



Landfall Living

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Landfall Foundation Gala: Photo by Jennifer Simpson, Ballerinas:
Devon Hamerski and Emily Lawler of The Dance Element



Barrel sampling at Archaval Ferrer



Tasting at Bodega Ruca Malen

Wine Review

LANDFALL TRAVELING TO SOUTH AMERICA.

Written by Brian Smith

There are two ways to get from Santiago in Chile to Mendoza in Argentina which are separated by about 120 miles. One is to drive through [and up and around] the Andes mountains while the other is to fly. We wanted a unique experience so we chose the former option. Summer in this part of the world meant we were driving up and down through mostly dry, barren, rugged red rock desert with some spectacular snow capped peaks off in the distance. Guidebooks say the drive should take between 5 and 6 hours depending on traffic [particularly at the many switchbacks] and the problematic border crossing.

Accompanied by our guide Marcelo and a driver we left Santiago around eleven in the morning with a planned stop at Errazuriz Winery in Chile's Aconcagua Valley for lunch. Errazuriz was founded in 1870 and the fifth generation of the same family is now in charge. The scenery [we were sitting outside] was breathtaking, the food and wine were first rate. My idea of heaven.

Back on the road and very happy we began our upward climb. The next stop was at the famed Portillo Ski Resort for a look around. Opened in 1949 and at 9500 feet [base] Portillo is one of South America's best known ski areas. You may recall this is where our USA ski team trains during our North American summers [along with teams from Italy and Austria amongst others].

Next, the border crossing. We were warned. Rows upon rows of cars, buses, trucks. People everywhere. Seems like everyone from western Argentina vacations in eastern Chile and we just hap-

pened to be making our drive at the end of their summer holiday season as they were all going home. It took us three hours plus to get through customs and immigration which was actually fast since our quick thinking driver persuaded one the guards to let us bypass part of the queue. Don't ask. I do not think there are Spanish equivalent words for speed and efficiency at least not at this border crossing. Maybe we should have flown. We arrived in Mendoza around 10 pm, had a quick bite to eat, enjoyed the free wine at our hotel and adjourned for the night.

Mendoza was founded in 1561 by Spanish colonialists and retains an idyllic serenity that has carried over from centuries past. This laid back manageable city [population 125,000] is set out on grid pattern centered by the huge Plaza Independencia with wide leafy avenues leading to four other plazas. Subdued during the day Mendoza comes alive at night as the residents take advantage of cooler temperatures and the many outdoor cafes.

Sol y vino. Sun and wine. The Mendoza area has 300 days of sun a year and produces seventy five percent of the wine produced in Argentina. Of the three full days we were scheduled to be in Mendoza we reserved one for visiting wineries. We easily could have spent a whole week just visiting the best producers but even I would consider that overkill [not to mention the reaction of my traveling companions].

Many different grapes are grown in the Mendoza area but, like Carmenere in Chile, the Argentineans have taken hold of Malbec and made it their own. This grape thrives extremely well in



Ken & Barb Robinson, Marcello our excellent guide, Peggy & Brian Smith at Errazuriz



Portillo in the summer

these conditions: high altitude, low humidity, sunny days and cool nights which lets the fruit mature longer on the vine. Low rainfall [8 inches per year] is augmented by abundant water running off the nearby Andes using irrigation techniques first begun by the Incas. Irrigation also runs through town which accounts for all the tall leafy trees and verdant plazas.

Coupled with ideal growing conditions and the latest and greatest modern production techniques many Argentine Malbecs have been elevated to high levels of quality and enjoyment. These wines are characterized by deep red berry color, intense fruit, velvety texture, balanced soft ripe tannins, medium body and the appeal of easy early drinking. Relatively consistent weather conditions means the wine has little quality variation from year to year.

First thing we realized as we started on our day trip was the short traveling distance from town to the wineries. Great. More time for tasting! The second thing you realize is that unlike the commercialized atmosphere of Napa, Mendoza is very much laid-back, rustic and farm like [as it should be]. After all this is agriculture. We visited Achaval Ferrer, Ruca Malen, Norton and Famillia Zuccardi where we had a late lunch. All four were excellent but I must single out Achaval Ferrer. I cannot recall one winery I have ever visited that has as many excellent wines to offer. The focus is almost exclusively on Malbec. Robert Parker's web site currently lists thirty four rated Achaval Ferrer wines mostly from 2005 through the latest releases. The average score is 95! Luckily for us these wines are available in Wilmington through Mutual Distributing. I can highly recommend their 91 rated entry level Malbec for less than \$20 a bottle and Quimera which is a Bordeaux blend with an emphasis on Malbec. Rated 93 this wine sells for less than \$40 a bottle. Parker says that AF stands at the summit of Argentine wine producers. I believe him. We were lucky to visit.

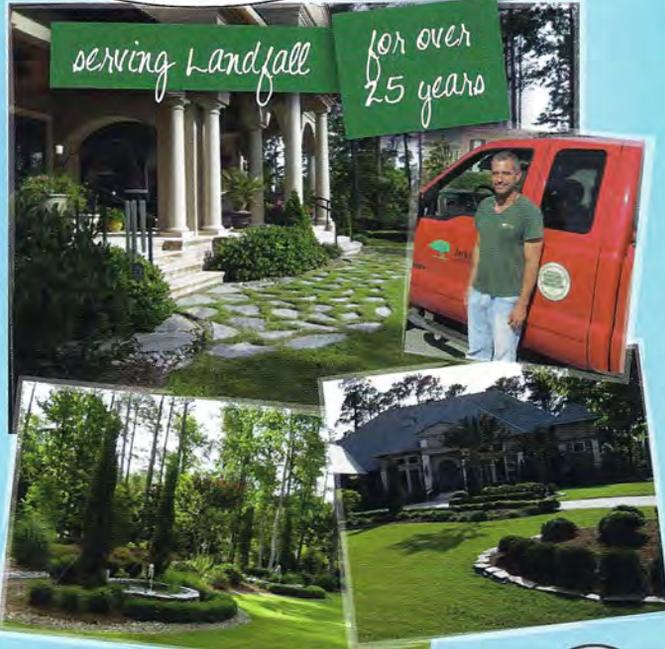
Next time Buenos Aires. Oh, we met a couple in Mendoza that flew from Santiago the same day we drove over the Andes. We complained to them about the delay at the border crossing and that we should have considered flying. Not. Seems they also had a very long delay at the airport getting through customs and immigration. At least we had scenery.



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