

# VINOGRAPHY: a wine blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world

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## The Bodeguero's Table: The Wines of De Lucca, Uruguay

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Populated by many more cows than people, the pastoral landscape of Uruguay is a place of kitchen hearths and kitchen tables. Most homes outside of the city feature a wood-fired *parilla* and the kind of kitchen table at which you could spend the entire day.

I was privileged to spend time at many such tables during my visit to Uruguay. But by far the biggest of those tables, and among the most welcoming, was the massive wooden slab that, thigh-thick and yards across, dominated the center of Reinaldo De Lucca's home. It was the kind of table that I'd imagine kicking my boots up on at the end of a long meal while I contentedly picked my teeth. Assuming I lived there, of course -- even the congeniality that pervades Uruguayan hospitality requires at least some decorum from a visiting journalist.

But had I the temerity to get that comfortable, I can hardly imagine the big-knuckled, mustachioed De Lucca would mind. This is a man whose rustic doorway bore the sign "Aqui vive un Bodeguero -- Here lives a winemaker," and whose patio had more space on it for antique wine processing tools than for furniture.

It would be easy, given the extremely rural, 100-year old cellar, and the fact that the table and most other elements of the bodeguero's cosy home qualified for the descriptor "rough-hewn" to imagine that De Lucca might not have strayed much farther than the little creek at the end of the lane that gives its name to his family's vineyards, the Rio Colorado.

Indeed, De Lucca is the third generation farmer of a set of vineyards tucked into one of Uruguay's oldest wine growing districts, Canelones, about 90 miles north of the capital Montevideo. And while he would most certainly classify himself as a humble farmer, he is both one of the most internationally educated of Uruguay's old guard winemakers (with degrees from Penn State and from the University of Montpellier in France), and one of the most ardent advocates for Uruguay's modern fine wine industry, having personally helped push the country's level of quality to new heights.



By: Alder Yarrow, Founder & Editor, Vinography



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"I wear my french T-shirt under my sweater," says De Lucca. By this I am meant to understand that you can take the boy out of Uruguay but you can never take the Uruguay out of the boy.

De Lucca's family, like many in Uruguay, emigrated from Italy. "My mother's side of the family is Piemontese, from near Asti, and my father's side of the family was originally from the south, but moved to Tuscany for a while before coming to Uruguay nearly at the beginning of the 20th century."

The family began commercial grape production under the De Lucca name in 1914.

"Originally they planted Sangiovese, Barbera, and Grignolino, and bought this winery, which is more than 100 years old," says De Lucca. "The tanks are made of bricks, not of concrete."

Near the winery the family planted Tannat in 1905 and 1906, but later dug up those vineyards when they realized it was a frost-prone site. De Lucca still lives and works at the century-old winery along with his daughter Agostina, who has recently begun to help with the commercial side of the business, but his 123 acres of vineyards are in the surrounding countryside with "better soils and better slopes."

Like many of the smaller farmers pioneering the fine wine of Uruguay, De Lucca was born to it, helping out in the winery from the age of 8 to 12 "because I liked it" he recalls. He studied Agronomic Engineering at the University of Montevideo, and then went to Penn State for a masters in Plant Physiology and Communication.

"Plant Physiology and Plant Communication?" I ask, making sure I understand his meaning.





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"Oh yes. Plants communicate," he says. "Take a walk during flower time and during harvest. It is an erotic time. The aromas of the different varieties during flowering are different. The Aroma during harvest is different. You can smell what they do."

After working for a time for the Uruguayan Ministry of Agriculture, he went to France to receive first another Masters in Viticulture and then a PhD in Viticulture.

"Then I spent a few months in Israel studying irrigation and fertigation and also communication, because it is very important and useful today," says De Lucca. "When you want to position an idea and transfer information, you must know how to do it. I have learned that it is not only important to have a good wine, but to know how to let people know about the wine."

