

Good Medicine - UCSF Doctor finds a Second Calling in Mendoza



Chronicle/J. Kat Wade

If you've ever watched "ER," you know the kind of life lived by Laura Catena, an emergency-room physician at UCSF Medical Center and the mother of two small sons. Blood, guts and gurneys meet diapers and preschool dropoffs.

That would be enough action for most people, but Catena, 36, also happens to be a winemaker and vice president of the most prestigious winery in Argentina, Bodega Catena Zapata. It's a life she didn't know she wanted until seven years ago, when she had an epiphany over a particular bottle of wine.

"I was a physician, after all," she says. "I already had my career path, caring for people. But when my dad visited (in San Francisco), we'd taste wine and talk. I got hooked. The first wine I remember was a Groth Chardonnay (from Napa Valley). It was amazing."

Now Catena travels the world representing her father Nicolas Catena's Catena Zapata winery — called by many "the Opus One" of Argentina for its striking architecture, opulent interior and high-tech equipment — and her own Argentine brand, Luca. She is a tireless and passionate promoter of the wines of the Mendoza region, which grows 70 percent of Argentina's grapes, and she is credited

with helping to bring the wines to the attention of the U.S. market.

Catena's ties to the United States began when her father became a visiting professor in agricultural economics at UC Berkeley in the early '80s and moved the family with him.

In 1963 he inherited the Catena winery, which was founded in 1902. While in Berkeley, he made frequent visits to Napa Valley wineries and befriended Robert Mondavi. When Nicolas returned to Mendoza in 1983, he had a new benchmark for his own wines.

"The United States, France and Italy were famous for the quality of wine they were producing and that's what I wanted, too," says Catena, 65, during dinner at his winery. "After some years of introducing the knowledge, we began to work on the tricky concept of terroir."

Today, Catena Zapata is arguably Argentina's most accomplished producer at all price levels, a well-oiled machine whose success has boosted all



Chronicle/J. Craig Lee

M e n d o z a producers. And the grape central to it all is Malbec.

When grown elsewhere, Malbec can be inky, tannic and austere, best used in blends with C a b e r n e t Sauvignon (though France's Cahors region excels at the grape). Yet in Mendoza, Malbec — brought to the

area by the French — thrives at the high elevations and produces fruit with exuberant blackberry, black cherry and plum flavors, peppery spice and, most agreeably, velvety, round tannins. It's an easy wine to drink yet complex and interesting.

Argentina is the fifth-largest wine-producing country in the world, but until recent years most of its bottles — mass-produced, cheap and rustic stuff — stayed home to meet the

demands of thirsty Argentines. In Mendoza, McDonald's serves wine with its adult meals.

But when the country known for its Andes mountains, tango, soccer, gauchos, beef and Evita collapsed in bankruptcy in 2001 and the value of the peso plummeted, domestic wine sales fell and producers had to find new outlets for their products. Export markets demanded higher quality, so vintners had to make dramatic improvements in viticulture and winemaking to stay in business. Catena was already ahead of the curve.

Now dozens of Mendoza wineries are improving their Malbecs and export programs, and some of the world's most respected vintners have joined in.

Michel Rolland, a globetrotting winemaking consultant from France, is in Mendoza with his high-end Clos de los Siete and Monteviejo Val de Flores brands. Chateau Cheval Blanc, a Bordeaux first-growth producer, is a partner in Cheval des Andes. Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy owns Chandon Estates in Mendoza and Terrazas de los Andes. Donald Hess, the Swiss founder of the Hess Collection in Napa Valley, markets the Norton brand.

Plus, two top Sonoma County winemakers, Paul Hobbs of Paul Hobbs Wines (Vinos Cobos) and Patrick Campbell of Laurel Glen Vineyard (Vale la Pena, Terra Rossa) make wine in Mendoza.



Nicolas Catena casts the broadest net of all. In addition to Catena Zapata, he produces Caro, a Cabernet Sauvignon-Malbec blend, with Domaines Barons de Rothschild, and he owns pieces of other top-notch producers, among them La Rural (the Trumpeter and Felipe Rutini brands) and Bodegas Escorihuela (Don Miguel Gascon).

