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# SOUTH AMERICAN RED WINES A COMING-OF-AGE STORY

**David Williams** introduces a revealing tasting, shared with **Jamie Goode** and **Peter Richards MW**, of old and new vintages of some of the most celebrated red wines from Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, in light of which it was possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the progress that is being made by South America's leading producers—and the ageability of their best cuvées

In putting together a single, collective tasting of South American red wines, *WFW* has run the risk of offending the winemakers of a whole continent. One can well imagine a disgruntled Argentine, Chilean, or Uruguayan—let alone a Brazilian, Peruvian, or Bolivian who will find not a single representative of their burgeoning industries featured here—firing off a sarcastic letter to the editor asking when *WFW* might be considering its next “European reds” tasting. Tempers will hardly be cooled by the presence, in the same issue, of a tasting involving just as many wines as are featured here, devoted to the red wines of but one region of France (the Loire) that is, for many, still far better known for its white wines.

A charge of eurocentricity seems reasonable after even the most cursory consideration of the very distinct vinous histories of the three countries that are represented here. There is a common beginning for Chile and Argentina, in that wine culture—and *Vitis vinifera*—arrived in the two countries with the Spanish in the mid-16th century. But Uruguay's wine industry emerges only with the Basque and Italian immigrants of the late-19th century, by which time wine in Argentina and Chile had long since set out on their separate paths.

For much of the 20th-century, the three countries' wine industries were differentiated both by scale and the idiosyncracies of local culture: Argentina became the world's sixth-largest wine producer thanks to far

greater domestic consumption (as high as 90 liters per capita at its height in the 1960s) than was found anywhere else in Latin America (exports at the time were negligible). And although Argentine wine producers shared Chile's fondness for high-yielding Mission (known as Criolla in Argentina; País in Chile) successive waves of immigration (most notably from Italy and Spain) left them with far greater varietal diversity than anywhere else on the continent.

Of course, vineyard locations are every bit as crucial in defining difference in South America as they are anywhere else in the world. In Chile, the wine industry was overwhelmingly concentrated in the fecund Central Valley that extends south from the capital Santiago, with its warm, very dry summer climate, but recent years have seen a hugely beneficial and exciting exploration of the viticultural outer limits, from coast to desert to hillside, adding wines of nerve and edge to the bright and easeful fruit that has been the country's calling card.

On the east of the Andes, Argentine wine is still dominated and defined by Mendoza, just as it has been since the 18th century. But the recent exploration and definition of the region's sub-zones, and the thorough investigation of the play of altitude, grape variety (or clone), and terroir therein, has been no less bold and productive than the great Chilean viticultural migration that has been happening around the same time. And this in a country that can also

provide the dramatic contrasts of the world's highest vines in Salta in the far northeast and of cooler, more humid conditions found along the Río Negro valley, a slither of green amid the desert-like conditions of Patagonia in the south.

Finally, Uruguay's still-fragmented industry, with its legion of small-holding farmers, is a study in Atlantic influence, both on the heavy clay soils of the traditional winemaking center around the capital Montevideo and, to an even greater extent, in the developing area around Maldonado along the coast to the east, where greater altitude (of up to 300m [1,000ft]) adds appreciably to the cooling effect.

## Converging stories

An explanation is in order, then, to justify a one-size-fits-all approach to these ostensibly very different wine traditions, and it begins at a time when all three countries emerged from periods of brutal military rule—and varying degrees of economic isolation—in the 1980s. It was at this point that each country's modern winemaking industries really began to take shape in strikingly similar ways: that exports became a serious possibility for the first time, and that investment both internal and external began to flow. Chile was the earliest to find success, with a seemingly endless supply line of winningly generous, competently made, and keenly priced varietal wines helping it become the

world's fourth-biggest wine exporter by 2017. Argentina's progress has been more uneven, with export-focused businesses not always helped by the chronic instability of the Argentine economy, and with a much bigger (if by that stage rapidly declining) domestic market to serve. That it is now the ninth-largest global exporter of wine is thanks largely to a modern marketing success story in Malbec—a proposition that Uruguay has attempted to emulate, with some success, with Tannat.

If, to generalize slightly, the 1980s and early-1990s were marked by this modernizing zeal and the shift from servicing the domestic market with scant thought for quality, to providing clean, fruit-driven wines for drinkers in Baltimore and Bristol, the late 1990s and 2000s was when Argentine, Chilean, and Uruguayan producers set out seriously to prove that they could compete in fine-wine territory. Progress was not always smooth. On my frequent visits to Chile and Argentina at this time, I came to dread the unveiling of the prized icon wine at the end of the tasting. Too often, the whole portfolio seemed to follow a formula, with ascending prices matched to specific criteria, as if a single spreadsheet circulated among South American wine marketers to be passed down in the form of precise instructions to the winemakers: an unoaked varietal wine, a reserva with some oak content and a little more extraction, and then the deep, dark, usually overextracted monster, aged for long periods in the expensive, fragrantly high-toasted French oak barriques that had been the proud center-piece of the preceding tour of the winery facilities.

## Test of strength

This observation was by no means mine alone: the late Michael Cox, who for years ran the British branch of Wines of Chile, was wont to quip that icon, in the South American wine context, should be understood as two words. Recent visits have confirmed that this jibe, and others like it, have hit home, as, indeed, they have done all over the world; a tour of the winery at top Chilean, Argentine,

and Uruguayan wineries is now secondary to a tour of the vineyards, terroir trumps barrels in the marketing spiel, and drinkability and elegance take precedence over power and density in the tasting notes.

On one level, then, the purpose of this tasting was to assess whether or not that avowed change in philosophy shows up in the wines. There was also, at least on my part, a desire to see if my prejudices about the early vintages of self-consciously fine South American wine were misplaced. Could the quality of the fruit transcend, with age, what Peter Richards MW calls “the post-Millennial” excesses of *élevage* in the same way that I've admittedly sometimes found to be the case with the better modernist Riojas?

