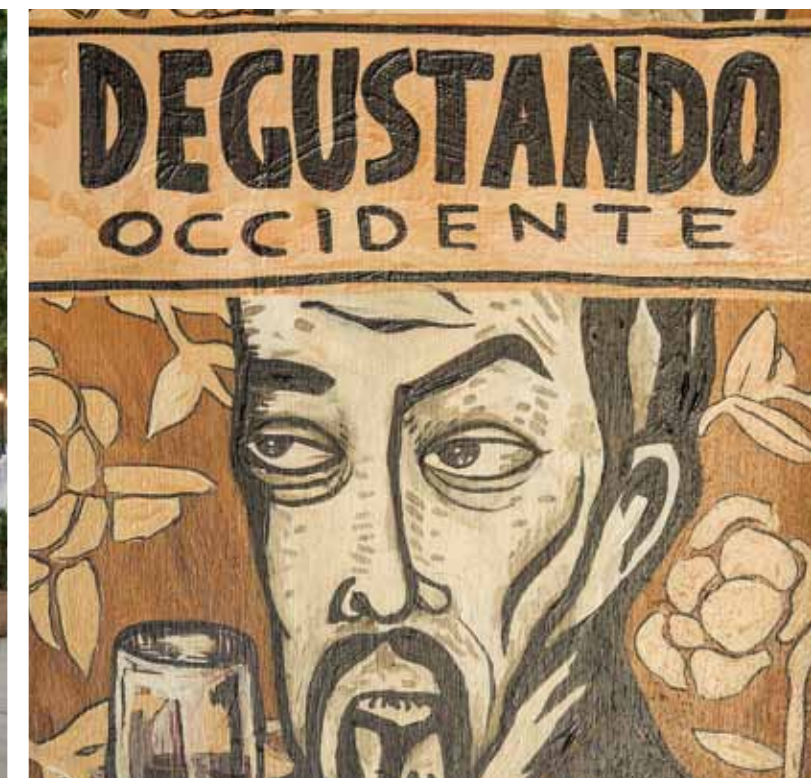


A scenic view of a vineyard at sunset. In the foreground, a modern observation deck with a curved metal frame and glass panels is elevated above the vineyard. Two people are standing on the deck, looking out over the landscape. The vineyard is lush and green, stretching towards the horizon. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a sky with soft, golden light and scattered clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and picturesque.

LAND OF PLENTY

With the annual harvest festival rolling into town this month, Joe Mortimer heads to Argentina's high-altitude grape-growing region, Mendoza, which has flourished into one of Latin America's most compelling gourmet escapes



Leafy terraces set the scene for people watching with a glass of Malbec at the Park Hyatt Mendoza (top left); the region's wine is a main theme in the design at the hotel's Uvas Lounge & Bar (top right), which has a cellar of more than 100 of Argentina's premium Mendoza wines (above). Previous page: The breathtaking sight of the Andes in the distance above the wineries. Previous spread: Taking in vineyard views from the Loft Suite at Entre Cielos

Peddalling through the vineyards of Mendoza with the Andes mountains as your backdrop, the sun shining through the crisp blue sky and lush green vines stretching as far as the eye can see, it's hard to imagine anywhere else in the world you'd rather be. The climate in this unique corner of Argentina is indescribably wonderful; 300 days of sunshine a year combined with the high altitude makes the air clean and sharp, the view sublime, and the surroundings inexorably bucolic.

If the setting is aesthetically pleasing for people, it's even more so for grapes, which were first brought to these lands by missionaries in the 16th century. Among the many varieties that made it across the Atlantic, the Malbec grape fared particularly well in the rich soil and high-altitude climate of Mendoza, which is protected from strong Pacific winds by the peaks of the Andes.

Malbec, juicy and robust as it is, lends itself particularly well to Argentina's culinary offerings. Although famous for its steak, the Argentine kitchen makes good use of the richness of the Atlantic Ocean, and imports Pacific fare from

its neighbour Chile. Inland, the wide expanse of central Argentina supplies endless quantities of free-range grass-fed meat and the rich soil gives birth to myriad vegetable varieties, from the foothills of the Andes in the west to the jungles of Misiones Province in the east.

It's this combination of organic cuisine, superb wines and breathtaking landscapes that make first-time visitors to Mendoza hungry for more.

VENDIMIA: HARVEST FESTIVAL

On the first Saturday of March, the streets of Mendoza come alive with the clatter of horses' hooves, the tinny hum of sound systems and the cheers of thousands of people who come from all over South America to be a part of the annual harvest festival, Vendimia.