Argentina is still an economic muddle, but the silver lining is that a broad range of well-made wines is now available in the United States, particularly Malbec and Malbec blends. Many of them are truly exciting, and the price range — \$7 to \$90 a bottle — offers something for everyone. The news is good on both ends of the Americas: U.S. consumers get great new wines, and the sales create positive cash flow and jobs in Argentina.

Mendoza's viticultural blessings include high altitude, plenty of sunshine, big drops in day-to-night temperatures and moisture control.

Most plantings are at 3,000 to 5,000 feet in the Andean foothills. As altitude increases, the average temperature decreases. As Catena says, growers can plant up or down in elevation to find just the right spot for each variety. The closer to the sun the vines get, the greater the radiation and the more complete the photosynthesis. This encourages the development of ripe, mature flavors in the grapes.

In fact, "How high can you go?" is the theme in Argentina, where many winemakers proudly display the elevation of vineyards on their front labels. And new heights are continually being reached — grapes for Hess' Colome brand, made in the Salta region outside of Mendoza, come from a vineyard 9,000 feet above sea level. By contrast, some California vintners consider a planting at 600 feet to be a "mountain" vineyard.

Mendoza gets an average of 350 days with sunshine and only 8 to 10 inches of rain a year, requiring

irrigation via an extensive system of canals that run through the vineyards, channeling snowmelt from the mountains.

During winter in Argentina (the Northern Hemisphere summer), the Andes are covered in snow and provide some of the world's best skiing. Leading up to harvest, Mendoza is a desert; with little rain, growers can give the vines just the right amount of moisture. Still, growers fear hailstorms that are fierce enough to destroy vines; protective hail netting is expensive, upward of \$4,000 an acre.

Catena Zapata's winemaking facility, designed to resemble an ancient Mayan pyramid, opened in 2001 in the Agrelo district of Mendoza, with a sweeping view of Mt. Aconcagua, the highest peak in the Americas at 23,000 feet. Catena vineyards are also located in the Maipu, Lujan de Cuyo, Tupungato and San Carlos regions.

Laura and her brother, Ernesto, 38, acquire grapes from 22 sites for their respective Mendoza brands (his is Tikal), including a bit of fruit from their

father's vineyards.

"Luca is a project I started (the first vintage was 1999) to get to know the older vineyards," she says. "A lot of the growers (of the old-vine grapes) are paid by the ton so they irrigate the hell out of the vineyards to achieve huge crops. I'm getting to know these producers and turn them around in their viticulture.

"We have 150 years of experience with Malbec in Mendoza and even if the wines aren't all in the modern style, there is a tradition here and generational experience."

Her Luca wines, totaling approximately 2,000 cases a year, include Mendoza Chardonnay, Syrah, Malbec, the Malbec-Cabernet Sauvignon blend Beso de Dante ("Dante's Kiss") and Pinot Noir.

"The day my dad approves of a Pinot Noir, we'll all be dead," she says. "The Pinot we make for Alamos is nice, but he expects it to be DRC (Domaine de la Romanee-Conti from Burgundy)."



Source: ESRI

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In order to make room for sales, marketing and winemaking, Catena works eight shifts a month at UCSF Medical Center. She lives with her husband, Daniel McDermott (also an emergency room doctor) and their sons Luca, 6, and Dante, 2.

“Being a doctor teaches you to be completely understanding about everyone. I feel strongly about my patients; I take ownership of them,” Catena says. “I feel the same about the wine.

Although it’s a business, if the wines don’t do well, there are 600 people in Argentina without jobs. After the (economic) crisis, I knew I owed it to my country to make the winery successful.”

Catena grew up in Buenos Aires, 500 miles east of Mendoza, and during harvest she spent time with her grandfather at the winery. While Argentina was ruled by a military dictatorship, Nicolas and Elena Catena moved their family to Berkeley when Laura was 14.