In limiting the tasting to producers capable of showing both an older and latest vintages (largely a decade or more apart, but with a smattering of vintages from the 1990s and one pair separated by a mere four years), we have inevitably missed out some of the cutting-edge of the continent's fine-wine production, both in terms of new producers and the many new vineyard areas that are only now beginning to hit their stride. In casting our net so geographically and varietally wide (high scores were given to wines made from Cabernet, Malbec, and Carmenère), we also had to accept that any conclusions about terroir and grape variety would be broad and shallow. Indeed, given the tasters distributed their highest scores fairly evenly between Argentina and Chile (the small Uruguayan sample fared slightly less well with just one wine, Bodegas Garzón Single Vineyard Tannat 2016 in any of the tasters' Top 10s), I would hesitate to draw too many conclusions even on a national level.

What can be concluded, however, is that, in terms of providing wines of real pleasure, the tasting was a qualified success, with a healthy cluster of high-scoring wines, albeit for different reasons for different tasters. Although there was an utterly beguiling savory complexity and, as Richards puts it, “killer combination of intensity and harmony” among the older vintages—

and although one of the highest-scoring wines in the tasting, the 1995 De Martino Cabernet Sauvignon, was the oldest vintage on show—too many of the older wines were, for me, let down by a sometimes overwhelming spicity heat; the throttle had indeed been pushed too far, and the wines were effectively burned out. I nearly always preferred the younger vintage in any given pair, and they provided six of my eight highest-scoring wines. Is this a sign of progress? A small sample, but I relished what seemed to me to be the greater verve and precision in the more recent wines of, among others, Catena and Errázuriz.

Richards, by contrast, preferred the older wines (Jamie Goode was somewhere between the two of us), which he interprets as proof of the ability of South American wines to age, rather than any fall in winemaking standards. I agree. One of the pleasures of this tasting was the all-too-rare opportunity to try South American wines with some age, even if the latest vintages seem to me to hint at an even brighter future.

## DAVID WILLIAMS'S TOP WINES

|  |                               |    |
|--|-------------------------------|----|
| Achaval-Ferrer Finca Altamira Malbec       | Mendoza Argentina 2014        | 94 |
| Catena Zapata Nicolas Catena Zapata        | Mendoza Argentina 2013        | 94 |
| De Martino La Cancha Cabernet Sauvignon    | Valle del Maipo Chile 2015    | 94 |
| De Martino Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley | Chile 1995                    | 94 |
| Errázuriz Don Maximiano Founder's Reserve  | Valle de Aconcagua Chile 2014 | 94 |
| De Martino Carmenère Maipo Valley Chile    | 1998                          | 93 |
| Trapiche Gran Medalla Malbec               | Mendoza Argentina 2015        | 92 |
| De Martino Alto de Piedras Carmenère       | Valle del Maipo Chile 2015    | 92 |

## AVERAGE AND RANGE OF SCORES

|         | Average | Range |
|---------|---------|-------|
| Tasting | 88      | 74-95 |
| JG      | 88      | 83-93 |
| PR      | 88      | 74-95 |
| DW      | 88      | 78-94 |

**De Martino**  
**La Cancha Cabernet Sauvignon**  
**Valle del Maipo Chile 2015** | 92  
(13.5% ABV)

**JG** | Some slightly resinous, tarry hints to the sweet blackcurrant and blackberry fruit on the nose. This has some mint/eucalypt character under the compact fruit, with some structure on the finish. There's good focus to the fruit here. | 90

**PR** | Deepish hue. Herbal red- and black-fruit aromas, some hints of warm earth and roasted pepper. Quite subtle and restrained. Not shouty. Lovely tension and line on the palate, then a wonderfully refreshing and revitalizing finish. Lifted, pure, svelte. The one weak point is the aromatic lift—put simply, it needs more—but this could still develop with time in the bottle, as the wine is still youthful. What's refreshing and exciting about this wine for me is the tension, focus, and clear ageworthiness in evidence. | 93

**DW** | Very composed and harmonious on both the nose and the palate, with judiciously ripe fruit and integrated oak in balance with tannins that are attractively textured, plus freshness and good length. This is a very nice example of harnessing Chile's natural exuberance without allowing it to run off at the mouth. This offers great drinkability. | 94



**De Martino**  
**Cabernet Sauvignon**  
**Maipo Valley Chile 1995** | 92  
(13% ABV)

**JG** | Very mature. Some minty notes alongside malt, earth, and leather characters, as well as some strawberry and plum fruity notes in the background. Still alive, and with some mellow harmony on the palate, but reaching the end of its life. Good if you are a fan of this generic old red wine character. | 87

**PR** | Notable age is evident here, both to smell and to taste. Roasted pepper, tobacco, and dried fruit on the nose. Complex, refined, elegant yet expressive. Lovely distinctive Cabernet class and character. Fully mature, great energy still, drinking very well now. Tannins are fine, elegantly drying. Flavors layered and savory. Delicious! | 95

**DW** | Gracefully mature with a spark of freshness still there amid the attractively grippy tannins and savory soy, leather, and a touch of balsamic. Great length, aromatic complexity, real intrigue and pleasure. | 94

**HERBAL RED- AND BLACK-FRUIT AROMAS, SOME HINTS OF WARM EARTH AND ROASTED PEPPER. QUITE SUBTLE AND RESTRAINED. NOT SHOUTY. LOVELY TENSION AND LINE ON THE PALATE, THEN A WONDERFULLY REFRESHING AND REVITALIZING FINISH. LIFTED, PURE, SVELTE. TENSION, FOCUS, AND AGEWORTHINESS**

**Errázuriz Don Maximiano**  
**Founder's Reserve Valle de Aconcagua Chile 2014** | 92  
(14% ABV)

**JG** | Fresh, focused and quite elegant with lovely blackcurrant and cherry fruit, with a bit of raspberry freshness. Nicely focused fruit here. Linear and not overripe, with good potential for development. | 93

**PR** | Creamy oak is prominent in the aromatics. Backed up, it has to be said, with cassia and herbs. The tannin is present but somewhat disparate and this, the creamy oak, and ripe fruit give a slightly disturbing aerial quality to the wine. Needs more grounding and focus. Finish lacks fresh fruit so is chewy. Some good elements but lacks overall cohesion. | 88