"It is not enough to produce a good wine," he continues. "That is an obligation, not a merit. I cannot say to an importer or a consumer merely 'I have a good wine.' Why should they adopt Uruguayan wine, why my wine? What can I offer that is different from others? Not everyone in Uruguay understands that. Our task is not to sell wine, our task is to put the Uruguayan wine industry in the eyes and minds of the people in the target market we want to reach. And that is a very complex and difficult task."

Apparently so, as De Lucca's own wines proved immediately upon tasting. These are some of the highest quality, most distinctive wines made in Uruguay, and can easily stand among the top wines of South America, and yet they are virtually unheard of in the United States.

What's the De Lucca formula for such honest and distinctive wines? It will sound familiar to anyone who has spent time around old-school, old-world winemakers.





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"First, we farm mechanically," explains De Lucca. "I use compost, I compost the seeds, the leaves, the clusters, the skins, everything. I give it back to the vineyard. That's the only fertilizer I use. No chemicals. If you want to produce high quality wines you can't use chemical fertilizers. We don't use insecticide either. We do use fungicide because otherwise you can't produce grapes in Uruguay. For us it is a combination of copper, sulfur, and phosphorus. I use only a topical herbicide that burns weeds as they grow, not any pre-emergence herbicides that will linger in the soil."

De Lucca's work in the vineyard focuses on reducing vigor, and creating balance.

"A good vineyard should be in equilibrium like a person," he says with a smile. "When you are in equilibrium, you give the best. Plants are the same thing. We must remember that wine is a living actor, coming from another living actor which is the plant. The plant digs in the soil to introduce the roots. For what? Taking water, only the water. The aerial parts, the chest of the plants, look into the sky to capture the CO<sub>2</sub> to clean the air and give us back the oxygen, and to capture the energy coming from the sky. This energy puts together water and CO<sub>2</sub> and builds up the carbonate chains that are the building blocks of the plant and the production of berries. If the vineyard is in equilibrium, and you don't touch the environment and you don't disturb it, it will give you the best harvest."

"If you plant a vineyard in soils for carrots, you will never obtain high quality," he continues. "You will have to do a green harvest, thinning your clusters again and again. Too much production by the vine is because you have done something wrong. You're not in good soils or you are not making good practice."

"I tell you something," he says wagging his finger for emphasis, "people here are scared of botrytis. I never treat against it. I never have problems. If you harvest 20 tons per hectare you will have every problem. You need to let the plant alone to do what the plants do."





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De Lucca hand-harvests his grapes, and brings them to his ancient winery that sits 10 steps from his front door. "I do my selection in the vineyard," he says. "I don't do any triage in the winery. We only use good clusters."

"My father fermented in cement," says De Lucca. "When I took over in 1991, I thought to myself steel was more modern. It's good. But now I have changed back."

The wines ferment with selected neutral yeasts at naturally cool temperatures with some pumping over when necessary. "When the alcohol goes up," he explains, "We let maybe 10 days of maceration without doing much or touching the bust and the skins."

This, he explains, is the secret to getting Tannat to have smooth, softer tannins. "With Tannat there is a huge risk of these sharp tannins, but to me the best extraction is just in those first few days but not much more."

De Lucca is the kind of winemaker you might expect to emphasize the use of so-called native yeasts in his fermentations, especially with the family history of using the same winery for nearly a century.

"I started producing my wines without inoculation, of course," says De Lucca, "but I found a problem with the wild yeasts. Maybe it is this climate. There are lots of types of yeasts, and some are good and some are bad. For many years I didn't inoculate, but I realized I needed to improve my quality, and so now I use neutral yeasts. I don't use those ones that produce specific aromas. That's bullshit."

One of the things that sets De Lucca apart from many of the other winemakers in Uruguay is his insistence on cofermentation of grapes, rather than blending before bottling.





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"It's just the best blend you can obtain," he says by way of explanation. "There is risk though. You take a risk if the maturity is not completed in the varieties you are using. It needs to be extremely clean."