“If you were foreign, you were more interesting in Berkeley,” Catena says with a laugh. “I went from a very rigid learning system to one that was very open. Socially I was the geek in the crowd — the only way I became cool was when I met my husband.”

Catena lived in Berkeley for two years and in 1984, when she was 17, she headed for Harvard University to major in biology, graduating magna cum laude. “Harvard was an amazing place, too. I experienced the intensity of the East Coast but wanted to be in the West again.”

Catena came to Stanford for her medical school degree in 1992 and completed her residency at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in 1995. After one year at Santa Monica Hospital, she moved to UCSF Medical Center.

She manages the Catena Zapata and Luca businesses from San Francisco and makes

frequent visits to Mendoza, spending February and March there for the harvest and taking her sons with her.

“They stay with my mom and I go to work,” says Catena, who composes the Catena blends with her father and Catena Zapata winemaker Jose Galante — who became familiar with California winemaking after working at Simi Winery in



Courtesy of Bodega Catena Zapata

Healdsburg in 1989.

Although Malbec is undisputed king in Mendoza, several other varieties stand out.

Familia Zuccardi’s 2001 Q Tempranillo (\$20) is ripe and concentrated, with a spicy kick. Bodegas Salentein’s Reserve Pinot Noir (\$35) is one of the few Argentine Pinots that challenges in quality and varietal correctness any made in California.

Syrah is a fairly recent addition to Mendoza winemaking menus and many, like the 2001 Luca Altos de Mendoza (\$30), Salentein’s 2002 Finca El Portillo Mendoza Shiraz (\$10) and the 2002 Don



Miguel Gascon Syrah (\$11) reveal great promise for the grape in Argentina. The widely planted Bonarda, an Italian variety, makes a spicy, juicy-berry wine by Alamos (2002 vintage, \$10).

There's plenty of Argentine Chardonnay, but the most interesting white is Torrontes, with fleshy apple, pear and white peach flavors. Good examples come from Michel Torino, Santa Julia and La Yunta.

"We want to prove that Mendoza can make top-quality wine," Laura Catena says. "It's about never resting, doing experimentation, being daring but not too daring. We want to produce distinctive wines that people want to drink."

Doctor's orders.

A taste of Mendoza

Laura Catena is the vice president of Bodega Catena Zapata, her family's ultrapremium winery in the Mendoza region of Argentina, and a UCSF Medical Center emergency room physician. She also has her own Mendoza wine brand, Luca, named for her first son. Here are tasting notes for the wines of Luca and Catena Zapata, and for some of the best Argentine Malbecs in the market.

Luca by Laura Catena

2001 Luca Altos de Mendoza Chardonnay (\$30)

— Made in a rich, full-bodied California style, with ripe pear, apple and tropical fruit leading to citrus, cinnamon, vanilla and a hint of mineral on the finish. The oak is there, but not prominent.

2000 Luca Altos de Mendoza Malbec (\$35) — Inky black in color and packed with black plum and blackberry aromas and flavors, with distinctive hints of licorice, coffee and earth. It's a big, bold wine that finishes with a lip-smacking fresh raspberry note and fresh acidity.

2001 Luca Altos de Mendoza Syrah

(\$30) — A youthful, robust red for hearty food. It's toasty, earthy and meaty on the nose and firmly tannic, yet well-fruited (blackberry, wild raspberry), on the palate, with a shake of black pepper for complexity. Enjoyable now, it will soften a bit with time in the cellar.

