

Winemakers pioneer their art in Patagonia

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winemaker's job at harvest — when the winery gates are locked — and that Patagonia still maintains its rough, isolated frontier feeling. Throughout history, explorers, adventurers, and visionaries like Darwin and Saint-Exupéry were drawn to this place.

Winemaking in Patagonia sounds like a bad idea. This is the place so far from everything that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid came here to hide. This is the country where six bucks buys you a steak as big as your head. This is the land that made the late Bruce Chatwin, author of "In Patagonia," write: "From its discovery, it had the effect on the imagination something like the moon."

Though reports indicate that Chatwin was never one to refuse a drink, at no time did he mention Patagonia as a good spot for winemaking. Yet Noemía and Chacra are producing tiny quantities of world-class wines, and others may soon follow.

Compared with myriad and slick operations farther north in Mendoza, winemaking in Patagonia is a do-it-yourself adventure. Far away from easy access to the right equipment, Bodega Noemía's first vintages were made in fiberglass tubs usually used as septic tanks. That same year, Vinding-Diers's partner, Countess Noemi Cinzano, fractured a vertebra using a pole to "punch down" grapes.

That said, they are spoiled now by the winemaking they can do. Grapes are hand-picked and destemmed, and all of Vinding-Diers's wines are crushed by foot — luxuries you pay dearly for in Europe.

Getting here and staying put wasn't easy. Weeks before, I had presented my idea to a fever-ridden Vinding-Diers. He groaned, said yes, and hung up. After a two-day bus ride from Chile, I joined him for lunch and he asked why I was there.

"To get my fingers in the grease," I said, repeating our phone conversation, feeling the others at the table squirm. "To participate in the harvest for a week."

Hearing the idea as if for the first time, Vinding-Diers derailed. "Harvest is the busiest time of year. I can't baby-sit you for a week," he said. "I'm sorry, I was sick when we spoke. I can't have you here." He rose and left.

If you go . . .

In Patagonia, distances are vast and travel can be slow — a minimum stay should be no less than 10 days. Options include wildlife viewing on the Valdes Peninsula preserve, staying on a ranch, glacier viewing, hiking, and horseback riding. Or you can rent a 4x4 and drive Ruta 40 to the end of the world. Just make sure you've got two spare tires, extra gas tanks, and camping equipment.

Where to stay
Helsingfors Estancia
Av. Córdoba 827, piso 11, depto. "A" Buenos Aires
011-54-11-4315-1222
www.helsingfors.com.ar
Luxury accommodations on the Lago Viedma inside Los Glaciares National Park. Horseback and walking expeditions head out regularly, as does a trip to the Viedma Glacier on a Zodiac. \$235 per person, with meals and limited transportation.

Hotel Indigo
Ladrilleros 105
Puerto Natales, Chile
011-56-61-413609
www.indigopatagonia.com/uk/
The luxurious Indigo was conceived as a place to begin or end several days of intense hiking in the Torres del Paine National Park. Rooms begin at \$260.

Estancias de Santa Cruz
www.cielospatagonicos.com/
Has several working ranches across Patagonia where you can hike, ride a horse, or kick up your heels like a gaucho; Estancia Menelik is one of the most authentic. \$60-\$80.



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY/ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Walking through the vineyards at Bodega Noemía in the harvest season. During the harvest, grapes are massaged by hand through a grate (below) to remove the stems just after picking.



That afternoon, I took a run, trespassing across a neighboring vineyard. I thought about the trip, crossing the Andes between Chile and Argentina. I remembered the beauty of that morning's drive along the mythical Ruta 40 (the wild-eyed cousin of Route 66 that runs down to the end of the world), skirting the lakes and peaked mountains, then following the sparkling Limay River northeast through volcanic formations.

I looked around. The land was flat and often barren, but the pear and apple tree plots that are the area's agricultural backbone are protected by long rows of

poplars, framed by a fiery sunset and Patagonia's wind-stretched clouds. Even in the middle of nowhere, it's still easy to get that pioneer, stake-your-claim feeling.

Rocchetta took me in while Vinding-Diers cooled his jets, but he understood his neighbor. "Everything happens in four weeks at harvest time. It's like a puzzle."

Rocchetta has a full plate with Italy's ultra-high-end Sassicaia wines, yet his heart and soul are in Patagonia. "Have you heard of Super Tuscan wines," he asked with a mix of humility and self-assurance. "That's my family."

Why was he here?
"Today, life is fast drugs, fast food, fast sex, fast everything," he said.

Patagonia is the opposite of that. Here, people are vastly outnumbered by livestock, and the boundless stretches of beauty and desolation cause time to hang.

"Here, it's old-world wine-making that doesn't seem to be in fashion. Wine should be like tasting 365 days of a place, like a sensory photograph as opposed to throwing in new oak and extracting tannins. Then you have a lollipop. That's not for me," he said. "If you try to please everyone, you don't have an identity."

Instead, Rocchetta is creating his own.

In an old army Jeep, he drove up one side of the canyon that used to be the bank of the Río Negro. The sand, minerals, and sediment that make up the soil were revealed in the canyon walls. The sun was strong, the wind relentless: harsh conditions that yield a good grape.

Later, I tasted his wine, pinot noirs named for the years their vines were planted. I noted the deep rosy color of the 2006 Cincuenta y Cinco, with its spicy, then intense licorice smell.

Like the "gotcha" smile he flashed to say, "Hello, trespasser" when we met, Rocchetta grinned, knowing I was sipping one of the best wines of my life.

"That's why I got on a plane," he said. "To do something like this in Europe is almost impossible."

Essentially, they're coddling their fruit like serious European winemakers wish they could.

"In Bordeaux, those guys have been making wine for hundreds of years. Here, it's seven," said Vinding-Diers, who eventually realized I wasn't leaving. "That's what's fun."

With this in mind, I joined both wineries' teams for a few days in the fields.

"What should I wear?" I asked the crew chief.

solid that this was the only way to stir it up.

"Stand on top," said Vinding-Diers.

I grinned, stripped to my underwear, and stepped onto grapes that had been in the vat for only a day or two. Walking on the surface, the grape skins popped beneath my feet like caviar.

In a second vat, I sank into the mix while Vinding-Diers explained the science between my ankles; yeast is converting sugar into alcohol, a frenzied exchange that turns grapes into wine. Our feet stirred the vat to homogenize its contents.

Later he poured a glass from the vat's spigot. Taste, spit. Taste, spit.

"This is how we know what to do tomorrow," he said.

I did my own tasting and spitting later. Vinding-Diers's 2006 Bodega Noemía had a deep rose color with a lavender tinge and a smell that rivaled perfume in complexity, blending cream, fruits, and caramel. In my mouth, there were fruit and mineral flavors that were strong and clear without heaviness. At the end, my tasting notes read, "It fades out like the Patagonian skyline."

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