**DW** | A deliciously exotic swirl of black fruit and subtle medicinal notes on the nose. The palate is luxurious but also very nicely balanced, with plentiful but beautifully polished tannins and just a snap of curranty freshness. Very long and fine. | 94



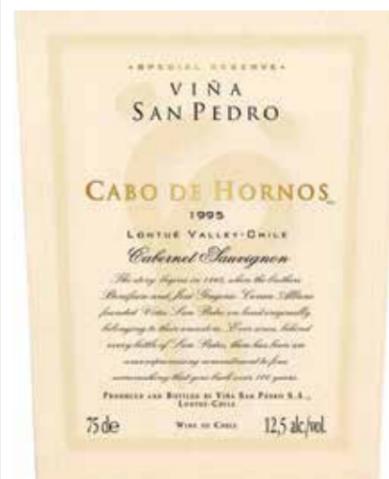
**San Pedro Cabo de Hornos**  
**Cabernet Sauvignon**  
**Lontue Valley Chile 1995** | 92  
(12.5% ABV)

**JG** | Evolved baked plum and damson nose, with some earthiness. The palate is a bit better, with smooth, harmonious berry fruits together with

earth, spice, and old leather characters. Has a hint of mint and some green sappiness. Very mature now, but hanging in there and delivering some mellow pleasure. | 90

**PR** | Tobacco, dried fruit, and toffee-apple aromas. Lifted and inviting, quite plush in feel. A touch of meaty brett character creeping in. Wonderful energy, intensity, and harmony here. Layered, complex, a brilliant blend of the savory and the sweet. Fine, firm tannin and well-judged acidity sustains it all. Hints of forest floor and truffle. Complex, energizing, almost exponential finish. Tremendous stuff. | 94

**DW** | Some attractively truffly fruit on the nose and a ruffle of very dry tannin on the palate; still some life here, though, with layers of flavor and a certain suaveness of texture and perkiness. Just a slight feeling of alcoholic heat as the fruit has faded, but of real (and much more than historical) interest. | 91



**Catena Zapata Nicolas Catena**  
**Zapata Mendoza Argentina** | 92  
**2004** (13.9% ABV)

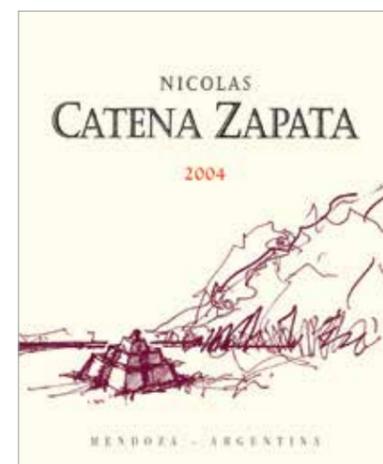
**JG** | Ripe, supple, smooth, and sweetly fruited. Generous blackcurrant fruit on both nose and palate, with some creamy richness. Has a slight saltiness, too. There's some harmony here, but it's ripe and sweet and has some oak character, although all the elements seem to be blending very well. | 91

**PR** | First bottle is faulty, both bretty and corked. The second bottle is above ideal cellar temperature (it's a hot day), showing both roasted pepper/herbal character and a dark, malty tone. Some elegant tannin and palate structure. Decent length, depth, and textural elegance. Lovely persistence, too. This grows on you. | 94

**DW** | The first bottle was corked; the second bottle was at a slightly warmer serving temperature than the first, perhaps exaggerating the alcohol. Somewhat tougher tannin here (it has a high-cocoa-content dark chocolate-like texture), than in the younger vintage, too, but some extremely attractive fruits of the forest flavor. Substantial and rich, rather than finessed. | 90

**JAMIE GOODE'S TOP WINES**

- Errázuriz Don Maximiano Founder's Reserve Valle de Aconcagua Chile 2014 **93**
- Siebethal Tatay de Cristobal Carmenère Aconcagua Valley Chile 2007 **93**
- Errázuriz Don Maximiano Founder's Reserve Aconcagua Valley Chile 2005 **92**
- Bodega Noemía Patagonia Argentina 2016 **92**
- Siebethal Tatay de Cristobal Carmenère Aconcagua Valley Chile 2014 **92**
- De Martino Carmenère Maipo Valley Chile 1998 **91**
- Catena Zapata Nicolas Catena Zapata Mendoza Argentina 2004 **91**
- De Martino La Cancha Cabernet Sauvignon Valle del Maipo Chile 2015 **90**
- San Pedro Cabo de Hornos Cabernet Sauvignon Lontue Valley Chile 1995 **90**
- Luigi Bosca Icono Mendoza Argentina 2008 **90**
- Catena Zapata Nicolas Catena Zapata Mendoza Argentina 2013 **90**



**Luigi Bosca Icono Mendoza**  
**Argentina 2008** (14.7% ABV) | 91

**JG** | This has developed into a very smooth, sweet, ripe wine, with lush blackberry and cherry fruit. It has a hint of ash and tar, as well as smooth, spicy cedary oak. Tastes very sweet: a lush, modern sort of wine. Plenty of concentration and lots of ripe fruit character. Well made in this style. | 90

**PR** | Age has mollified the intensity of the hue—and of the aromas. Forest floor, baked mint, and dried fruit emerge. Lovely tense acidity at its heart, with fine firm tannin. Alcohol is intrusive on the finish, giving a raw and slightly caustic impression, which is a shame. Because beyond this, it's a wine of lovely complexity and savory depths. Over time in the glass, the aromas do tend to fall apart, but the acidity and tannin remain. | 91

**DW** | Intriguing and alluring nose, mixing evolved, soft berry fruit and savory-meaty tones; a suggestion of fruit sweetness still there, and impressive tannic framework with a long, dark-cherry finish. | 91