From late morning, a parade of floats and wagons representing the 18 departments of Mendoza surges through the city, accompanied by marching bands, men and women in traditional costumes riding on horseback, and of course the highlight of the show, *las reinas* – the "queens" of each province,

competing for the title of Harvest Festival Queen, who throw bunches of grapes and other treats from the wagons.

The ideal place to watch the parade is from a terrace at Park Hyatt Mendoza, which reigns as the most sought-after hotel in the city. Looking out over Plaza Independencia, one of five leafy squares that make up the heart of the historic centre of Mendoza, there's no better way to watch the proceedings than from the hotel's café Las Terrazas de la Plaza with a glass of Malbec and something fresh from the kitchen of executive chef Pedro Salas. "People come to Mendoza for the wine first, but the food is right there to follow," says Salas, who cut his teeth in the kitchens of Buenos Aires, Washington, DC and Hong Kong. "The art of pairing wine and food has become its own tourism specialty here in Mendoza, as chefs and sommeliers love sharing their passion with others and learning new combinations of flavours. In Argentina there is a strong influence of Spanish and Italian culture that can be seen and tasted in many of the restaurants."

As well as the terrace, the hotel is home to Bistro M, which serves traditional Italian dishes using local Argentine ingredients, and Grill Q, the signature

Argentine *parrilla*, or steakhouse, where giant slabs of *bife de chorizo* (sirloin steak) are served with the finest wines from around the region.

The festival action moves to the Greek amphitheatre in General San Martín Park around nightfall, where an epic spectacle featuring hundreds of dancers, musicians and actors takes place, culminating with the crowning of the Harvest Festival Queen and a huge fireworks display.

During the rest of the year, the excitement is still palpable, as visitors from all over the world come to the region to sample its famous wine and food: "Even though grape growing is the main focus in Mendoza, fresh produce can be found just about anywhere," says Salas. "There are farmers' markets on the weekends, fruit and vegetable shops on almost every corner, and the Mercado Central, an open-air market where you'll find anything and everything."

If you want to know where to eat in a city, ask the chefs who live there. People who spend all day at the stove don't mess around with gimmicky design or average cooking; when they dine out, they dine out well. Although there were



A two-bedroom Deluxe Suite at Vines Resort & Spa enjoys serene views over the Uco Valley (top); luxurious facilities at the boutique winery, resort and spa, Entre Cielos, include an indoor hammam (above left); guests can experience Francis Mallmann's open-flame asado cooking techniques inspired by Argentine gauchos and European migrations at Siete Fuegos ("seven fires"), located at the resort (above right)

a few variations on the suggestions from locals, one name that came up again and again was Francis Mallmann.

The Argentine chef runs two restaurants in Mendoza, the legendary 1884 (*Belgrano 1188, Godoy Cruz; +54 261 424 3336; www.1884restaurante.com.ar*), which he created with winemaker Nicholas Catena Zapata two decades ago in homage to the wines of Mendoza and Andean cuisine; and Siete Fuegos (*Vines Resort & Spa, Ruta Provincial 94; +54 261 461 3910; www.sietefuegoasado.com*), his innovative regional restaurant at Vines Resort & Spa.

At the former, in an old winery in the nearby suburb of Godoy Cruz, typical Argentine fare is complemented with more unusual regional dishes from the foothills of the Andes, like *chivito*, or slow-cooked baby goat, accompanied by a wine list of more than 600 Argentine labels.

Around an hour outside Mendoza, Siete Fuegos puts a more dramatic spin on regional cuisine, with seven *asado* (barbecue) cooking stations serving up flame-grilled steaks, slow-braised lamb, juicy blackened chicken and grilled

octopus – all set to the magnificent backdrop of the high Andes of the Uco Valley, one of the youngest wine-growing regions in Mendoza province.

A PLACE TO STAY

The boutique Vines Resort & Spa is part of The Vines of Mendoza, a company conceived by founders Michael Evens and Pablo Gimenez Riili to enable prospective vineyard owners to purchase small (three- to 10-acre) plots of land in Mendoza and make their own wines. Designed to make winemaking accessible to enthusiasts and amateurs, the company's 150 members work alongside legendary winemaker Santiago Achával (founder of one of Mendoza's finest labels) to create their own small-batch vintages and learn the art and craft of winemaking.