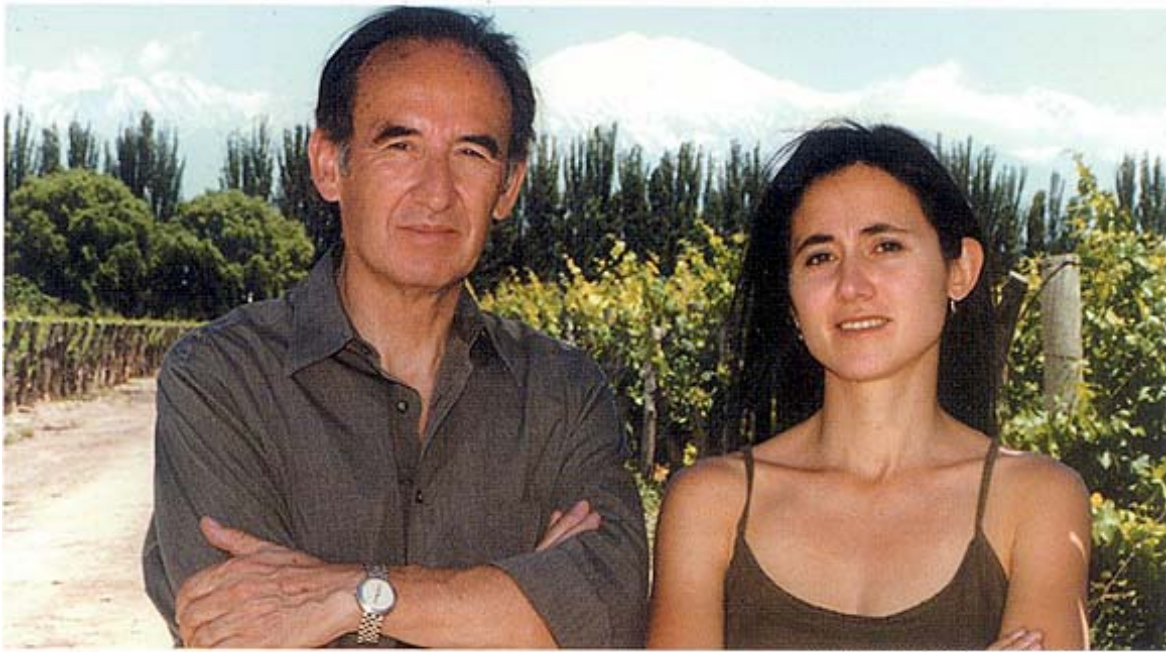
2000 Luca Beso de Dante Altos de Mendoza (\$50) — "Dante's Kiss," named for Catena's second son, is a Malbec-Cabernet Sauvignon blend with sweet, juicy blackberry, blueberry and plum flavors on a lush frame. It's rich and balanced, with just the right amount of oak.

Catena Zapata picks

2002 Alamos Mendoza Malbec (\$11) — An outstanding value, this full-bodied wine is soft and supple, with raspberry, blackberry and dried cranberry fruit flavors and hints of orange zest, vanilla and leather. Buy it by the case.

2002 Catena Mendoza Chardonnay (\$18) — Beautifully textured in its tropical fruit flavors, slightly creamy/sweet vanilla character and citrusy, fresh-acidity finish. Nice oak integration.

2002 Catena Mendoza Malbec (\$20) — Has a lively nose of mulberry and blackberry fruit, followed by a juicy palate of wild blackberry/brambly fruit. Black pepper and chocolate notes add interest to this well-filled, harmonious wine.



Courtesy of Bodega Catena Zapata

2002 Catena Mendoza Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20) — This is 100 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, aromatic in its black fruit, loam and lavender notes. The palate shows ripe, luscious black cherry, cassis and blackberry plus spice on a moderately tannic frame. Delicious and ready to drink now.

2001 Catena Alta Mendoza Malbec (\$60) — Toasty vanilla nose leads to deep yet bright flavors of dark berry and raspberry. Complete and complex, with crisp acidity that reflects cool-climate, high-altitude viticulture. Begs for a slab of beef.

Other masterful Malbecs

2001 Achaval-Ferrer Finca Altimira Mendoza Malbec (\$75) — A whopper of a wine at a whopper of a price. Still, it's to be reckoned with, made in a powerfully ripe, fruity (blackberry, blueberry) California style with smooth vanilla and toast and with a milk-chocolatey finish.

2002 Aleph Mendoza Malbec (\$19) — A big, dense wine with black fruit, tobacco and a whiff of forest floor on the nose. The blackberry, cranberry, currant and spice flavors are followed by dusty cocoa on the finish.

2002 Bianchi Mendoza Malbec (\$18) — Bursting

with ripe blackberry, black cherry and raspberry flavors and hints of anise and coffee, all on a plush frame. A drink-now style.

