

# VINOGRAPHY: a wine blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world

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## The Quiet Neighbor: An Introduction to Uruguayan Wine

11.11.2015

When prompted with the phrase "South American Wine" even the most experienced wine lovers will likely call to mind only the wines of Chile and Argentina. Perhaps the most adventurous might have had a wine from Brazil. But very few people have tasted, let alone heard of wines from Uruguay. In fact, a random sampling of adults I interrogated proved that some didn't even know on which continent Uruguay might be found (some guessed Africa).

Though it languishes in obscurity, thanks in part to the long shadow cast by its neighbor and friendly arch-rival Argentina, Uruguay has been producing wine for well over 100 years, and in the last thirty years, some of that wine has become extremely high in quality. Add to that the charms of the Uruguayan coastline, culture and cuisine, and you've got a sub rosa wine destination of epic proportions. Mark my words, Uruguayan wine is South America's hidden gem.

Simply put, Uruguay is one of the Western Hemisphere's most remarkable countries. How remarkable? According to global organizations who spend our tax money measuring such things, Uruguay is the most democratic country in South America (and ranks higher than the US in objective democracy scores). It is also ranked

#1 in South America for peace, lack of corruption, quality of living, digital government capabilities, size of its middle class relative to the overall population, prosperity, and security.

The unfortunate fact that the Portuguese and Spanish essentially killed or drove out all the native peoples in the 15th through the 17th centuries means that more than 90% of the population are of immigrant descent, which has resulted in a remarkable lack of racial tensions in the country.

On a per capita basis, Uruguay contributes more troops to the United Nations than any other country on earth. It is ranked second in South America for economic freedom, income equality, and per-capita income. Its constitution guarantees religious freedom; it ranks 26th in the world on measures of press freedom (the US is at 46); and it formally legalized abortion in 2012, same sex marriage and cannabis in 2013. Voting in national elections is compulsory, and failure to do so will result in fines and the inability to renew your driver's license. In 2009 Uruguay became the first country in the world to guarantee one laptop per child in every school. Schools by the way, are free to all citizens from pre-school through university.

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WINES of  
**URUGUAY**

By: Alder Yarrow, Founder & Editor, Vinography



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Uruguay is a country of 3.4 million people, 12 million cows, and somewhere on the order of 300 miles of beaches. There's so much open space and land, that Uruguay makes money to planting trees for Europeans looking to offset their carbon emissions. The country runs on as much as 80% renewable energy.

Uruguay's friendly rivalry with Argentina reaches a fever pitch with regards to which country is the rightful home of the *gaucho* culture, but its cowboy tenets are so strong that Uruguay famously had a law at one point making it illegal to kill or eat a horse.

Some call Uruguay the Switzerland of South America (apparently the banking laws are also quite favorable to foreign investment) but in a phrase, it's a sparsely populated little South American paradise.

Especially if you like meat. Uruguayans consume almost twice as much beef per capita than the United States, and their meat is widely regarded as some of the healthiest in the world. Since 1968 the country has had laws in place forbidding the use of hormones on its cows. They are entirely pasture-raised and grass-fed. After an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001, the entire country's beef supply is 100% traceable from farm to store. Any steak on the shelf can be linked back to a specific animal, on a specific plot of land in the country. Interestingly, the same can be said for much of the wine made in the country as well, but more on that momentarily.

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Uruguay is famous for its *parillas*, or wood-fired grills, on which a wide variety of beef cuts are roasted to dripping perfection. Outside of the dense urbanity of the capital Montevideo, which contains more than 50% of the country's population, every house has a wood fired grill built into their kitchen. Grilling meat is serious business for Uruguayans, and represents the height of their hospitality. Invited guests will invariably be treated to a parade of grilled flesh, beginning with sweetbreads, followed by *asado*, the country's famous fatty short-ribs, and then followed by several different cuts of beef and potentially sausage as well. If you're lucky, you'll also get some grilled provolone (which can be seen melting like little pats of butter on big iron pans in the photo above).



While colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese initially, Uruguay became a popular destination for Basque and northern Italian immigrants. The Italians, in particular, used the phrase "making America" to describe the process of heading to Uruguay for six months to earn and then heading back home for a spell before returning. These intrepid travelers eventually brought their families and stayed put, resulting, among other things in extremely high quality local pastas, both fresh and dried.



It's not clear whether this Italian connection has influenced aesthetics as well, but the country also seems to have a great affinity for modernist architecture and design. Especially as you leave Montevideo and head Northeast towards the seaside resorts that dot the country's Atlantic coast, even the smallest villages are dotted with gorgeous poured cement, rock, and natural wood buildings that wouldn't be out of place in the most chic wooded communities of Northern California, or Stockholm for that matter. These modernist buildings alternate with the thrown-together fishing shacks you might expect in tiny coastal towns in South America.

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With so many Italian immigrants, you might expect them to have populated the country with Italian grape varieties as well. And you'd be entirely correct. The only problem is, those grapes didn't do so well in the windy, wet, and generally humid climate, especially when compared with a grapevine brought over by some enterprising Spanish immigrant. Barbera, Nebbiolo, Corvina, Refosco -- they were all planted and coaxed along, but ultimately they couldn't hold a candle to Tannat, the thick-skinned import from the Pyrenees (and specifically the Madiran region) that has become the signature grape of Uruguay.



According to *Wine Grapes*, Tannat was first brought to the country by a Basque immigrant named Pascal Harriague, who planted a vineyard in 1870 outside of the city of Salto, and for a time lent his own name to the grape variety. By 2009 this relatively ancient grape variety had become the most widely planted grape in the country, and today makes up more than 25% of all vineyard acreage. Italian varieties are slowly making a comeback as modern viticulture techniques make them slightly more viable.

Tannat, as you might expect from the name which derives from the same root as "tannin," can make some pretty chewy wine. The thick-skinned grapes have unusually high tannin levels matched with natural acidity. Much to the national pride of most Uruguayans, Tannat also boasts some of the highest levels of polyphenols of any red grape variety. Tannat wines generally have about 2.7 times more resveratrol (the "magical" compound shown to extend the lifespan of lab rats) than Pinot Noir or Bordeaux varieties, and has among the highest levels of procyanidins of any grape variety. Procyanidins are flavinoids, a type of organic compound that has been shown to bolster blood vessels and increase oxygen flow to red blood cells, reducing LDL cholesterol and corresponding risks of cardiovascular diseases.

When well made, Tannat has a broad-shouldered character in the mouth with a mix of black cherry and boysenberry flavors that can be bright and juicy thanks to high acidity levels. The trick, of course, involves taming the tannins, which the best winemakers do through a combination of ensuring optimal ripeness and very gentle handling of the destemmed fruit. This is not a grape that lends itself to whole-cluster fermentation, nor to excessive maceration or punchdowns. Some people have experimented with carbonic maceration (letting the fermentation begin inside un-crushed, whole berries) with interesting results. Aging in barrels with the benefits of their natural micro-oxygenation also helps to smooth out the wine.

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Perhaps most interestingly, Tannat seems quite capable of transmitting soil characteristics if farmed well and aged in a restrained portion of new wood. Many of the most exciting Uruguayan wines, usually made by smaller producers, are often grown on the country's ancient weathered granite, pegmatite, or schist soils, some of which date back to the Precambrian era. The very flat country also has pockets of heavily calcaereous soils, which can show yet another side of the grape.



Uruguay's main viticultural challenges stem from the climate. As one local winemaker succinctly puts it, "we have Burgundy soils and Bordeaux weather." Uruguay receives on average roughly 1100 millimeters of rain per year, compared to Bordeaux's 900 mm or Champagne's 650 mm. Humidity and its various disease pressures represent a major problem. The threats of mildew, botrytis, and other such fungal infestations all but ensure that despite their best intentions, almost no one works their vineyards in a fully organic fashion. Despite a natural surfeit of raw bovine materials, no one is really practicing biodynamics, either.



Most vineyards in Uruguay are situated on fairly flat ground, and are marked by several unique and exotic characteristics that have nothing to do with the vines themselves. Seeing a whole herd (flock? posse?) of shy capybaras (known locally as carpinchos) munching their way through the grasses bordering a vineyard proves to be a fairly astonishing sight, as do the occasional wild ostriches striding through the rows.

