

A CHAT WITH MICHAEL EVANS OF THE VINES OF MENDOZA

Almost a decade ago, on his first visit to Mendoza, Michael Evans realized that the culture of making wine in Mendoza was as marvelous as the wines themselves. He joined up with two of the province's leading lights, Pablo Gimenez Riili and Santiago Achaval, to offer a unique concept: private vineyards and winemaking for owners from around the globe, all managed locally. The Vines of Mendoza has since grown into a wine and tourism phenomenon. We asked him how it all started and where it's going next.



AV: What gave you the idea for The Vines of Mendoza?

ME: In 2004, I came to Mendoza on vacation and fell in love with the region. In keeping with the warm hospitality Argentina is known for, Pablo Gimenez Riili, who I was introduced to through a mutual friend, welcomed me into his family and showed me the best of Mendoza, particularly all the things a solo tourist might otherwise miss - for two days! I had phenomenal wines and experiences with people who embody this region, like Carmelo Patti. It was serendipitous and we became fast friends.

Pablo and I saw an untapped opportunity to share extraordinary Argentine wine experiences with people from around the world, and The Vines of Mendoza was born. Nine years later, the company is welcoming visitors to its Mendoza and Uco Valley tasting rooms, helping more than 120 wine lovers from all over the world own their own private vineyards, and preparing to open The Vines Resort & Spa in December.

AV: Have you had any remarkable experiences with the private vineyards? Any exceptional vintages?

ME: We've just received Wine Spectator ratings of 91 points for our Recuerdo Gran Corte and 92 points for our first issued Recuerdo Reserva, so that certainly leaves us feeling very proud as these are our first vintages ranked by Wine Spectator.

Also, it might seem cliché, but most experiences with our Private Vineyard owners are remarkable. It's a proud moment when we receive emails, almost daily, about how much they and others love their wines. We've already had countless special moments. Here are just a few examples:

* We have Private Vineyard owners getting married in New York this week and sharing their own wines with their guests to mark this special occasion.

* A British client's wine was recognized this year at the prestigious International Wine Challenge in London.

* Wine Enthusiast has ranked Solo Contigo wines, produced by private vineyard owners and resort partners Noel and Terry Neelands, a "Top Shelf" wine. In addition, Neal Martin from Robert Parker's The Wine Advocate scored their higher-end Solo Contigo 2010 Coleccion 90 points, saying it was a "very well-crafted, opulent Malbec that has style and grace."

AV: Which wineries are doing the most exciting and innovative things in Mendoza right now?

ME: There are many. Marcelo Pelleriti, our neighbor at the Uco Valley's Clos de los Siete, has done a phenomenal job of integrating the French style of winemaking in pure, quality Mendoza wines. And I've always been a fan of Catena. Alejandro Vigil's innovative and renegade style of winemaking continues to flourish and deserves special attention. Caelum also continues to raise the bar.

AV: What Argentine wine would you most like an American consumer to taste today?

ME: It's a fabulous time to explore blends, and we are also very excited about Cabernet Franc and Syrah from the Uco Valley. That said, rather than just focusing on one varietal, tasting through many different styles of varietals is a great way to discover a true favorite.

AV: Did you ever think The Vines would be such an important part of promoting Argentine wine to foreign consumers?

ME: That's flattering and humbling. I think it makes sense as The Vines was created in part from my own experiences as an enamored traveler visiting Mendoza who saw, and continues to see, a great deal of opportunity in showcasing the best of Mendoza to wine lovers around the world. And my business partner, Pablo Gimenez Riili, has a phenomenal knowledge of the region and the wine industry. It was the perfect storm of timing, and it's exciting to be a part of the continued growth and success of the region, and to see the results in the winemaking validate our investment in and love for such a special place.

AV: What are your hopes for The Vines in the future?

ME: We're opening The Vines Resort & Spa by the year's end, and it's exciting to see that dream that we've had from the beginning to come to reality. For Harvest 2014, our Winemaker's Village - 12 boutique wineries that are personal projects of Mendoza master winemakers - will be open for tourism. At the center of it all, we're continuing our quest to make the best wine in the world as our business continues to grow. As we say, "Nada es imposible."

AV: It's been great to watch The Vines flourish since we first visited your Mendoza tasting room in 2007. All the best for the next decade. Salud!

Photo: Pablo Gimenez Riili, Michael Evans, and Santiago Achaval