**Trapiche**  
**Gran Medalla Malbec**  
**Mendoza Argentina 2015** | 91  
(14.5% ABV)

**JG** | Focused, bright blackberry and blackcurrant fruit on both the nose and the palate, with some grippy, crunchy tannins and acidity that sticks out a little. It's ripe and sweet, and currently a bit unresolved. Some cocoa and spice on the finish. | 89

**PR** | Pretty youthful in both hue and aromas. Engaging plummy, damson notes, with a hint of lively pepper and violets. The tannins are fine, firm, and tense. Classy and focused in feel. Complex and layered, though relatively reticent in its youth and it lacks the extra dimension on the finish to be top drawer. It's still impressive, though. | 92

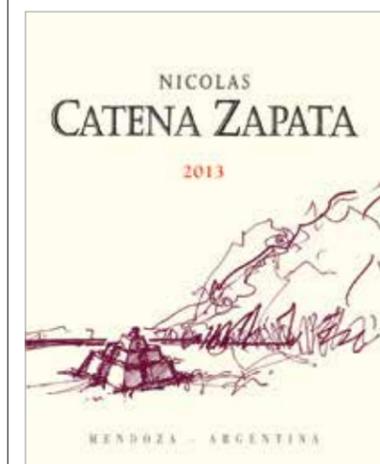
**DW** | Attractively deep but aromatically pretty nose, with alluring dark fruit. This is intense on the palate but silkily structured and succulent, with oak in balance and fruit to the fore, and good, dark-cherry-filled length. Very polished, fine tannins, balancing acidity. | 92

**Catena Zapata Nicolas Catena**  
**Zapata Mendoza Argentina** | 91  
**2013** (13.5% ABV)

**JG** | Blackcurrant fruit on the nose, with just a hint of earthy development and a twist of swimming pool. Good concentration on the palate, with dense, grippy blackcurrant and blackberry fruit. This wine shows focus and intensity, with very ripe fruit but also some structure. | 90

**PR** | Bright, puppyish enthusiasm right from the first impression. Tons of bright cherry fruit and creamy notes. Somewhat hollow on the mid-palate. Nonetheless, it has a gravity and persistence that may yet turn this around. For now, a slow burn. | 88

**DW** | Very bright and focused on both the nose and the palate, with elegant, fresh blackcurrant and black-cherry fruit, and very fine and appetizing tannins; great depth but a lift and raciness, too, and lots of life from the balancing acidity. Refined, modern Argentine fine wine. | 94



**Achaval-Ferrer**  
**Finca Altamira Malbec**  
**Mendoza Argentina 2014** | 90  
(14.5% ABV)

**JG** | Dense and structured, with a salty edge to the sweet blackcurrant and blackberry fruit. Slightly stewed, with a very sweet finish. Nice intensity and freshness, though. The cedary oak integrates well. | 88

**PR** | Classic stewed damson and black-pepper aromas. Young and tense in feel. Tannin is edgy, acidity relatively marked. Lacks the real persistence and complexity to veer into top territory. But it's elegantly refreshing. | 89

**DW** | Beautifully composed and harmonious, with real finesse and lightness of touch, red- and black-currant fruits and floral notes and a keenness of acidity; fine tannins and a long, haunting, perfumed finish. Graceful and stylish. | 94

**Errázuriz Don Maximiano**  
**Founder's Reserve**  
**Aconcagua Valley Chile 2005** | 90  
(14.5% ABV)

**JG** | Ripe, sweet, and generous, with a real sense of harmony to the lush blackberry fruit. This is a very ripe wine but it has kept its shape with age, displaying a mellow harmony and pure, sweet fruit. | 92

**PR** | Malty, smoky, dark dried cassia. Quite stolid in profile. The palate is the same. Doesn't give much, slightly unyielding in its foursquare, chunky stance. Sturdy. Steely gaze. All present and correct but lacks joy and generosity. | 89

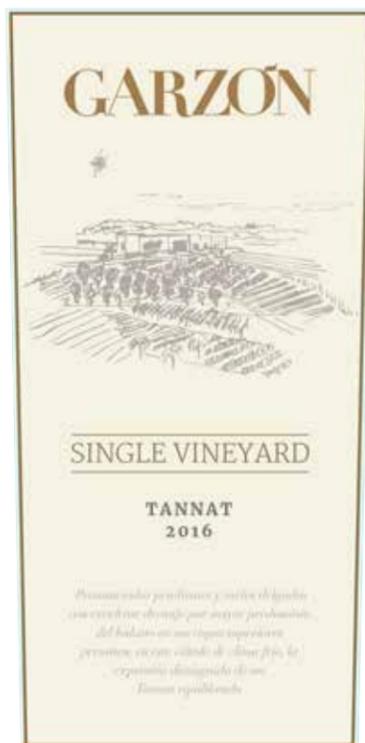
**DW** | Sumptuous fruit, very inviting in all its heady richness and the lingering power and viscosity. The tannins are pleasingly grippy without being overbearing. A little foursquare, and an unwelcome touch of alcoholic heat, but impressive nonetheless. | 90



**BEAUTIFULLY COMPOSED AND HARMONIOUS, WITH REAL FINESSE AND LIGHTNESS OF TOUCH. FINE TANNINS AND A LONG, HAUNTING, PERFUMED FINISH. GRACEFUL AND STYLISH**

**Bodega Garzón Single Vineyard Tannat Uruguay 2016** | 89  
(14.7% ABV)

**JG** | Dense, grippy, and firm, with sweet blackcurrant and cherry fruit. This is lush, with a liqueur-like edge to the fruit. Very ripe and sweet, but with well-integrated oak. | 89  
**PR** | Very young. Intense, dark-fruited, creamy aromas. Tremendous energy at its core but elegantly textured, firm but fine tannin. Despite the insistent and ripe dark fruit profile, it's not at all sweet. A hint of cordite... intriguing. Mineral dimensions. Very smartly put together, expressive, elegant despite being big, and age-worthy. I'd love to see this in ten years. | 91  
**DW** | Luxuriously ripe and full, with plump soft berry fruit and a stealthy tannic grip, intense, impressively so, if rather one-dimensional at the moment. A little short in the finish. | 86



