



Matias Michelini

# THE YOUNG ones

**With a rebellious edge and the desire to make Argentina stand out from the crowd, these winemakers are worth keeping an eye on, writes *Amanda Barnes***

**ARGENTINA HAS** long been known for its lush, ripe Malbec, and there's no doubt that those wines are still in full swing. However a tide of change is reaching well beyond this grape, with a new generation of winemakers at the helm. Moving away from the continental climate of the flat lands, winemakers and agronomists are seeking higher altitude micro climates in the Andes and new varieties are surfacing

– including a new wave of whites. Here are some of the winemakers who are blazing a new trail in Argentina.

## **1. MATIAS MICHELINI, PASSIONATE WINE & SUPER UCO**

Perhaps the most radical of Argentina's winemakers, Matias Michelini was fondly known as "the green Michelini" for years,

and his colourful winemaking still makes him the compelling anti-hero of the Argentine wine scene. Pioneering a lean wine style with often electric acidity, Michelini has been at the forefront of Uco Valley winemaking and in particular Gualtallary's development over the last decade or so.

Although still consulting to larger projects, including Finca Sopenia and



Sebastian Zuccardi



Zorzal, it is in his own experimental passion project – Passionate Wine – where he is making waves. As a firm believer in biodynamic viticulture, Passionate Wine very much starts in the vineyard and almost invariably ends in concrete. The ever-growing collection includes an exuberantly aromatic, bone-dry orange wine (Torrontés Brutal), a 40-day co-ferment of Malbec and Cabernet Franc from eight harvests (Demente), and a Pinot Noir fermented in a large, refurbished oak vat that in a previous life was a dog house.

“I take lots of risks when I make wine, and I lose all the time, but it is all part of the game,” says Michelini. “It is an exquisite exercise. I want to make wines without rules, and without limits.”

Perhaps the only winemaker in the country who has a problem with Argentina’s regulatory board for having too little alcohol in his wines – his

**‘Although there’s always bureaucracy in a big company, I decided I needed to relax and start marking the details’**

neighbours struggle to keep below 15% abv – Michelini’s belief is that the best balance and expression of the Uco Valley’s mountain wines is through earlier harvests and zero correction in the winery. With minimal intervention and non-mechanised, artisan techniques (his young children are often deployed to crush grapes), Michelini strips away all the smoke from the winemaking process and shows us that the true magic is in the vineyard. Rule-breaking, opinion-splitting and making some of the most original wines to come out of Argentina, Michelini is one to keep your eye on.

## 2. SEBASTIAN ZUCCARDI, FAMILIA ZUCCARDI

A leading winemaker of the new generation, Sebastian Zuccardi is the tireless head winemaker for Familia

Zuccardi and its sister winery Santa Julia. Despite managing a team of seven winemakers and producing over 16 million litres between brands, Zuccardi Jnr has his eye firmly on the details. As one of the forerunners of the micro terroir studies in the Uco Valley and pushing through the Geographical Indication (GI) regions, a new family winery in Altamira has been specially designed to vinify small

vineyard lots with 17 amphorae and 62 concrete vats that were custom-designed for the purpose.

One of the most important features in the winery for Zuccardi is the experimentation and research lab where his young team of winemakers and international interns tests out new concepts. “It is the kindergarten of the winery,” says Zuccardi, who started the lab over seven years ago. “It is here where we came up with all of the ideas for the new winery.”

Zuccardi’s experiments have so far led to a sparkling red Bonarda – a variety he

champions for Argentina – and unusual varieties such as Ancellota and Caladoc.

While he dabbles in these different varieties, Zuccardi’s vision for the future is not about variety, but place. “The challenge of my generation is to work in geographic identification,” he maintains. “To talk about the Uco Valley is too big, the future of Argentina is in the villages... Malbec is not the important thing, the most important thing is the place, and Malbec is the vehicle to express our region. Burgundy took 800 years, but maybe we will take less.”

Zuccardi is indeed well on his way, and his top wines show an elegant and stylish interpretation of Mendoza’s future. With Zuccardi’s visionary winery opening in the next six months and a new Finca range about to be launched, there is plenty more yet to see from Sebastian Zuccardi. At only 34-years-old, he is at the top of his game and not slowing down.



David Bonomi



Leonardo Erazu

### 3. DAVID BONOMI, BODEGAS NORTON & PER SE

"My story is all made of these small circles," Bonomi says humbly about his return to one of Argentina's biggest producers, Bodega Norton, after an eight year gap in the Doña Paula winery. But the circles Bonomi has been making are not small. During his time at Doña Paula he planted, experimented with and brought to market one of the highest quality (and still one of the few) Rieslings in Argentina. He also did significant research into Sauvignon Blanc with excellent results that has made Doña Paula one of the most prized producers of the variety, and made the first Argentine sparkling Sauvignon Blanc.