They opened the resort as a place for members – who visit frequently to discuss everything from this year's blend to new label designs – and other well-heeled visitors to stay among the vines. And the result is spectacular: 22

one- and two-bedroom villas set in the heart of the Uco Valley, with activities including horseback riding, fly-fishing, heli-skiing, hiking and winemaking all on the doorstep. "Mendoza was, and to some extent still is, a frontier for winemaking; it's like Napa 40 years ago," says Michael Evans, who first visited in 2004 for a vacation and never looked back. "As I got off the plane in Mendoza I realised it was a truly special place with amazing people. After spending a few days in the vineyards, the mountains and getting to know the wineries and winemakers, I think the decision to stay was made for me."

He's not the only foreigner to recognise the beauty and potential of this picturesque region. Cecile Adam and two Swiss friends also fell in love with Mendoza; it was a holiday romance that led to the purchase of a plot of land, planting vines and establishing Entre Cielos, a boutique resort, spa and winery that's now part of Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

Around 40 minutes from central Mendoza, in the well-established wine-growing region of Luján de Cuyo, Entre Cielos (which translates to "between

the skies") is made up of 16 modern suites on a picturesque plot of land at the foot of the mountains, surrounded by vines. On site, there's a choice of two restaurants – fine dining at Katharina Bistro or traditional *parrilla* at The Beef Club – an authentic Turkish hammam and spa, and activities ranging from sunrise yoga and tai chi to snowshoeing, kayaking, golf, birdwatching and mountain biking, to name a few.

Perhaps the most immersive Mendoza travel experiences of them all is watching the sun go down over the vines from the terrace of the Loft Suite, a one-of-a-kind luxury cabin perched on stilts in the middle of the vineyard, with a glass of one of Entre Cielos's own exclusive wines.

FRUITS OF THE VINE

In Mendoza, expansive vineyards are spread out over hundreds of kilometres across the province, which is divided into smaller regions like Maipú, Luján de Cuyo and the Uco Valley, all of which are within an hour's drive of the city. The



Opposite page clockwise from top left: the country's nomadic horse riders, known as gaucho, are a symbol of this region of Argentina; the sultry dance of tango is another classically Argentinean sight – even in wine cellars; the table is set for an evening meal at Siete Fuegos; vegetables and meats are cooked over the traditional open-flame asado at Siete Fuegos; harvest time at Vines Resort & Spa. Above: a painted sky above Vines Resort & Spa

highlight of any trip to Mendoza will be visiting some of the wineries, most of which offer tours of the vineyards and winemaking facilities, as well as tastings and, sometimes, elaborate lunches with wine pairings.

Of all the winemakers of the region, Achaval Ferrer (*Cobos 2601, Perdriel, Luján de Cuyo*; +54 261 481 9205; www.achaval-ferrer.com) stands out as one of the best, with four vineyards at different elevations that are home to vines planted more than 100 years ago. Visit the oldest, Finca Bella Vista, for a peek behind the scenes and a chance to sample the best of the best. Also in Luján de Cuyo, Catena Zapata (*J. Cobos S/N, Agrelo, Luján de Cuyo*; +54 261 413 1100; www.catenawines.com) is one of the most respected names in Mendoza, producing some of the best wines in the country at its zigurat-shaped winery.

At Casarena (*Brandsen 505, Luján de Cuyo*; +54 9 261 696 7848; www.casarena.com), an abandoned winery taken over and renovated in 2008, you can follow your tasting with a five-course lunch with pairings, or stay on to watch a tango show among the vines. At nearby Clos de Chacras (*Monte Libano 1025, Chacras de Coria, Luján de Cuyo*; +54 261 496 1285; www.closdechacras.com.ar) visitors can explore the vast cellars beneath the red-adobe winery, learn about the history of one of Mendoza's oldest winemaking families, and feast on a seasonal three-course lunch with pairings.

Nearer to Mendoza city, in the suburb of Maipú, Bodega La Rural (*Montecaseros 2625, Coquimbito*; +54 261 497 2013; www.bodegalarural.com.ar) is noteworthy for its excellent museum in the former family home of winemaker Felipe Rutini. Inside is a treasure trove of antique winemaking equipment, from presses and barrels to old bottles and measuring instruments.

Maipú is the only wine region that can realistically be explored by bicycle, since the others are too spread out to cover much ground during a day's pedalling, but plenty of tour operators offer excellent private and group trips to Luján de Cuyo and the Uco Valley, and most hotels can organise guided tours. Trout and Wine (+54 261 425 5613; www.troutandwine.com) and Argentina4u (+54 11 322 10224; www.argentina4u.com) both offer particularly good itineraries with private transportation and a driver/guide, who will ensure you reach your next tasting on time, as well as endless non-wine activities taking you to the heart of the spectacular landscape.

Whatever your motivation for visiting Mendoza, it's almost certain you won't have enough time to sate your appetite for all this remarkable region has to offer.

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