

# SOUTH AMERICA: THRILLING NEW CAMINOS IN THE SOUTHERN CONE

By Amanda Barnes

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Barnes is an award-winning wine and travel writer, and the author of *The South America Wine Guide*. Although born and raised in Hampshire, England, Amanda has been based in South America since 2009 and is a sought-after specialist in the wines of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil. She writes for several wine magazines and books in the UK and USA, including *Decanter* and *The World Atlas of Wine*, and is the editor of *The Circle of Wine Writers'* monthly publication.



In over a decade writing about the wines of South America, I can assure you that the ink is barely dry before I have to add a new side note or appendage to an article. The ‘highest altitude’ vineyard doesn’t stay the highest for long, nor does the ‘most extreme coastal’ vineyard, and there are pioneers aplenty that keep disrupting the status quo in the most delicious fashion. South America’s winemakers are taking full advantage of exploring their brave New World of wine. Here are some of the thrilling new directions, or caminos, in which the South American wine industry is moving.

## WE’RE GOING ON A TERROIR HUNT...

Argentina and Chile are titans within the world wine production, claiming fifth and eighth place respectively. But although they already have well established wine regions and producers, that doesn’t stop winemakers from adventuring into the unexplored. Each vintage there are a handful of new vineyards and wine regions pioneered in seemingly unthinkable places.

The first major movement in both countries has been further into the Andes mountains. Both Chile and Argentina’s main wine regions are fed by the snowmelt and rivers of the Andes mountain chain that acts as a geographical and political frontier between the countries. Wine regions have traditionally been nestled in the foothills and valleys below. But since the early 1990s there’s been a gradual movement higher into the mountains, seeking more interesting soils and cooler temperatures at higher altitude.

Long have Maipo and Cachapoal been known for their high altitude mountain wines, but today the highest vineyard in Chile is Viñedos de Alcohuaz in the Elqui Valley at 2,200 m.a.s.l.. Not only is the altitude different for Chile but the steep valley and angular quartz and volcanic soils make a dramatic departure from the flatter lands associated with much of the Central Valley. The wines reflect their dramatic landscape: intense and perfumed Syrah blends with Grenache and Malbec. Across the provincial border in Limari (a region best known for coastal wines) there’s another high altitude vineyard causing a stir, Tabali’s Rio Hurtado vineyard where winemaker Felipe Muller makes excellent Malbec and Viognier at 1,600 m.a.s.l..

Not quite as high, but just as extreme, are the new high-altitude vineyards of Aresti in Curico. This is a region traditionally associated with vineyards on the flat central valleys, but today Aresti makes fragrant, elegant Merlot at their mountain vineyard some 1,245 meters high in the Andes—only accessible by 4x4!

Over the border in Argentina, the frontiers of Mendoza’s Uco Valley are ever moving towards the Andes on the west. With notable high altitude vineyards including Salentein’s new adventures in San Pablo at 1,700 m.a.s.l., Terrazas de los Andes new El Espinillo vineyard in Gualtallary at 1,450 m.a.s.l., and the new vineyards being planted even higher in La Carrera.

But some of the more unusual developments in Mendoza are between the pre cordillera mountain range and frontal mountain range in the otherworldly landscape of Uspallata. This arid mountain town is better known as the last petrol stop before arriving to the border with Chile and the quiet town where Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow lived for a few months while filming *Seven Years in Tibet*. The fact that Uspallata’s main claim to fame is already 25 years old shows you how little really happens in Uspallata... But today it can lay claim to the highest altitude vineyard of Mendoza, Estancia Uspallata at 2,000 m.a.s.l.. Surrounded by flame red mountains, it’s a wild vineyard to see and the wines are rather wild to taste. Fragrant and spicy Malbec, floral Pinot Noir with notes of wild mountain herbs and savoury sparkling wines.

The highest in Argentina though are the sky scraping vineyards of northern Argentina in the Calchaquí Valleys and Jujuy. In the Calchaquí Valleys, Colomé’s vineyard at 3,111 m.a.s.l. claims the throne of the highest vineyard but also an impressive endeavour with a museum, wine hotel and winery—all of which are only accessible by driving three hours on a dirt road. In Jujuy, the newest chart topping vineyard is at 3,300 metres altitude!

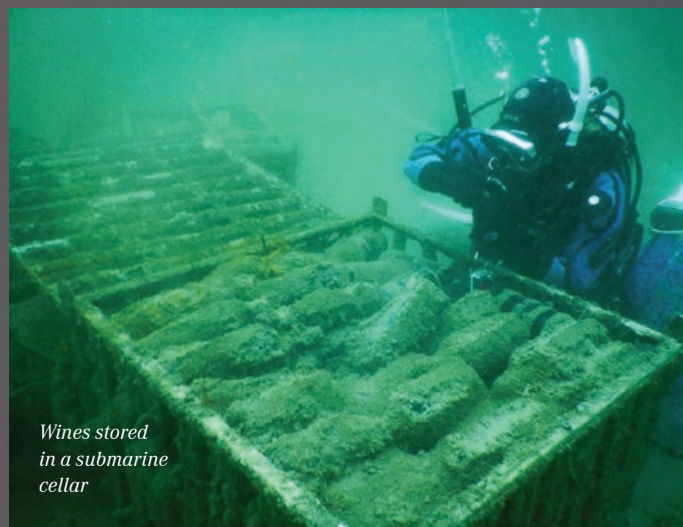
And few can compete with the almost exclusively high altitude vineyards of Bolivia. South America’s landlocked country at the heart of the continent where no vineyard is less than 1,600 m.a.s.l.. and where the highest plantations, although scarce, are just outside Potosí at almost 4,000 m.a.s.l.. Whichever wine from Bolivia you taste, high altitude marks it in its entirety: intense in colour and tannin with refreshing acidity.