**Santa Rita Casa Real Cabernet Sauvignon Chile 2013** | 89  
(14.1% ABV)

**JG** | This is focused, with vibrant blackcurrant and blackberry fruit, but also some grippy tannins and a bit of bitterness. Sweetly fruited and ripe in style, but with a nice fruit drive. | 89  
**PR** | Peppery, bright cassis fruit, with a hint of figginess. Firm, almost austere palate, with grippy tannin, bright acidity. The finish is decent if not outstanding. This could evolve well but is a little muted at the moment. | 90  
**DW** | Very ripe, silky-sweet blackcurrant fruit; this is easy, generous, plush, and full, with welcome tannic grip. Lacks a little freshness to complement the tannic grip. | 89

**Siebenthal Tatay de Cristobal Carmenère Aconcagua Valley Chile 2014** (15% ABV) | 89

**JG** | This is all about seamless ripe black fruits, with a sense of harmony and generosity. Lush blackcurrant fruit, with some smoothness. Broad and concentrated, and quite luxurious. It's an extremely ripe and rich wine, but there's clearly real appeal in this style. | 92  
**PR** | Engaging aromas of ripe dark fruit with earthy, stemmy notes. The palate is generous and succulent, with a warming alcohol on the finish. Heart-warming and rich, hard not to admire in this style but it becomes wearing after a while. A crowd-pleasing style that will have its fans but needs to focus more on refreshment value to improve and deliver more. | 90  
**DW** | Big and butch: a lot of sweetness, weight, and density, and the alcohol is very apparent. It's a one-glass wine for the moment, and I'm not convinced it has the structure or complexity to come good in the long haul. | 85

**Trapiche Gran Medalla Malbec Mendoza Argentina 2005** | 89  
(14% ABV)

**JG** | Evolved nose, with sweet, stewed plums and strawberries, together with some undergrowth and decaying leaf notes. Some sweet malty notes on the palate, with earthy undercurrents and nice supple fruit. This is fully developed and should be drunk soon. | 88  
**PR** | Deeply saturated color despite the browning evolution at the rim. Evocative aromas of tobacco and dried red fruits. Creamy, high tones, too. Spicy, with an intense mid-palate feel. Carries on right through to the end, where the alcohol is a touch raw and invasive, but this is a minor quibble. Complex, serious, elegantly aged style. Well-balanced, well-grounded (in acidity, elegance). | 93

**THIS IS ALL ABOUT SEAMLESS RIPE BLACK FRUITS, WITH A SENSE OF HARMONY AND GENEROSITY. LUSH BLACKCURRANT FRUIT, WITH SOME SMOOTHNESS. BROAD AND CONCENTRATED, AND QUITE LUXURIOUS. IT'S AN EXTREMELY RIPE AND RICH WINE, BUT THERE'S CLEARLY REAL APPEAL IN THIS STYLE**

**DW** | Intense and a little soupy, with alcohol prominent in kirsch-like style and rather tough, dry tannin lingering. Super-concentrated and hard work even after a decade. | 87

**Luigi Bosca Icono Mendoza Argentina 2015** (14.5% ABV) | 88

**JG** | Very sweet fruit with a slightly baked character. Lots of vanilla oak here, alongside the sweet, dense, ripe blackcurrant and blackberry fruit. Very modern, polished and intense. Currently youthful and primary. It may soak up the oak and evolve well, but it's very much in the international style. | 88  
**PR** | Polished and exuberant initially. Creamy, high-toned, with plummy notes. Spicy, hot, with stewed fruit. The tannin is fine but it needs more freshness and precision. It's a bit dead-eyed in its beauty-pageant ideal. Lacks soul. | 86  
**DW** | Big-boned and lots of new wood: really massive concentration; immense, intense, and heady. Well-structured, with creamy fruit power, but there is freshness, too, underscoring the mass. A keeper. | 90

**Concha y Toro Don Melchor Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Vineyard Puente Alto Chile 2014** | 88  
(14.5% ABV)

**JG** | Pure and fresh, with some red-fruit character on a background of blackberry fruit. Has good acidity and notes of warm herbs and sour cherries. Finishes with some bitterness and sourness. | 87  
**PR** | Fresh cassis with herbal tones. Fine, firm tannin. Juicy acidity. Nice mix of red and black fruits, some good freshness and lift here. Not perhaps the most distinctive or edgy style, it feels fairly middle of the road, but it's correct and precise. Neat and tidy. Alcohol is notable on the finish, though, so could be toned down in that respect. | 90  
**DW** | Smoothly ripe and intense, with plenty of ripe, verging on stewed, fruit. Powerful and easeful sweet fruit, but rather lacking in refinement and definition. | 86

**De Martino Alto de Piedras Carmenère Valle del Maipo Chile 2015** (13% ABV) | 88

**JG** | Fully mature, with a slightly bitter, drying finish. Has herbs and earth and leather. Mellow, with a twist of rusty iron and blood. Warm. | 86  
**PR** | Carnal, bloody character. Dried flowers and baked herbs. Fruit is fading but still some decent dried blackberry and plum. Finish fades pretty swiftly. Some good character and expression but it needs drinking up. | 87  
**DW** | Very luxurious in texture, this is remarkably full, hale, and hearty for its age, still somewhat chunky but with a plump, voluptuous feel and complementary grip. There are some slightly animal notes, and a bloody mineral feel at the core. This is very interesting, very savory, very long, just slightly marked down for the twinge of alcohol-burn. | 92

**Montes Alpha M Cabernet Sauvignon Blend Santa Cruz Chile 2003** (14% ABV) | 88

**JG** | Evolved, earthy, and medicinal, with some drying tannins under the decayed, fading berry fruits. Sweet and baked. Has some harmony, but it's very mature now and needs drinking up. | 85  
**PR** | Dusty, slightly murky aromas. First bottle corked. Second bottle also has a slightly murky, feral character to add to the baked cream and dark fruit. Generous but hollow on the finish, a maximum-expression style from a warm vintage that's showing its limitations in age. Chewy. | 88  
**DW** | Second bottle; served a little warmer than the rest of the flight. Again, like its junior partner there's mass here, beefy tannin and sweet pastille fruit, but joined by a little Rioja-esque savory leatheriness—it's holding up pretty well, but is at the end of its drinking window. | 90



