

Ready for the Next Argentine Invasion?

by Eric Asimov

TORRONTÉS has been touted as the hottest thing to arrive from Argentina since the tango. Or at least since malbec. It's a grape, and a white wine, and some say it will be as popular in the United States as pinot grigio.

Well, one day, perhaps. But first things first. Have you even heard of torrонтés? The grape is grown pretty much nowhere else in the world but Argentina. Yes, Spain also has a grape called torrонтés, but the two grapes are apparently unrelated. The Argentine grape has been shown genetically to be a hybrid of the muscat of Alexandria and the criolla, or mission, as it's known in English.

The ancestry of the torrонтés is interesting only in that it most definitely bears more than a passing resemblance to the gloriously fragrant muscat. The best torrонтés are highly aromatic, exuberantly floral with a rich, hothouse citrus scent as well. Dip your nose into a glass, and you don't know whether it ought to be sold as a wine or a perfume.

Argentina has a talent for obscure grapes. It took the malbec, a red grape that is forgotten in Bordeaux, overlooked in Cahors and known as c ot in the Loire Valley, and turned it into a juicy, fruity, money-generating phenomenon identified purely with Argentina. Can torrонтés become malbec's white counterpart?

Indeed, in 2010, Argentina exported more than 231,000 cases of torrонтés to the United States, according to Wines of Argentina, a trade group. That figure may seem minuscule next to the 3.15 million cases of Argentine malbec the United States received that year. But compared with the mere 29,333 cases of torrонтés exported to the United States in 2004, the growth has been remarkable.

Given the rate of the torrонтés onslaught, the wine panel felt compelled recently to taste through 20 bottles. We could easily have done 50, given the sheer amount of wine out there. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Brett Feore, the beverage director at Apiary in the East Village, and Carla Rzeszewski, the wine director at the Breslin and the John Dory Oyster Bar on West 29th Street.

It was clear right away that torrонтés has issues of identity. These wines were all over the stylistic map. Some were indeed dry, light-bodied and crisp, like pinot grigios. Others were broad, heavy and rich, like ultra-ripe California chardonnays.

This may be a problem. All genres of wine have their stylistic deviations, but consumers can often read the cues. Chablis is a chardonnay that one can reasonably assume will be lean and minerally, without oak flavors. One would likewise expect a California chardonnay to be richer, and oaky flavors would not surprise. Of course, exceptions exist, often from labels that have been around long enough to establish an identity of their own. But torrонтés has no clear identity, not yet at least, and the unpredictable nature of what's in the bottles will not help.

Wherever the wines landed on the spectrum, we found that their level of quality depended

on one crucial component: acidity. Whether light or heavy, if the wines had enough acidity they came across as lively and vivacious. The rest landed with a thud, flaccid, unctuous and unpleasant.

Florence had other issues with the wines. "Some were concentrated, but finished with a kind of watery emptiness," she said. "And often, the nose and the palate were not on speaking terms." That is to say, the aromas often did not signal clearly how the wines would taste.

So, what did we like? Those beautiful aromas — or as Brett put it, "floral, mandarin, muscat, nice!" Carla found a touch of bitterness in some wines, which she very much appreciated.

Just to make torrонтés a little more complicated, it turns out the grape in Argentina has three sub-varieties: the torrонтés Riojano, the best and most aromatic, which comes from the northern province of La Rioja and Salta; the less aromatic torrонтés Sanjuanino, from the San Juan province south of La Rioja; and the much-less aromatic torrонтés Mendocino, from the Mendoza area, which — fasten your seat belts — may not be related to the other two at all.

While I would never want to assume which sub-variety was used, we did find a geographical correlation. Of the 20 bottles in the tasting, 11 were from Salta and other northern provinces. Eight were from Mendoza, and one was from San Juan. But of our top 10, seven were from the north, including our top four. Only three were from Mendoza, and they tended to be more subdued aromatically.

Our No. 1 wine, and our best value at \$15, was the 2009 Cuma from Michel Torino, from the Cafayate Valley in Salta. With plenty of acidity, the Cuma was fresh and lively, which made its aromas of mandarin and cantaloupe vibrant rather than heavy. Likewise, our No. 2, the 2009 Alamos from Catena, also from Salta, was thoroughly refreshing with aromas of orange blossoms.

The story was similar for Nos. 3 and 4, both from Salta, too. The 2010 Crios de Susana Balbo was fragrant with melon and citrus, and well balanced, as was the 2009 Tom s Ach val N made, which had an added herbal touch. By contrast the No. 5 Norton Lo Tengo and the No. 6 Goulart, both from Mendoza, were far more reticent aromatically though pleasing and balanced enough.

At this stage in the evolution of torrонтés quite a bit of experimentation is still going on. Some wines are clearly made in steel tanks, which accentuates the fresh, lively aromas. Others may have been briefly aged in oak barrels, adding depth and texture to the wines. Thankfully, we found very little evidence of new oak in our tasting.

For my part, I was encouraged by the wines we liked best, particularly our top five. Their aromatic exuberance is singular and pleasing, with the caution that the wines ought to be consumed while young. As for comparisons

to pinot grigio, they seem both premature and misleading. The big-selling pinot grigios are so indistinct that they offend no one but those seeking distinctive wines. Torrонтés, on the other hand, are quite unusual, which confers on them the power to offend. In wine, that's often a good thing.

Tasting Report

Michel Torino Cuma ★★★

Cafayate Valley Torrонтés 2009
Fresh and lively with depth, presence and flavors of orange and cantaloupe.

Catena Alamos ★★★

Salta Torrонтés 2009
Fragrant and refreshing with aromas of flowers and citrus.

Crios de Susana Balbo ★★1/2

Salta Torrонтés 2010
Well balanced with lingering flavors of mandarin and honeydew.

Tom s Ach val N made ★★1/2

Cafayate Valley Torrонтés 2009
Light-bodied and balanced with floral aromas and orange and herbal flavors.



Norton Lo Tengo ★★1/2

Mendoza Torrонтés 2009
Full-bodied but fresh and balanced with flavors of citrus and tropical fruit.

Goulart ★★

Mendoza Torrонтés 2009
Subtle and restrained with flavors of minerals, melon and herbs.

Colom  Calchaqu  Valley ★★

Torrонтés 2009
Balanced and pleasing with flavors of peaches, flowers and citrus.

La Yunta Famatina Valley ★★

La Rioja Torrонтés 2010
Straightforward with orange and herbal flavors.

San Telmo Esencia ★★

Mendoza Torrонтés 2009
Flavors of melon and citrus but a bit heavy.

Terrazas de los Andes ★★

Reserva Salta Torrонтés 2008
Aromas of ripe oranges and flowers but a touch hot.