In Brazil altitude is also proving a promising new direction for producers—where temperatures are cooler, the microclimate is less humid and where soils are better draining. Santa Catarina’s Planalto Catarinense was known for its crisp, fresh apples until the first pioneers planted there in 1999. Now the vineyards, at around 1,400 m.a.s.l., are known for their fresh, crisp Sauvignon Blanc wines and cooler climate Cabernet Sauvignon wines. And São Paulo and Minas Gerais have seen a rather unlikely rush of plantations along their Serra da Mantiqueira mountain chain, where you can flip the vintage on its head by harvesting in winter to make fresher, high-altitude Syrah harvested in the cool but sunny winter month of July.

## A NEW REACH FOR THE BEACH

It isn’t only upwards that’s the new direction in South American wine, but also towards the coast. Uruguay had always been able to boast being South America’s only true Atlantic wine region and continues to develop new wine regions along the coast extending from traditional Canelones eastwards to Maldonado and Rocha.

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*Wines stored in a submarine cellar*

◀ But today Uruguay is also joined by Argentina in boasting Atlantic maritime wines. Costa y Pampa's new vineyards in the province of Buenos Aires, in Mar del Plata, helped put Argentina's coastal wines on the map. And the addition of Wapisa's coastal vineyards in Río Negro, where wines are stored 10 metres under water in a submarine cellar, is sure to make a splash soon.

The long Pacific coastline on the western side of the continent is what brings cooler breezes and fog to make vineyards possible in the desert climes of Peru and northern Chile. But it was seen as a hindrance until recently—far too cold to allow any grapes to grow within reach of the sometimes biting temperatures and frosts. Since Pablo Morandé's brave bet on Casablanca in the 1980s though, Chile's coastal regions have developed at incredible pace to now include not only 5,800 hectares in Casablanca but also 2,300 in nearby San Antonio and 350 hectares in Aconcagua, almost 1,000 for wine grapes in Limari and 100 in Elqui further north. The most extreme coastal vineyards in Chile include Casa Marin's vineyard in Lo Abarca at just four kilometres from the coast, and Viña Leyda's new vineyard which is also four kilometres from the coast.

Further south there are more coastal vineyards in Colchagua, Maule and Itata. Although they are typically further inland, the combination of lower latitudes and coastal influence can make these refreshing wines indeed. One of the more extreme new coastal vineyards is Leo Erazo's Cobquecura vineyard of Riesling and Chenin Blanc in Itata, just a couple kilometres from the sea. Only planted four years ago, the slow growing fruit is yet to come to maturation. It's a similar case with one of Chile's most extreme vineyards in all senses of the word—not only coastal but daringly southern too—the vineyard of Aurelio Montes in the chilly archipelago of Chiloé at 42.6° S latitude where he has Albariño, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Riesling planted on the shoreline. Time will soon tell if this is feasible or folly.



## TAKING SOUTHERN CONE WINE EVEN FURTHER SOUTH

Although the Chiloé vineyard is definitely one of the greatest risks in new Chilean wine regions, planting at these southerly latitudes is a risk producers are increasingly willing to take. Until the 1990s, there was no thought of ever planting below Río Negro in Argentina and Bio Bio in Chile as the temperatures were thought to be too cold and prone to frost. But Felipe de Solminihac thought otherwise and his Sol de Sol vineyard in Malleco was the first of Chile's deep south which proved that there was wine life beyond Bio Bio. Today his thrilling Sol de Sol Chardonnay wines, racy Sauvignon Blanc and nuanced Pinot Noir have encouraged producers including the likes of De Martino, Clos de Fous, Viña San Pedro and William Fevre to plant there.

Even further south, in Chile's lakes regions, there is also a motley area of wine producers hedging their bets on the relative safety of the moderating impact of large bodies of water to plant lakeside vineyards at these extreme latitudes. The distinctive wines of Casa Silva's Lago Ranco, Viña Trapi and Miguel Torres' Cordillera prove that this was a risk worth taking and are making some of the most engaging Sauvignon Blanc wines today, as well as good Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Noir.

On the other side of the Andes there's also an exploration into Patagonia happening. The late Bernardo Weinert was the first to plant in Chubut, taking several vines along with his fishing tackle on one trip in 1995 into this popular fly fishing region. His big catch wasn't only trout, but finding several families willing to grow these vines for him and kickstart a cottage wine industry there. Today around Trevelin there are a handful of producers worth seeking including Contra Corriente, Casa Yagüe and Nant y Fall.

But the most notable producer in Chubut to date is Bodega Otronía—the world's southernmost commercial winery and vineyard at 45°S latitude. Winds whip at up to 100 km/hour here and snow is not uncommon in the winter, although the sunny lakeside exposure seems to work for the vines and the mouthwatering and complex Chardonnay and fragrant Pinot Noir is a great testimony to what can be achieved when winemakers break all the boundaries.

As the ink dries on my article today, I'm hesitant to put down the pen. Whether it be towards the deep south, the cool coast or higher into the lofty Andes, I'm sure there's more than one winemaker already en route to redefine the vinous map of South America once again. 🍷