Whites, although a personal favourite, are not his only forte. Bonomi has pushed a new style of red wines, working on a more linear, lean and drinkable expression with a site-specific focus. "I am looking at places where the wine expresses itself, with an aromatic potential that pleases people but it remains the place that marks it."

This affinity with place and the vineyard comes from experience with his father

and uncle who worked in vineyard, and Bonomi's own great friendship with renowned viticulturist Edgardo del Popolo. With Del Popolo as a partner, he launched a garage wine label Per Se last year specialising in Cabernet Franc and Malbec – two varieties that Bonomi believes are part of the growing identity of Gualtallary. Having made his own garage wines for over a decade, and this is where you see Bonomi's playful side and fascination for the Uco Valley.

Whether it is through his own idiosyncratic Per Se project, or as he begins to take the reins of Argentina's market leader Norton, Bonomi is steadily changing the course of Argentine wine.

### 4. LEONARDO ERAZU, ALTOS LAS HORMIGAS

If you followed *db's* previous Top 10 Chilean Winemakers series, then Erazu might be a familiar face. This Chilean winemaker certainly merits being on the Argentine list too for the excellent work he is doing with the ambitious Altos Las Hormigas project in Mendoza. With six international owners including world-renowned Italian winemakers Attilio

Pagli and Alberto Antonini, and Chilean terroir specialist Pedro Parra, the project is not shy of expertise; however Erazu has been an important addition to the team since 2012, helping Altos' transition into a more modern style as well as a dedicated research programme.

In 2014 Erazu made 85 experimental micro-vinifications, no mean feat for a winery that only makes 100,000 cases

annually. Many of his experiments have already come to light in the commercial wines of Altos Las Hormigas: a zero-dosage sparkling Bonarda Rosé 2013 in Colonia Las Liebres, and the release of the long-anticipated Appellation series now topping the Altos Las Hormigas Malbec collection.

Later this year Erazu will release three of his own wines under a new Revolver brand which are a result of this research: a grippy and mineral Chardonnay and a fresh, gunflint Pinot Noir both from Gualtallary, and a low alcohol Torrontés from Tupungato. "Basically this is an experimental playground on limestone," he comments. "After what we did with Malbec, now we want to see what limestone does to other varieties that typically do well on limestone, like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir."

Erazu's productions may be very limited in size, but his thirst for experimentation and changing the concept of premium Argentine wine has no limit.

**'It is a job that takes many years, but we believe that we are going to find very particular wines that are very related with the terroir'**





Luis Reginato

## 5. LUIS REGINATO, CHAMAN & CATENA ZAPATA

Born in the Uco Valley, Reginato is a multi-talented winemaker who has been producing solid wines under the premium Catena Zapata brands (Luca, Tikal) since the early 2000s, as well as producing a large proportion of Argentina's top sparkling wines with his family's "champagnerie".

In 2013 Reginato launched his own small-production private label, Chaman, where his style veers towards fresh and spicy with excellent Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc and blends. While his

**"The challenge of my generation is to work in geographic identification. To talk about the Uco Valley is too big, the future of Argentina is in the villages"**

### It's not all about the winemakers

While not wanting to denigrate the role of the winemaker, it is the viticulturalist who can be crucial to advancing wine quality, writes *Patrick Schmitt*. And if one were to pick a single person in Argentina whose work in the vineyard is having a powerful impact on wine character, it would be Doña Paula's Martín Kaiser.

Born into a family of viticulturists, trained as both an agronomist and oenologist, Kaiser is obsessed with identifying the effect of soil and climate on Argentine wine, particularly Malbec. As part of this, he has dug multiple soil pits across Doña Paula's 700 hectares of vineyards in the Luján de Cuyo and Uco Valley to identify a range of soil profiles, before using Argentine winemakers and sommeliers to blind taste micro-vinifications from different parcels.

In terms of climatic impacts on the Malbec style, he has discovered increased levels of anthocyanins and tannins in colder places, as well as more floral characters and black fruits. On the other hand, hotter climates bring more red fruits and spice.

As for the effect of the soil, he has found that heavy soils enhance freshness, while light soils bring more spice to the wine. Consequently, he says, "If you have a light soil, then the wine tastes like one from a hotter area, and vice versa."

