

Out from the Shadows

URUGUAY IS READY FOR ITS CLOSE-UP story and photos by Anthony Dias Blue

Uruguay? Where's that? Dwarfed by

its two South American east coast behemoth neighbors—Argentina and Brazil—this tiny country of 3 million people is easy to overlook. But wait just a minute. It's time for the world to notice Uruguay . . . and its terrific wines.

Uruguay has been a well-kept secret. Nevertheless, for years its pristine beaches have been the warm weather playground of the well-heeled of Buenos Aires. Its banks have been the refuge for those looking to escape the economic chaos of Argentina. And now, its wines are beginning to attract consumers looking for exciting, modern and reasonably-priced bottlings.

Like Argentina, Uruguay was settled by Europeans—mainly Spanish and Italian, both people with a strong wine culture. The difference in areas of production between the two is, however, considerable. While most Argentine vineyards are located on the high desert plain east of the Andes, Uruguay's vineyards are mostly maritime. Many are within a few miles of the Atlantic Ocean.

As a result of this diversity, different grape varieties have come to dominate the respective wine cultures: Malbec in Argentina, Tannat in Uruguay. Both of these varieties come from vineyards in Southwest France, Malbec from Cahors

and Tannat from Madiran. In both cases, what makes somewhat coarse and rustic wines in France, makes charming, fruitforward wines in South America.

Montevideo, Uruguay's capital, is an amiable city of 1.5 million—half the country's population. The city is surrounded by the waters of the Rio de la Plata on three sides. It has an easy-going, lived-in feel. The people are friendly, generous and fun-loving and restaurants are throbbing with life until well after midnight (most Uruguayans would consider a dinner reservation before 10 p.m. as gauche).

Uruguay is not a particularly hospitable destination for vegetarians. In fact, vegetables are not a big part of the local diet. Beef, on the other hand, in the form of *asado* (sort of a giant mixed grill), is most of the diet. The average Uruguayan consumes over 150 pounds of beef annually.

Uruguayans also take their wine seriously. The country has been producing wine for more than a century but a new generation, many of whom trained in Mendoza, has updated the technology, streamlined the vineyards and upgraded wine quality.

Most wine production is located north of Montevideo in the department of Canelones. Other vineyards can be found in nearby Colonia, San Jose and Maldonado.

Marichal

This small winery was established in 1938 by the Marichal family who descended from immigrants from the Canary Islands. All wines are produced from estate-owned vineyards planted in Canelones's limestone-clay soil.

The winery is run by the fourth generation of Marichals, brothers Juan Andrés and Alejandro, with help from the third generation, their mother Lidia and father Juan Carlos. The winery produces Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Tannat.



Tasting Notes

A small selection of the best releases I tasted. Approximate SRPs are given for wines available in the U.S. market. A.D.B



Marichal 2011 Premium Varietal Chardonnay, Canelones. Fresh and clean with good depth of flavor; lovely fruit with good minerality and pure, long flavors; no ML, no oak. **90**

Marichal 2009 Tannat, Reserve Collection, Canelones. Deep, rich and tangy with spice, lively black raspberry and racy acidity; crisp, generous and complete; balanced and delicious.

91 FACE TO FACE (CA)/TKO WINES (MN)

