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## TRAVEL FEATURE

Lady of the Night  
 by Kevin Raub

**Beyond the cavernous, candlelit stairs that lead from Av. Libertad in Buenos Aires to upscale Recoleta district into Gran Bar Danzon – quite possibly the world’s sexiest wine bar – a beautiful seduction ensues. She emerges amid the exposed concrete walls and air ducts of this dark and sultry haunt of urban sophisticates and pounces on the uninitiated armed with a single weapon: the sweet element of surprise. Her name is Malbec.**



The distance between wineries in Argentina can be daunting – these grapes aren’t bunched on top of one another like they are in Napa. But there are several reputable outfitters, both stateside and in Argentina, who can arrange tours of the areas.

**Los Angeles**  
 Destinations & Adventures,  
 (800) 659-4599,  
[www.daitravel.com](http://www.daitravel.com)

**Mendoza**  
 Southernmost,  
[www.smjourneys.com](http://www.smjourneys.com)

**Salta**  
 Marina Turismo,  
[www.marina-semisa.com.ar](http://www.marina-semisa.com.ar)

The sweltering allure of the tango and the ridiculously passionate and attractive population are both well-documented world contributions of European-leaning Argentina. And now, thanks to \$1.2 billion in European investments since the mid-90s, Argentine wines – marketed with significantly less savvy (and pesos) than Chilean brands, though every as tasty – and their signature grape, Malbec, are finally making a significant impact on the palates of New World wine lovers.

Not only that, but the country’s famed grass-fed pampas steer, loved world over by carnivorous foodies, provides a pairing so intimately perfect you’ll often find yourself daydreaming of your next meal – which will inevitably appear before you on any visit to these seductive streets. But all, though, are the prices. Due to El Corralito, or “Little Fence,” the local term for 2001-02’s knee-buckling financial crisis that began with freezing of accounts and ended with an eventual 73 percent devaluation of the Argentine peso – the country remains an astounding bargain.

The country’s wine industry is centered in and around Mendoza (a quick hour-and-a-half flight west from Buenos Aires) and Salta (which is two hours north by plane). A few days exploring the capital is the perfect start for vacationing oenophiles to start their trip.

## **Buenos Aires**

As I take the first bite of my bife de lomo, a popular beef cut served at the traditional steak house El Trapiche, located in the trendy Palermo Hollywood district, I think to myself that I must have died and gone to heaven. Doused with chimichurri, a mouthwatering accompaniment of many variations, frequently made from parsley, garlic, hot peppers, basil leaves, oregano, basil, and vinegar, the dish could turn any vegetarian into a cattle farmer by meal's end.

Argentines actually eat more beef per capita than any other people in the world – nearly 40 pounds per person per year more than Americans – and any trip to the country is sure to be a diet killer (though Atkins would be proud). The local populace obviously knows a good thing when it gets it and sees little reason to eat much else. One dinner at the right parrilla (Trapiche, La Brigada, La Cabaña – there are more than 10,000 to choose from) and you'll see little reason to argue.

That night, I lay my head down at Buenos Aires's newest and hippest digs, the Faena Hotel+Universe, where Philippe Starck has created an ultra-modern Imperial-style design hotel – it's dripping with sultry red and rich blacks – inside a former grain warehouse in Puerto Madero. I fall asleep wondering: Can one survive on Malbec and beef alone?

## **Mendoza**

I arrive at Carlos Pulenta's brand-new boutique winery in the Vistalba district of Mendoza's Lujan de Cuyo wine region – the oldest grape-growing area in this high-altitude wilderness – long after the sun has set over the Del Plata range of the Andes, which cuts across the western outskirts of Mendoza. But this is okay, as Pulenta, an Argentine wine legend, has two beautifully appointed rooms available to visitors at his dream winery (one of the few in town not funded by foreign investment).

The next morning, I wander down the center of the adobe-like building, a purely Medocinian mud-toned structure designed by local architect Eliá Bormida – and marvel at this austere oasis in the desert (Mendoza only receives seven or so inches of rain a year, and it's one of the world's only wine regions lacking ocean influence). Layers of reddish-orange vineyards and golden poplar trees in full autumnal bloom light up the landscape like a fiery kaleidoscope.

Then I turn around and see them. The Andes. Fully snowcapped and perfectly framed under the entrance arch to the winery. I nearly trip on myself fumbling for my camera. There's no doubt Pulenta picked this spot with Mayan accuracy, and I think this is surely the world's most astonishing wine region view – for the moment, anyway.