2001 Cabrini Mendoza Malbec (\$14) — Spicy and concentrated, with black plum and blackberry flavors enhanced by notes of peppery spice, toast and creamy vanilla.

2003 Don Miguel Gascon Mendoza Malbec (\$15) — Straightforward ripe black cherry and berry fruit with a Syrahlike meatiness, plus mocha and a zingy berry finish. Young and frisky.

2002 El Felino Mendoza Malbec (\$13) — Ripe, sweet blackberry fruit with coffee, anise and black pepper highlights. It has fruity earthiness and a rich, chocolatey finish. Nice for the price. From Sonoma County's Paul Hobbs.

2001 Felipe Rutini La Consulta Mendoza Malbec (\$20) — Tart cranberry, cherry, raspberry, red currant, plum, vanilla and brown spice notes make this an atypical yet elegant Malbec. It's juicy, yet structured, with bright acidity.

2001 Navarro Correas Limited Release Mendoza Malbec (\$14) — Very ripe, almost jammy, black fruit, plum and cassis on the nose and palate, with chocolate-covered cherry and earth notes. Finishes

with black pepper and brisk acidity.

2002 Salentein Mendoza Malbec (\$16) — A sophisticated wine with black cherry and plum fruit that's ripe yet not jammy; vanilla and baking spice on the midpalate lead to a long, juicy finish and crisp acidity.

2001 Terrazas de los Andes Reserva Mendoza Malbec (\$18) — Juicy and ripe, with roasted meat and earthy notes underneath the raspberry and blackberry fruit. The Rhone Valley meets Bordeaux meets California — in a good combination of Old and New World winemaking.

2002 Tikal Amorio Altos de Mendoza Malbec (\$31) — This big wine oozes with ripe blackberry, mulberry and damson plum character. Its impressive complexity comes from chocolate, toast and black spice notes. Satiny finish.

2002 Val de Flores (\$40) — A polished wine that's lavish in its ripe fruit and peppery character, with hints of leather and blueberry. Supple tannins mesh with bright acidity.

2001 Vale la Pena Mendoza Malbec (\$30) — Ultraripe black fruits are framed by solid tannins and toasty oak in this powerful, concentrated wine. Cedar, coffee and vanilla notes add complexity. From Patrick Campbell of Laurel Glen Vineyard.

2000 Vinorum Premium Mendoza Malbec (\$40) — A crisp, textured, well-made wine with rich boysenberry/blackberry fruit wrapped in vanilla and toast and accented by a tangy raspberry finish. Classic Mendoza Malbec.

Bargain Malbecs

2002 Finca El Portillo Mendoza Malbec (\$9) — Light, lively plum, bright berry and baking spice on both the nose and palate. Toast, pepper notes and a crisp finish make this an affordable, food-friendly choice. From Salentein.

2001 Michel Torino Don David Cafayate Malbec (\$10) — Wonderful aromas of blueberry, currant, raspberry and cranberry. Similar flavors, though on the tart side, with crisp acidity and definite tannins.

2002 Norton Mendoza Malbec (\$7) — Amazing value. The wine is round and supple, with blackberry fruit aromas and flavors and hints of cappuccino and anise. Easy-drinking, with a clean finish.

2001 Santa Julia Reserva Mendoza Malbec (\$10) — Juicy boysenberry, red currant, cranberry and tangerine fruit plus tar and oak notes lead the way. There's also black peppery and coffee notes, with moderate tannins and a long finish.

2002 Trapiche Oak Cask Mendoza Malbec (\$10) — True to type — beefy with lots of jammy red currant, raspberry and black cherry fruit. Hints of spice, earth, tobacco and herbs lend complexity. Ripe and round, with firm tannins.

2003 Trumpeter Mendoza Malbec (\$8) — Incredibly dark color leads to a toasty nose; the aromas and flavors turn to juicy blackberry, blueberry and plum. It's smooth-textured with a long, raspberry-tinged finish. From Rutini.

— L. M.