Kaiser has also pioneered the classification of vineyard sites according to calcium content, because he says that this mineral brings more and bigger tannins to Malbec. "The job of the viticulturist is to find the differences and separate them, and the job of winemaker is to make them shine," he says, clarifying his position.



work as a winemaker continues to produce some of the top wines in Argentina, it is Reginato's activities on the ground that makes him one to watch.

As head viticulturist of Catena, Reginato has worked in conjunction with Zuccardi and Chandon among others in the creation of the Pareja Altamira GI, and has been working with another team to push through the new Gualtallary GI.

The result of the last decade of his work in soil studies is notable wines like the White Bones Chardonnay and White Stones Chardonnay, which set a new benchmark for super-premium white wines in Argentina, and, of course, Malbec. The new variety Reginato is working on – and which surprisingly few other producers are currently focused on – is Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Together with Laura Catena and

Alejandro Vigil, we have been investigating, through experimental studies, what is the best management for this variety at high altitude," he says. "It is a job that takes many years, but we believe that we are going to find very particular wines that are very related with the terroir." We might have to wait patiently to taste the results, but no doubt it will be good.

>



Juan Pablo Michelini

## 6. JUAN PABLO MICHELINI, ZORZAL

Gualtallary is one of the most promising new regions to emerge from the Uco Valley, and while Juan Pablo was not the first to make wine here (he was introduced to Gualtallary by older brother and winemaker Matias Michelini), as head winemaker of Zorzal he is certainly one of the most dedicated

**'I want to make wines without rules and without limits'**

## Another one to keep your eye on...

While there are still relatively few female winemakers in Argentina, a new generation of women is beginning to take important posts in winemaking (see Honourable Mentions, p51). Victoria Prandina is one of them. Having started at Trivento (Concha y Toro's Argentine outpost) as an assistant in 2006, she has risen through the ranks rapidly and just two years later was put in charge of the large producer's premium wines.

She developed Trivento's top-of-the-line wine "Eolo" and will soon be bringing out its first traditional method sparkling wine. Bringing a female touch to the team, Prandina is focused on making more elegant wines: "I love French oak, but I like wine a lot more, so I'm always looking to find a good balance."

Currently she is working on a new balance – a blend with Chilean winemaker and mentor Enrique Tirado, Concha y Toro's blend master for Don Melchor, where he'll be making the Cabernet Sauvignon, and she'll make the Malbec.



producers whose style is defining the region. Wines with tension, high acidity, minimal oak and a sense of place form the oenological focus at Zorzal.

"The first objective is making wines with personality, and the soil is where the personality of the wine is," says the 33-year-old. "We use concrete eggs because there's more potential for the character and personality of the wine. The wine moves inside the egg by itself, all the time it has lots of contact with the lees. They give it the character of the soil and I wanted to show the purest texture of Gualtallary."

It is perhaps the four Pinot Noirs he makes that are most surprising, offering none of the lush, over-ripe fruit or toasty oak one might have associated with Argentine Pinot from years gone by, but instead crisp wines with gunflint and mineral qualities, and in one case using 100% carbonic maceration.

While there are single varieties in the Zorzal portfolio, Michelini is more interested in blends or not listing the variety. "People won't talk about the variety in the future, they will talk about

Gualtallary," he says. And when they talk about Gualtallary, they undoubtedly will talk about Michelini.

## 7. SANTIAGO MAYORGA, NIETO SENETINER

In 2013, 33-year-old winemaker Santiago Mayorga moved from boutique Mendel producing 180,000 bottles a year to Nieto Senetiner producing 18 million bottles a year. "For me this was like moving to a big city, to Manhattan!" says Mayorga about the change. "Although there's always bureaucracy in a big company, I decided I needed to relax and start marking the details."

Since then Mayorga has already introduced a shift in style and some attractive details: reducing the oak impact (from 24 months to 18 months in the Cadus lines), harvesting a bit earlier and focusing on a new appellation series.

While red remains the winery's strong point, Mayorga is introducing a new emphasis on its whites, bringing in a top level Chardonnay in the Cadus range and introducing a bright Sauvignon Blanc in the entry-level Emilia line. His speciality though is Semillon, a grape he worked with for many years at Mendel and one of >





7. Santiago Mayorga

the oldest varieties in Argentina. Semillon has moved into obscurity in Argentina, with a bare handful of producers working with the variety. However Mayorga saw the potential of one of Nieto Senetiner's 50-year-old Semillon vineyards and has just launched the very first white DOC wine in Argentina, which sells at just £6.

Mayorga is steering one of the most traditional Argentine producers in a new direction, and navigating such a large boat will undoubtedly create a ripple effect in the near future.