**El Corralito may have** devastated the country's banking system, but wineries are now benefiting big-time. Why? Because those with dollars and euros to spend can now get three times for their money. As a result, the Argentine wine-tasting trail is flourishing with brand-new, ultramodern design-forward wineries whose owners clearly had more than grape-crushing on their minds during construction. At Pulenta, for instance, you get an amazing room outfitted in chic, earth-toned appointments, two meals, endless wine (bottles and tastings), Internet access, a minibar

everything, really ♦ for \$160 per night. Last but not least, you can hang out with the winemaker as he turns Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Bonarda into Pulenta♦s signature blends.

At Bodegas Salentein in the Uco Valley, an hour♦s drive from Mendoza proper, a similar wonder is in place. Dutch investors have thrown \$60 million into this Architectural Digest-worthy cellar whose dark, industrial look is a marvel of modern winery engineering. In other words, these far cry from traditional French ch♦teaus, or even from the classic fee most California wineries.

Nearby, there♦s Clos de los Siete, a joint venture between seven of France♦s most heralded wine figureheads (grape globe-trotter Michel Rolland included) and Argentine winemakers. I arrange a lunch at Monteviejo, the first of three stunning wineries to open in these seven vineyards. This marvelous structure sits right between Mount Aconcagua the Andes to the west and the gorgeous Uco Valley to the east.

For 60 pesos (\$20), the best empanadas I have ever eaten kick-start meal that includes a full-on asado, or mixed grill, and ends with flan flanked by Argentina♦s famed caramel-like milk jam, dulce de leche. A bottle of Clos de Los Siete, an experimental blend that includes grapes from each of the seven vineyards, costs 40 pesos (\$13.50) more, but at this exchange rate, who cares? It all goes down as I gape at the vista from the dining room ♦ a portrait of vineyards in every direction, framed by the Andes and Uco Valley ♦ which are surely unparalleled in the world.

### Salta

If there was any doubt I♦m in a carnivorous country, it♦s shed when my guide in Salta ♦ a 100-percent-normal, 34-year-old guy ♦ whips out a facon to cut his meat at a parrilla in charming San Lorenzo, just outside town. Gauchos, as Argentine cowboys are known, use this large knife to slaughter their herd, later to cut up said herd for consumption, and then for protection anywhere else along the way ♦ should the need arise. After lunch, he cleans it with bread (never water, I learn ♦ it dulls the knife) and slides it back into the leather case on his belt. I immediately ask him where I might procure one for myself. ♦In Cafayate,♦ he says where I just so happen to be heading next.

Highway 68 runs south from Salta City to the wine region of Cafayate of Salta Province♦s most important wine areas. The three-hour drive is spectacular. Wild herds of llamas and goats roam free through the Cafayate Ridge, a gorge cutting right through the Andes that can only be described as Grand Canyon-esque. Up a dusty desert road from town to San Pedro de Yacochuya winery, another Franco-Argentine affair. There is no tasting here, but 80 pesos (\$27) will secure lunch, wine, and yet another amazing view.

After lunch, it♦s off to Estancia Colom♦, a boutique hotel and winery that boasts the highest vineyards in the world at 9,892 feet (the lodge sits at 7,546). Swiss winemaker Donald Hess purchased this property ♦ located deep in the Andes and miles from nowhere ♦ in 2001. To reach it from

...and you'll have an idea of what little-known geological wonder looks like.

Hess has turned Colom into a self-sufficient, biodynamic winery and luxury nine-room boutique hotel literally at the end (and on top) of the world. For a wine lover, it's pure paradise. The gorgeous property in Calchaqu Valley, decked out in indigenous yellows, reds, and beiges sandwiched between the two most spectacular Andes ranges this trip produced. There is nothing to do here but sit back with a bottle of He Amalaya de Colom, a heart-stopping red blend, and gaze at what truly the most eye-popping view in the modern wine world. This time I've really found it.

**Back in Buenos Aires**, over yet another mouthwatering steak this at La Brigada, a San Telmo parrilla regarded by many as the city's best there's another Malbec in sight, being sipped by a ubiquitous dark-haired Argentine beauty. I recall something the winemaker at Salentein in Mendoza said to me earlier in the week about one of his bottles: "If I were to ask a woman to marry me," he said, "this is the bottle of wine I would bring to the occasion."

At these prices, I'll take a case.

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**Kevin Raub** is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among other publications. He lost track of how many steaks he consumed on this trip after his ninth one.

Photographs by Brian Maranan Pineda

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