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Stirring the lees with James Molesworth

A Sit Down with Argentina's Ricardo Santos

A veteran of the Argentinean wine industry still does it his way

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"Argentinean wine is hot. Malbec is really hot. Lots of new hotshot wineries are popping up. Single-vineyard wines are proliferating. The wine face of Argentina is new, young and popular.



In the race for the newest though, it's sometimes easy to overlook those who have been there all along. Ricardo Santos, 72, has seen the Argentinean wine business go from nothing (in terms of exports) to where it is today.

"I'm deaf, I'm old and some people think I'm stupid," says Santos. "But I also drink Malbec," he adds with a hearty, gravelly laugh.

Born in Buenos Aires, Santos studied architecture in the U.S., earning a degree "half a century ago" from the University of Virginia. While studying in the U.S., his father bought the Bodega Norton winery back in Mendoza. Upon returning to his native land, Santos married and raised his family (four children) while living on the winery property. It didn't take long for him to eventually give up architecture as a career to work alongside his father at Bodega Norton.

Santos eventually took over from his father and in a chance meeting with an American businessman in 1972, he suddenly became one of the first Argentinean wineries to export its Malbec to the U.S. market. The wine at the time—a '71 Malbec—was made without any oak and sported 14.6 percent alcohol, a soaring number at the time that resulted in the wine being taxed at the rate for liquor, rather than table wine. Today that alcohol level seems modest, while the lack of new oak would be considered a charming but outdated tradition by some.

Santos sold the Norton winery in 1991 and thought he would be out of the wine business from there on. But two years later he and his wife, Estella, bought a small farm in Mendoza—some vines, olive trees and the like. You can probably guess the rest from there. He sold the

grapes off for a few years but by '95 he was bottling his own production again, this time under his own name.

Now with his son Patricio handling the winemaking, Santos produces about 11,000 cases annually of Malbec from his own estate and 3,000 cases of Sémillon, using fruit purchased from a very old vineyard that Santos used to buy from when he ran Norton.

Both wines are still made with little to no oak—stainless steel now instead of the cement vats in the past. The Malbec Mendoza La Madras Vineyard 2007 (88, \$19) has quietly established a steady track record for delivering fresh, exuberant fruit at a solid price. The current 2007 bottling only carries 13.9 percent alcohol too, well in the shadow of the 15 percent-plus wines now routinely coming out of Argentina and many other places.

The Sémillon Mendoza Una Seleccion de la Finca de Roberto Azaretto 2008 (\$15, NYR) offers very good quality, showing the grape's lightly waxy edge, along with tasty tangerine, peach and cardamom notes. It's a grape that is all-too-often overlooked.

Both wines are unadorned in style, staying fresh and forward, with accessible fruit and medium-bodied texture and structure. But Santos isn't trying to catch on to a new wave—he's just doing what he has been doing all along. For some, the concept of "tradition" provides an excuse for lazy winemaking; for Santos, it's a reflection of what he wants to drink.

"Malbec has few tannins and it matures rapidly," he says, offering a slightly different take from most on the grape. "It's beautiful for its aromas and fruit. If you add too much oak to that, you lose it ... and for Sémillon, wouldn't you rather drink that with a nice piece of fish, than some big, oaky Chardonnay?"

I guess you could say Santos has been around so long, he's cool again. With his retro-styled Argentinean Malbec and an offbeat white varietal, it's another example of why the wine business is so much fun."

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