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Report #57 Tannat and Other Wines of Uruguay

Introduction



While it is one of South America's smallest countries, Uruguay makes distinctive wines that are increasingly capturing the attention of wine connoisseurs. It has a unique terroir with a moderate, maritime climate, calcareous clay soils that are uncommon in the Western Hemisphere, and a rainfall pattern not unlike Bordeaux. And its adopted national grape Tannat makes wines that are richer and more accessible than those of Madiran in Southwest France where the grape originated. Its small, family-owned wineries face challenges competing with the behemoths of Chile and Argentina, but Uruguay's wine industry leaders have over the past quarter century aggressively sought out the best international expertise. The result has been a radical transformation in viticulture and winemaking among its export-oriented wineries.

With just 3.4 million people in a country the size of Washington State, Uruguay is South America's fourth largest wine producer, after Argentina, Chile and Brazil. It has over 250 mostly small wineries, most of which produce low quality wine in demi-johns and tetrapaks for the domestic market. The 30 or so export-oriented wineries instead sell much of their products in the increasingly international marketplace, with growing success.

Winemaking arrived in Uruguay with its Basque, Spanish and Italian immigrants. One of them started growing

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Tannat, which is now the national grape. Tannat is famous for its assertive tannins, but with the help of international consultants Uruguayan producers have learned how to work in the vineyard and the winery to tame the grape and craft high quality wine. Today, the top Tannat wines offer a well-structured elegance of pure flavors on a silky textured palate that surpasses Tannat wines produced elsewhere in the world.

This report explores the vineyards and wines of Uruguay. It examines the history of wine in Uruguay and, especially, the recent history of new clones, improved canopy management, micro-vinification, and many other changes that have contributed to the improved quality of Tannat and other wines. We look at the important role of modern-day

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wine pioneers like Reinaldo De Lucca and Francisco Carrau, the contributions of consultants like Alberto Antonini and Duncan Killiner, and the importance of recent investors like Alejandro Bulgheroni, Juan Francis Bouza, Alvaro Lorenzo and Paula Pivel, and the Deicas family. We also provide comprehensive profiles of Uruguay's major wineries and tasting notes and ratings of almost 200 wines.

In the final section of the report we focus on the marketing challenges facing Uruguay as it seeks to increase its fine wine exports. As part of its strategy it will need to increase consumer knowledge about the very special qualities of Uruguay and its wines. In this connection, Wines of Uruguay is playing a vital role with other partners in supporting the joint marketing activities of its member wineries, large and small. In the years ahead we fully expect the world of wine to recognize Uruguay as a key producer of high quality wines and, especially, Tannat.

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