**Siebenthal Tatay de Cristobal Carmenère Aconcagua Valley Chile 2007** (14.8% ABV) | 88

**JG** | This is generous and ripe, with sleek, rich blackcurrant and blackberry fruit, but there's also some freshness. It has developed very nicely, with a wall of sleek ripe fruit hitting the palate. I'm not sure how much longer it will age for, but it's delicious now in this bold, ripe, harmonious style. | 93

**PR** | Smoky, dried fruit aromas. Slight resinous notes. It has presence but largely in its syrupy fruit and spicy alcohol. Tannin provides little sustenance, nor does acidity—as a result, it is a slight morass, as this style tends to be when it ages. A wine for drinking young, if you like the style. | 87  
**DW** | Monolithic, salty, fiery, and intensely chewy and dry; there's little pleasure here now, as it's rather unforgiving. | 83

**Achaval-Ferrer Finca Altamira Malbec La Consulta Mendoza Argentina 2002** (13.5% ABV) | 87

**JG** | Evolved, slightly baked, earthy nose, with sweet fruit and some spiciness. Very developed on the palate, with mint, earth, iodine, and some medicinal notes. Savory and developed, this is a bit past its best. | 86  
**PR** | Very marked aromatic evolution. Papyrus or old vellum—like opening an ancient book. Very dried fruit. The palate still retains some underlying acidity and fine insistent tannin but the fruit has all fallen away. Shame! Some fresher fruit to start with may have helped here. Past its sell-by date. | 86  
**DW** | Deliciously pure dark raspberry and cherry fruit, with a pleasing snap of tartness, even crunchiness; there's good length here and cherry Bakewell flavors, even if it's clearly a little past its best now. | 89

**Aquitania Lazuli Cabernet Sauvignon Valle del Maipo Chile 2014** (14.5% ABV) | 87

**JG** | Still has freshness and fruit, with some sweet raspberry and cherry fruit as well as some herb and stewed plum notes. Acidity is noticeable, and

**VERY LUXURIOUS IN TEXTURE, THIS IS REMARKABLY FULL, HALE, AND HEARTY FOR ITS AGE, STILL SOMEWHAT CHUNKY BUT WITH A PLUMP, VOLUPTUOUS FEEL AND COMPLEMENTARY GRIP. THERE ARE SOME SLIGHTLY ANIMAL NOTES, AND A BLOODY MINERAL FEEL AT THE CORE. THIS IS VERY INTERESTING, VERY SAVORY, VERY LONG**

there's a minty green edge to the palate, but there's also some harmony and sweet lushness here, too. An unusual wine but not without charm. | 88  
**PR** | Only moderate depth of hue and aromatic expression. Some evolution notable, a slightly stewed feel to the fruit, a touch of smoke and tobacco. It's brief and lightweight on the palate. Some elegantly drying tannin but beyond this it's fallen away. | 87  
**DW** | This is retaining that easy Chilean Cabernet blackcurrant fruit and delectable fruit sweetness, albeit a little dulled with time, and with a little more tannic chew and bite; the alcohol is just creeping in there on the finish in a wine that is surely now towards the end of its drinking window. | 87



**Montes Alpha M Cabernet Sauvignon Blend Colchagua Valley Chile 2013** (14.5% ABV) | 87

**JG** | Ripe, sweet, blackcurrant and raspberry fruit, with a slight pastille-like character. Savory, spicy undercurrents and some warm cedary notes in the background. Lush and mellow. A ripe, generous style. | 89  
**PR** | Intense cassis aromas. Pretty pure in style. Tons of juicy dark fruit on the palate, looks good until the finish, which is dominated by raw, prickly alcohol. Shame! Some lovely elements here otherwise, and in the fruit and acidity you could see it evolving well... but the alcohol will remain invasive. | 88  
**DW** | Intense and very ripe in a rather monolithic way; a forceful mass of sweet fruit and oak and tannin, it lacks detail and tension. | 85

**Bodega Noemía Noemía Patagonia Argentina 2016 (magnum)** (14% ABV) | 87

**JG** | Sweet and refined, with a lovely structure. Has good concentration and a smooth, textured mouthfeel. Ripe and harmonious. Sleek and modern, but good. | 92  
**PR** | Quiet pale hue in the context of this tasting. Simple aromas of ripe plum and a touch of cherry. Firm, drying tannin. Simple and short. Perhaps with a plate of charcuterie... but beyond that it's pretty basic. | 83  
**DW** | Bright and pretty fruit on the nose but rather lacking in depth; a slightly hollow mid-palate, with somewhat overbearing chewy tannin and oak. Very young; a little ungainly, with jagged acidity. | 87

**Bodega Noemía Noemía Patagonia Argentina 2006 (magnum)** (14.5% ABV) | 87

**JG** | Ripe and sweet. Has developed some spicy, earthy savoriness under the sweet berry fruits. Shows nice texture and still has some fruit, with an easy, smooth quality. A little malty and cedary, with a twist of bitterness, but pleasant and drinkable. | 89

**PR** | Moderate hue. Retacent though evolved aromatics. Hints of woodsmoke and dried cassis. Touch of baked mint. On the palate it's quite gritty and perfunctory. Lacks finish and length. Rustic. More interesting than the younger version but not by much. | 86

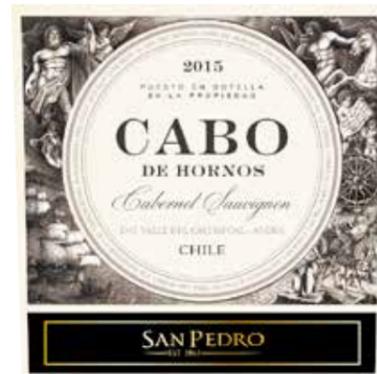
**DW** | Very soft and flattering, with cooked fruit and creamy notes; tannins a little dry and flat, with alcohol coming through. A little labored and heavy. | 87

