

Essence and Identity: Transformations in Argentine Wine, 1910-2010

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For wine industries worldwide, a driving force for the development of business strategies has been the perception and targeting of the consumer market(s). In the case of Argentina, the consumer groups of Argentine wine have changed substantially over the history of the industry from its inception in the 1880s through the present. This paper will focus on the specific "wine cultures" of core consumer groups in three crucial periods: the turn of the twentieth century when an artisanal industry grew to become the fifth largest in the world; the 1950s through the 1970s, the years in which the deterioration of wine quality matched the massive expansion of production; and the period of Argentina's "wine revolution" from the 1990s to the present.

The first part of the paper describes the makeup of the consumer market in each of the three periods, Southern European immigrants in the first decade of the 20th century; urban working class and middle class drinkers in Argentina in 1960s; and international consumers principally in the U.S. and Western Europe in 2000s. I include brief discussions of how these groups emerged as the decisive markets for Argentine wine. For the first period, I focus on massive immigration from southern Europe, specifically Italy and Spain, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the second period the rapid growth of major cities, particularly Buenos Aires, was accompanied by significant income redistribution initiated by populist regimes, led to the expansion in size, concentration and purchasing power of the consumer market. In the post-1980 years, the virtual collapse of that domestic consumption spurred the wine industry to seek new markets, principally in the US and the UK, as principal targets their production.

Each of these core consumer groups possessed their own distinctive "wine culture." The second part of the paper relates each of these wine cultures to the concrete aroma and flavor profiles of the wines produced during the three benchmark moments. The material for this section comes from the study of tasting notes produced by contemporary wine critics that I have accumulated from a broad diversity of publications for each period.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the symbols communicated in the imagery on cask and bottle labels and in winery advertising for each of the periods. The analysis takes two directions. First, through a content analysis of these images, I am able to focus on the identities wineries had and/or were trying to communicate about their products. I ask the quest and how those identities related to their perceptions of the wine culture of the core consumers. I follow this with an assessment about extent to which taste profiles of the wines for each period reflected content of bottles.