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Many vineyard posts are also topped by the avian equivalents of sprawling adobe condominiums. The ubiquitous horneros, Uruguay's national bird, earn their name ("horno" means oven in Spanish) by constructing their clay-oven-like mud homes seemingly anywhere, including on top of one another.

Birdsong generally features prominently in any Uruguayan experience outside of the urban capital. Spending a few minutes walking through the vineyards, the visitor is regaled with an exotic symphony of calls and responses that make for an easy reminder of the meaning of the country's name, which translates roughly to "river of the painted birds" in the native Guaraní dialect.

The roots of viticulture in Uruguay go back to the earliest permanent Spanish settlements in the country beginning in 1624. According to Evan Goldstein, author of *Wines of South America*, other than records showing the importation of grapevines by the colonial authorities, very few records exist documenting viticulture in the country until the late 1800s, when the aforementioned Don Harriague helped kick-start commercial viticulture in the country.

Despite this somewhat obscure beginning, several wineries in Uruguay have passed their 100th year of more or less continuous operation, some even by the same family. Indeed, family-run seems to be the rule for most wineries in Uruguay. While some families have become significant players in the country's wine industry (every country needs to have its big players) Uruguay remains conspicuously short of corporate wine interests, at least for now.

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The closest you might get to such a thing is Bodega Garzon, the ambitious and impressive winery project by billionaire Alejandro Bulgheroni, which is slated to open the doors of its stunning new winery in January 2016.

Built by a team of international architecture superstars, the LEED Silver certified winery will set a new bar for the wine hospitality experience in the country. Bring your helicopter.

A few other very impressive wine tourism experiences exist in Uruguay, funded by wealthy and passionate wine lovers, but outside of these few, the vast majority of wine production in the country comes from smaller producers. Most of the wineries worth visiting sit conveniently close to the capital Montevideo, within about an hour's drive. With the exception of those few glitzy operations, their offerings for wine tourists range from modest to downright rustic, but many are gearing up fast in the face of increased interest in wine tourism by locals and visitors alike.

As recently as 30 years ago there were, according to some, as many as 1000 wineries in Uruguay. The vast majority of these made ordinary and cheap table wine for themselves, bigger cooperatives or commercial buyers. Today there are something on the order of 320 wineries in Uruguay, and only about 15% of those produce "fine wines" that meet the country's governmental standard designation of VCP or Vinos de Calidad Preferente ("Wines of preferred quality"). The rest produce wines that end up in bag-in-box, or very low-priced supermarket bottlings.

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Despite a very low percentage of fine wine, the government agency in charge of the wine sector, INAVI, takes the wine business quite seriously. According to several winemakers, Uruguay is somewhere around 20 months from having every single one of the country's vineyards GIS mapped and classified in a computer database, with the goal of introducing the same level of traceability for wine as currently exists for beef. Before long you'll be able to link the bottle on the shelf not just to an individual producer, but to a specific vineyard block.

For many obvious reasons Uruguay is pinning the hopes of its wine sector on the export market. Per-capita wine consumption is falling, and there are just not enough people in the country to drink the amount of wine it can produce (or eat as much beef as it can raise, though they seem to be giving that one a seriously good try). Having said that, the total production of the country's 22,000 acres of vineyards could fit in the tanks of Chile's single biggest wine producer with room to spare, so we're not talking about a ton of wine.

Exports really only began in earnest in the early 1990s, and are still barely a trickle, but they have made great strides in the past five years. Even so, several of the country's top wineries have very limited representation in the United States.

That fact, however, is bound to change. Uruguay is too idyllic of a country, and the wines have far too much potential for this secret to stay kept for long. In the coming weeks, I'll be doing my best to blow the lid

off some of the best producers from the country, and hope that their efforts to gain more international recognition are met with as much enthusiasm as I now have following my trip there in October.

If only Uruguay could bring everyone down to the tiny little town of Jose Ignacio to watch the light fall on the Atlantic while meat sizzles on the grill nearby. Luckily, the next best thing is a great bottle of Uruguayan Tannat, and I'm sure that's coming soon to a wine store near you.

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