**San Pedro Cabo de Hornos Cabernet Sauvignon Valle del Cachapual Andes Chile 2015** (14.5% ABV) | 87

**JG** | Supple, sweet, smooth berry and blackcurrant fruit. Very lush and open, with extremely ripe fruit flavors. Tastes quite sweet. Tannins are very soft, with a smooth mouthfeel. Lush and a bit overripe. | 88

**PR** | Cassis purée. Intense, ripe, heady. Sweet-fruited palate, layered and pretty intense. A generous style that's in proportion in the context—but it would be better (ie more refreshing, nuanced, and beguiling) with slightly more elegance and restraint. A touch short, despite the tons of winning character. | 90

**DW** | Some prettiness of fruit—red as well as black—but there's a hollowness to the palate through which the vapor trail of alcoholic heat passes. Not much pleasure here. | 84

**Aquitania Lazuli Cabernet Sauvignon Valle del Maipo Chile 2002** (13.5% ABV) | 86

**JG** | Sweet pastille-like berry fruits on the nose. Fresh, juicy, grippy palate with bright raspberry and cherry fruit, with a slightly sour, bitter edge. The acidity sticks out, accentuating the tannins and leaving the finish edgy and angular. This is not integrated. | 85

**CASSIS PURÉE. INTENSE, RIPE, HEADY. SWEET-FRUITED PALATE, LAYERED AND PRETTY INTENSE. A GENEROUS STYLE THAT'S IN PROPORTION IN THE CONTEXT—BUT IT WOULD BE BETTER WITH SLIGHTLY MORE ELEGANCE AND RESTRAINT. A TOUCH SHORT, DESPITE THE TONS OF WINNING CHARACTER**

**PR** | Not super-deep, quite pale in the context. Very upfront, arresting, and distinctive aromas of blackcurrant pastille and eucalypt oil. A touch caricatured and simplistic, to be honest. Palate is dominated by creamy, oily oak flavors and textures. Short. Lacking profundity or verve. | 85

**DW** | Classic Chilean fruit-pastille nose—unmistakable. Succulent and supple palate with lots of juicy fruit, this is generous but not overworked, with an easy-drinking and far from serious style. | 87

**Bouza Tannat B6 Parcela Unica Las Violetas Canelones Uruguay 2007** (16% ABV) | 86

**JG** | Evolved, earthy, spicy nose, with sweet berry fruits and a hint of mint. The palate is warm, sweet, and shows baked fruit with some grippy tannin on the finish. A sleek, ripe, lush wine that has lost more than it has gained through the aging process. | 86

**PR** | Whiff of the abattoir here. Bloody. Smoky. Savory. The palate coheres better than the younger version, even if the alcohol is marked and dries out the finish further. No shortage of flavor or intensity; the focus is decent but the finish is a little hard to bear, almost painful in its drying intensity. Cries out for food. *Asado*, anyone? | 89

**DW** | Spicy but tired and old, forced fruit, a rather sickly and overbearing style, with the tannins still very much to the fore and a fiery alcoholic heat. Slightly clumsy now. | 84

**Bouza Tannat B6 Parcela Unica Las Violetas Canelones Uruguay 2015** (15% ABV) | 86

**JG** | Powerful and intense, with bold, sweet black fruits. Inky, with some saltiness and a bit of alcoholic heat. Shows subtle baked characters. A very ripe, intense wine of great concentration. Firm finish. | 87

**PR** | Intense from its inky hue to its vibrant, peppery, floral, black-fruit saturated aromas. Super-fine and abundant tannin. The fruit could be fresher, though, to sustain and mollify the architecture. Alcohol invasive on the finish. It's all a bit too big. Every sinew is strained here. Refreshment value suffers as a result. | 87

**DW** | Super-intense, with the Tannat vice-grip tannins and somewhat stewed, overextracted fruit and harsh oak. | 84

**Concha y Toro Don Melchor Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Chile 2001** (14% ABV) | 86

**JG** | Some herb and earth notes as well as a twist of mint. Quite evolved, showing sweet, stewed fruit and a touch of earthiness. Mellow and mature now. The fruit is a bit faded. | 86

**PR** | Malty, black bread aromas. Dark and somewhat inscrutable. Savory tones on the palate, along with some succulent tannin and, while it has decent persistence, it lacks the real breadth and thrill of a great wine. Limited in scope. | 88

**DW** | The sweet fruit is still the dominant taste here, but the alcohol here is entirely dominant, particularly on the finish. It lets the side (or rather, the pretty, gently maturing fruit) down. | 85

**Bodega Garzón Garzón Reserva Tannat Uruguay 2011** (14.7% ABV) | 86

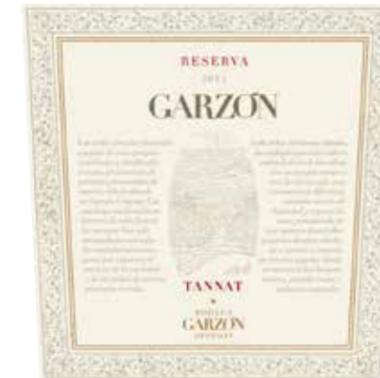
**JG** | Showing evolution on the nose, with iodine, mint, and medicine notes, as well as some ash. Malt and chocolate chip on the palate, with some warmth and a drying tannic finish. A bit all over the place, this hasn't aged very well. | 84

**PR** | Distinctive, characterful initial feel. Dried meat, a hint of gunpowder and flint, the pepper on your steak. Very evocative and different. Intense

**POWERFUL AND INTENSE, WITH BOLD, SWEET BLACK FRUITS. SOME SALTINESS AND A BIT OF ALCOHOLIC HEAT. SHOWS SUBTLE BAKED CHARACTERS. A VERY RIPE, INTENSE WINE OF GREAT CONCENTRATION. FIRM FINISH**

on the palate, spicy, nervy, tons of energy and verve. Still has a way to go! Top Tannat often speaks more of the underworld—brimstone, undergrowth, and minerals rather than airy fruit and vegetation. This is a great example, with the complexing agency of age. Not for everyone, but impressive nonetheless. | 90