After fermentation, his wines settle into tanks or old barrels. De Lucca uses very little new wood in his winemaking.

"Not just any wine deserves wood," he says. "You can destroy a wine with barrels if it doesn't need it."

As opposed to many producers, he also prefers to bottle age his wines for much longer before release, something else he believes contributes to the approachability of Tannat in particular.

"A lot of people are selling in the same year as the vintage," he says, shaking his head. "I am selling anything at a minimum of one and a half years after harvest."

One of the other things that sets De Lucca apart are the varieties of grapes that are found in his wines. You might imagine that a country filled with northern Italian immigrants would be filled with Italian grape varieties, but as the early settlers learned much to their chagrin, most Italian grape varieties are quite difficult to grow in the very wet climate of Uruguay. Consequently most people stopped trying in about the 19th century.

De Lucca is one of the few producers to blend Italian grape varieties such as Sangiovese and Nero d'Avola with his Tannat with excellent results.

In addition to these, he also produces the only Marsanne in Uruguay ("I liked it when I was in Montpellier" he says with a shrug) and an incredibly distinctive and elegant Syrah that he produces only in years when he can get it truly ripe (I had fun visiting the Cote du Rhone!" is his answer to that one).



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All of De Lucca's wines have something of an honesty to them. An understated quality that might be mistaken for rusticity were it not for the utterly smooth tannins and exquisite balance in the wines. The lack of wood influence lets both the fruit show, as well as the distinct flavor that De Lucca suggests is the product of the red soils that give his wine growing area its name.

These are wines that open their arms wide and smile as wide as the one under De Lucca's mustache. You needn't spend much time with them before they'll invite you to sit down at the table and spend an idyllic afternoon trading stories about family and friends. And a few of them will simply leave you sitting in stunned silence, asking yourself as I did, why on Earth haven't more people tasted this stuff?

Unfortunately, I could find only a single wine of De Lucca's available to purchase on the Internet in the US. Keep an eye out for them, and snap them up if you find them.

TASTING NOTES:

## **2015 De Lucca Sauvignon Blanc, Canelones, Uruguay**

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet stones and ripe apples. In the mouth, apple and pear flavors mix with nice mineral undertones. Notes of citrus zest and pith linger in the finish. Excellent acidity and balance. 13.6% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9.

## **2015 De Lucca "Reserve" Marsanne, Canelones, Uruguay**

Light to medium gold in the glass, this wine smells of quince and a hint of candle wax. In the mouth quince and spiced pear flavors mix with a wonderful minerality and a slight spicy kick on the finish. Excellent acidity and length. Includes about 10% Roussanne. 13% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9.

## **2011 De Lucca "Reserve" Merlot, Canelones, Uruguay**

Medium to dark ruby in the glass, this wine smells of leather, cedar, and dried red fruit. In the mouth, graphite, cedar, and red fruits have a nice leathery quality and a very mature aspect to them. Fine grained tannins wrap around the core of fruit. Excellent acidity and length. Outstanding, but maturing quickly. Spends about a year in a mix of old and new French oak. 14% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5.

## **2011 De Lucca "Antonella" Syrah, Canelones, Uruguay**

Dark garnet in color, this wine smells of meaty and smoky blackberry. In the mouth, a wonderfully savory blackberry, cassis, and passion fruit combination possesses a smoky barnyard quality and has a nice spicy black pepper kick on the finish. Very old school in character. Nice powdery tannins and hint of mineral tone underneath. Comes from head pruned, 20-year-old vines in very shallow soils. 13.9% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5.

## **2014 De Lucca "Agostina" Pinot Noir, Canelones, Uruguay**

Light ruby in the glass, this wine smells of raspberry and green herbs. In the mouth, raspberry and wet stone flavors mix with a faint green herb note. Very faint, very fine grained tannins linger in the finish. Excellent acidity. Ages in neutral oak for 18 months. 1000 bottles produced. 14.2% alcohol. Score: between 8.5 and 9.