## 8. LORENA MULET BODEGA CRUZAT

Mulet has been making some of Argentina's top sparkling wines for over a decade, and there is still more to look forward to. At only 35, she is the right hand of South America's most experienced sparkling wine producer Pedro Rosell at Bodega Cruzat.

Having studied under Rosell, Mulet went on to Luigi Bosca where she specialised in sparkling and fine wines, while also consulting for other sparkling wine producers. Five years ago, Rosell selected his former pupil Mulet to help run the production of Cruzat by his side and she hasn't looked back.

While Rosell, aged 78, is still very much part of Cruzat, Mulet has a promising future as one of Argentina's leaders in the category. Producing some of the country's best Champenoise- and Charmat-method bubbly, Cruzat is already the yardstick for Argentine sparkling wine.

The team has another game-changing sparkling wine up its sleeve though, to be released in the next couple of months:

"We are preparing the launch of a special edition millésime," reveals Mulet. "These are two sparkling wines that have only been produced in very small productions and when the harvest acquires an exceptional quality. They were both bottled over four years ago, from the 2006 harvest. One is 100% Pinot Noir, and the other Pinot Noir-Chardonnay." These will undoubtedly add more sparkle to Mulet's already bright future.

## 9. MATIAS RICCITELLI, MATIAS RICCITELLI WINES

Having been mentored from a young age by his father, internationally acclaimed Norton winemaker Jorge Riccitelli, 34-year-old Riccitelli Jnr is now making wines in his own right. For many years Riccitelli was head winemaker at Fabre Montmayou, but since last year he has



8. Lorena Mulet

been fully committed to his family project, Matias Riccitelli Wines, with award-winning results.

Part of the new generation of winemakers, Matias is one of the most promising on the scene, making well balanced and modern wines from a selection of vineyards in Luján de Cuyo and the Uco Valley. While his Malbecs continue to accrue awards, the latest focus of the winery is on bringing out a wider portfolio including premium oak-aged Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc, an unoaked Pinot Noir, and a Pinot Noir/Malbec rosé at the entry level.





Matias Riccitelli

## 10. FRANCISCO BUGALLO, CARA SUR

Although a small project, Cara Sur is already beginning to have some big repercussions. Avid mountain climber and garage winemaker Bugallo lives in the isolated mountain community of Barreal, tucked behind the Precordillera next to the Andes mountains, three hours from San Juan. It's here that the agronomist has been working with old vineyards that had long been forgotten about or undervalued as only suitable for cheap table wine. Breaking with convention, Bugallo has been making some eye-catching wines together with his renowned winemaker friend and partner in Cara Sur, Sebastian Zuccardi.

A high-altitude Bonarda and Argentina's first fine wine made of Criolla (Mission) are the two offerings to date, but this harvest you can expect a white Criolla too. As well as giving a fresh face to Criolla, the duo are revealing the

winemaking potential for Calingasta Valley – a secluded, high altitude region with excellent luminosity and an acute thermal amplitude. "Cara Sur is a small project, but the bigger project is getting Calingasta known as a wine region," says 33-year-old Bugallo who manages many of the vineyards in the valley and makes wine for some of his neighbours. "We can make very sincere mountain wine here."

Plans are in the pipeline for some more extreme mountainside plantations, but currently Cara Sur's refreshing, low alcohol wines are showing a new dimension of San Juan. db



Francisco Bugallo

## Honourable Mentions

While this list is mainly composed of the new generation of winemakers, or those taking Argentina in a more radical direction, there are of course many excellent winemakers not on the list who have been leading the segment and making award-winning wines for numerous years.

Distinguished winemakers who have been producing some of the highest regarded wines in Argentina over the last decade or more include (in alphabetical order): Susana Balbo (Dominio del Plata), Walter Bressia (Bodega Bressia), Roberto de la Mota (Mendel), Mariano di Paola (Rutini), Jose Galante (Salentein), Marcelo Pelleriti (Monteviejo, Marcelo Pelleriti Wines), Daniel Pi (Trapiche, Mar & Pampa), Jorge Riccitelli (Norton), Alejandro Sejanovich (TeHo, ZaHa), and finally, Alejandro Vigil (Catena Zapata, El Enemigo).

Other winemakers from the new generation who are beginning to impact the Argentine wine scene include (in alphabetical order): Paula González (Casarena), Andrea Mufatto (Bodega Gen, Zorzal), Alejandro Nesman (Piattelli), Mariano Quiroga (El Porvenir), Laura Sotelo (Zuccardi), Soledad Vargas (Finca La Anita), and Mauricio Vegetti (Gauchozco).



Trapiche's Daniel Pi