**DW** | Lacking in definition and with the fruit long gone, this is largely overseasoned oak and alcohol now; it's noisy but without much substance. | 83

**De Martino Carmenère Maipo Valley Chile 1998** (13.5% ABV) | 86

**JG** | Concentrated and sweetly fruited, with lush blackberry and black-cherry fruit. Nice density here, and there's a compactness to the fruit that suggests it could still develop nicely. Some warm herbs and spices on the finish. | 91

**PR** | Subdued, short, and ungriving style. We try two bottles. They're not identical but both are limited in scope and pinched in aromatics. Ultimately, the wine is dull. | 74

**DW** | Rather mute aromatically, this is quite tightly coiled on the palate, but there's density and power there, waiting to spring out, and fine structure, too, with plentiful but ripe tannin and a line of natural acidity. There's some minerality here, too. Need to see it again in a few years' time, but this shows a great deal of promise. | 93

**Aristos Duque d'A Grand Cabernet du Chili Chile 2008** (13% ABV) | 85

**JG** | Initially this seems fresh and bright, but there's some sticking-out acid and some bitter, stewed plum and berry fruits. There's some warm spiciness and quite a bit of savory development, but the fruit still has a bit of brightness. Rather an awkward wine now. | 83

**PR** | Resinous, eucalypt, caricatured image of an iconic Chilean Cabernet. Tons of creamy confectionary flavors. The acidity and tannin are okay, actually, providing decent structure and backbone. But the flavors are just very resinous and in-your-face, and this is exacerbated by the alcohol. | 87

**DW** | The classical Chilean blackcurrant character is preserved in its sweet juiciness a decade on, only with dry tannin and a waft of spirity alcoholic heat, which makes for hard work in a wine now lacking a little in harmony. | 84

**PETER RICHARDS MW'S VERDICT**

Hard to draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of this tasting. The sample size was small and there were many variables at play, including a range of vintages, varieties, origins, styles, and even formats. Nonetheless, comparing older and younger versions of the same wines (in some cases, brands) was instructive. There was usually a good few years between vintages (the biggest gap was 20 years, the smallest four) so this allowed an insight into not only the inherent ageworthiness of the wines but also any changes in approach.

Though opinion was split among the tasters, I found much to admire in the older vintages, preferring the older wine in ten of my 17 pairs. Clearly, top-flight South American reds can and do age well—the resonance, typicity, and sheer vitality of De Martino's Cabernet Sauvignon 1995 was proof enough, a point ably seconded by the likes of Nicolas Catena Zapata 2004 and San Pedro's Cabo de Hornos Cabernet Sauvignon 1995 from Curicó.

The best wines, as ever, were those that pulled off the killer combination of intensity and

harmony. If any single element overstepped the mark—overly ripe fruit, or lackluster acidity, excess oak, insipid tannin—then things fell apart. Although high alcohol isn't inherently detrimental to quality, when allied to sweet fruit, low acidity, and soft tannin (as can be the case in South America) it can prove invasive. Too often I found myself writing or thinking, “shame,” when a wine that was shaping up well closed with an unwelcome, caustic hit of raw alcohol on the finish. Sadly, age merely exacerbates this effect.

There were some impressive younger wines, too. Trapiche Gran Medalla Malbec 2015, Garzón Single Vineyard Tannat, and the De Martino La Cancha Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 were cases in point. It will be instructive to see how these modern iterations age in their turn, especially since among the better producers there's a growing emphasis on focus, purity, and elegance after the excesses of the post-Millennium years. There are also many other wonderful South American reds (including Tannats and Carmenères) beyond the scope of this tasting. A return match is called for.

**TOP WINES**

De Martino Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Chile 1995 **95**

Catena Zapata Nicolas Catena Zapata Mendoza Argentina 2004 **94**

San Pedro Cabo de Hornos Cabernet Sauvignon Lontue Valley Chile 1995 **94**

De Martino La Cancha Cabernet Sauvignon Valle del Maipo Chile 2015 **93**

Trapiche Gran Medalla Malbec Mendoza Argentina 2005 **93**

Luigi Bosca Icono Mendoza Argentina 2008 **91**

Bodega Garzón Single Vineyard Tannat Uruguay 2016 **91**

Trapiche Gran Medalla Malbec Mendoza Argentina 2015 **92**

**Aristos Duque d'A Grand Cabernet du Chili Chile 2012** (14% ABV) | 84

**JG** | Fresh, sweet blackcurrant and berry fruits. Lush, smooth, and generous, with a very sweet fruit profile. Has an awkwardness to the palate, with some grip and notes of tar and herbs. | 86

**PR** | A slightly odd, oily, and floral edge to the aromatics. Baked cream and raisined fruit. Perfunctory. Strange on this showing. (We try two bottles, both are the same.) | 79

**DW** | Cherry Coca-Cola! Something to appeal to my younger self, perhaps, but rather trying at my age. Once again, the alcohol just takes over in a wine where any fruit character doesn't quite compensate for a lack of refinement. | 86

**Santa Rita Casa Real Cabernet Sauvignon Chile 1995** (13.5% ABV) | 79

**JG** | This is very evolved now. There are earthy, leathery notes under the remnants of some berry fruits, with herbs, dried meat, and spices. Has seen better days, but there is still something to like about it. | 86

**PR** | Both bottles overtaken by brett. The tannins

are dried, the aromas peaty and feral. | 74

**DW** | Brett is the dominant character here, both in animalish stink and drying tannins. Alcohol, too. A bit of a mess. | 78

**THIS IS QUITE TIGHTLY COILED ON THE PALATE, BUT THERE'S DENSITY AND POWER THERE, WAITING TO SPRING OUT, AND FINE STRUCTURE, TOO, WITH PLENTIFUL BUT RIPE TANNIN AND A LINE OF NATURAL ACIDITY. THERE'S SOME MINERALITY HERE, TOO. SHOWS A GREAT DEAL OF PROMISE**