## **2013 De Lucca "Reserve" Tannat, Canelones, Uruguay**

Very dark garnet in color, this wine smells of black cherry and blackberry. In the mouth, very stony and lean blackberry and black cherry fruit flavors have a smooth power to them along with their cool concrete stoniness. Very fine-grained tannins linger with a hint of smoky earth in the finish. 13.5% alcohol. Score: around 9. Cost: \$15.

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## 2011 De Lucca "Libero" Red Blend, Canelones, Uruguay

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of black cherry, raisins, and chocolate. In the mouth, a leathery fist of tannins closes tightly around a core of black cherry, earth, leather, and dried herbs. Good acidity keeps this wine fresh despite the dried fruit character. The tannins need some time. A blend of 95% Tannat and 5% Nero d'Avola and Sangiovese. 13.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.

## 2011 De Lucca "Reserve" Cabernet Sauvignon, Canelones, Uruguay

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of black cherry and tobacco. In the mouth wonderfully bright and juicy cherry flavors are tinged with a distinct coconut flavor of American oak as well as a remarkable saline character that turns to a slightly olive quality in the finish. Very fine-grained tannins linger and gather strength in the finish with a bit of saltiness and the distinct character of oak. For me there's a bit too much wood in this wine, but that's true of young Ridge Montebello as well. Like that wine, this is a very excellent Cabernet. 13.5% alcohol. Score: around 9.

## 2008 De Lucca "Rio Colorado" Red Blend, Canelones, Uruguay

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cherry and tobacco and a hint of graphite. In the mouth, wonderfully seamless flavors of cherry, tobacco, graphite and a hint of espresso mix with a darker crushed stone and earthy minerality. Phenomenally balanced with fantastic acidity and length. Regal and poised, this is one helluva wine, and easily one of the best I tasted in Uruguay. A blend of 40% Tannat, 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 20% Merlot. This wine is made in only the best years. 13.3% alcohol. 6000 bottles made Score: around 9.5.

## 2002 De Lucca Syrah, Canelones, Uruguay

Medium to dark ruby in the glass, this wine smells of gamey earth, cedar, and leather. In the mouth, leather, cherry and very tight fine grained tannins have a blunt and somewhat rustic quality. 12.5% alcohol. Score: between 8 and 8.5.

## 2000 De Lucca "Rio Colorado" Red Blend, Canelones, Uruguay

Medium to dark ruby in color, this wine smells of sweet cedar, cherry, and juniper berries. In the mouth, wonderfully smooth, powdery tannins wrap around a core of fennel seeds, leather, cherry and dried herbs, all tinged with a hint of American oak. Excellent acidity and deep stony minerality round out a seamless and beautiful package. A blend of Tannat, Cabernet, and Merlot. The Tannat is aged in American oak, while the Cab and Merlot are aged in French oak. 13% alcohol. Score: between 9 and 9.5.

## 2015 De Lucca "Bravura" Tannat, Canelones, Uruguay

Inky, opaque purple in the glass, this wine smells of rich blackberry and black cherry fruit. In the mouth, tight powdery tannins wrap around a core of smoky blackberry and black cherry fruit that has a beautiful crushed cherry minerality and juicy acidity. Very, very young yet (it won't be sold for some time) but juicy and delicious. Notes of bitter chocolate linger in the finish. 13.7% alcohol. Score: around 9.

## 2011 De Lucca "Florencia Cosecha Noble" Marsanne, Canelones, Uruguay

Dark gold in the glass in the glass, this wine smells of exotic citrus marmalade and honey. In the mouth, flavors of dark honey, dried fruit, and parchment have a very faint sweetness that turns bitter in the end. Decent acidity still, but doesn't have the depth and complexity I might like. 15% alcohol. Score: around 8.

