



FOUNDING FATHER

When his academic ambitions were thwarted, Nicolás Catena put his research background to good use in the vineyard. **ANTHONY ROSE** salutes the man credited with putting Argentina on the wine map

PHOTOGRAPHS: NICOLAS CATENA WAS PHOTOGRAPHED EXCLUSIVELY FOR DECANTER BY ESTUDIO GARCIA & BETANCOURT AT BODEGA CATENA ZAPATA, MENDOZA

While its seat at the top table of wine producing countries is now secure, Argentina has one man above all to thank for its elevation. Growing up in an era when it would have been laughable to think of Argentina as a serious wine power, Nicolás Catena became the leading architect of his country's transformation from gaucho bumpkin to quality wine exporter.

In the 1960s, the quiet academic changed his family's bulk wine into a bottled brand. In the 1970s, Catena renounced plonk and its wicked ways. And after a seminal trip to California in 1982, he changed the direction of Argentinian wine to spearhead the country's export drive. From the 1990s onwards, he has been an inspiration to

overseas investors lured by the unexpected prospect of ploughing a lucrative furrow in Argentina's new El Dorado.

It was with his researcher's hat on that Catena set out to discover the best microclimates in which to plant vineyards. 'Everyone thought I was mad when I planted the Adrianna vineyard at 1,440 metres in the Uco Valley in 1993. It suffered from late frost, early frost and ripeness problems,' he says. But low temperatures, high sunlight intensity and the poor soils near the Andes turned out to be an ideal blend, with quality controlled by strict irrigation. Clonal trials and tireless experiments with altitude and lower temperature led to the realisation that sunlight intensity at higher altitude could substantially improve flavour and

aromatics. The proof came by way of unprecedented success on export markets. Today, Argentina's Uco Valley is the promised land of New World terroir.

'I came to the conclusion...' is one of Catena's favourite phrases, evidence that, while prepared to take risks, he has always thought out, discussed, argued and weighed up all the angles, and then – several steps ahead of his competitors – carried out the research before finally taking the plunge. From his mother, Angélica, he inherited an enquiring mind and the value of analysis. His father Domingo's enduring legacy was entrepreneurial flair and a tough-minded work ethic that underpinned the economic prospects of Argentina's immigrant communities. His talent has been to harness this legacy of drive and ➤

Decanter
MAN OF THE
YEAR 2009





Inspired by fine French wines and his experiences in California, Nicolás Catena has transformed winemaking in his native Argentina

imagination to challenge conventional wisdom. As an academic and wine producer in equal measure, a life less ordinary would be hard to imagine.

His grandfather, Nicola, was 18 when he left Belforte del Chienti in the Italian Marche for Argentina in 1898. As he settled in Mendoza among other Italian immigrants, the region was gaining recognition for its wine grapes. It was a natural choice for the son of vineyard workers to plant his first vineyard close to the Río Tunuyán four years later. 'Then, there was virtually no knowledge or understanding of viticulture,' says Catena, 'but my grandfather chose Malbec because even at that time it was considered the best, most reliable variety.'

His father took over the family business in 1936. Four years later, and clearly keen to get on in the world, Nicolás Catena was born in the family house among the vines when they couldn't get his mother to hospital on time. Catena was six when Perón and Evita came to power. Against a background of Perónism, regarded by his conservative parents as Mussolini-style fascism, he was packed off aged 12 to the Liceo Militar in Mendoza. Thanks to a precocious ability in maths, he finished two years early. At university in Mendoza he met his wife-to-be, Elena, an economist and ace tango dancer.

Clear focus

Catena's mother and grandfather were killed in a car crash in 1962 as he was on the brink of postgraduate study in Chicago. All plans of an academic future went up in smoke and Catena resolved instead to help his father. Domingo's speciality was buying wines in bulk and selling three blends of his own to bottling factories around the country. 'The most basic was *vino común*, the next step up was *reserva*, and the top we called "*vino fino*";' he smiles wryly. 'We were already selling five million litres a month. The first decision I made was to bottle under our own name.'

Four in five bottles of wine drunk by Argentinians at the time were either tired whites or rotgut rosés. Realising that wine was considered neither healthy nor natural, Catena embarked on an advertising programme aimed at communicating its health benefits. 'I researched ways of softening the reds and brought in Raúl Gómez, a university professor, as a consultant. I then started selling directly to retailers.' None of this was enough to satisfy his yearning for the academic life. Aged 28, he upped sticks for Columbia University in New York.

As a student, Catena enjoyed drinking cheap Blue Nun, Bolla and Undurraga, but never equated them with the fine French wines his father used to rave >

'The Catena wines were beacons for quality in Argentina from the very start and, due to the passion, foresight and cultural dedication of Nicolás Catena, they remain so today.'

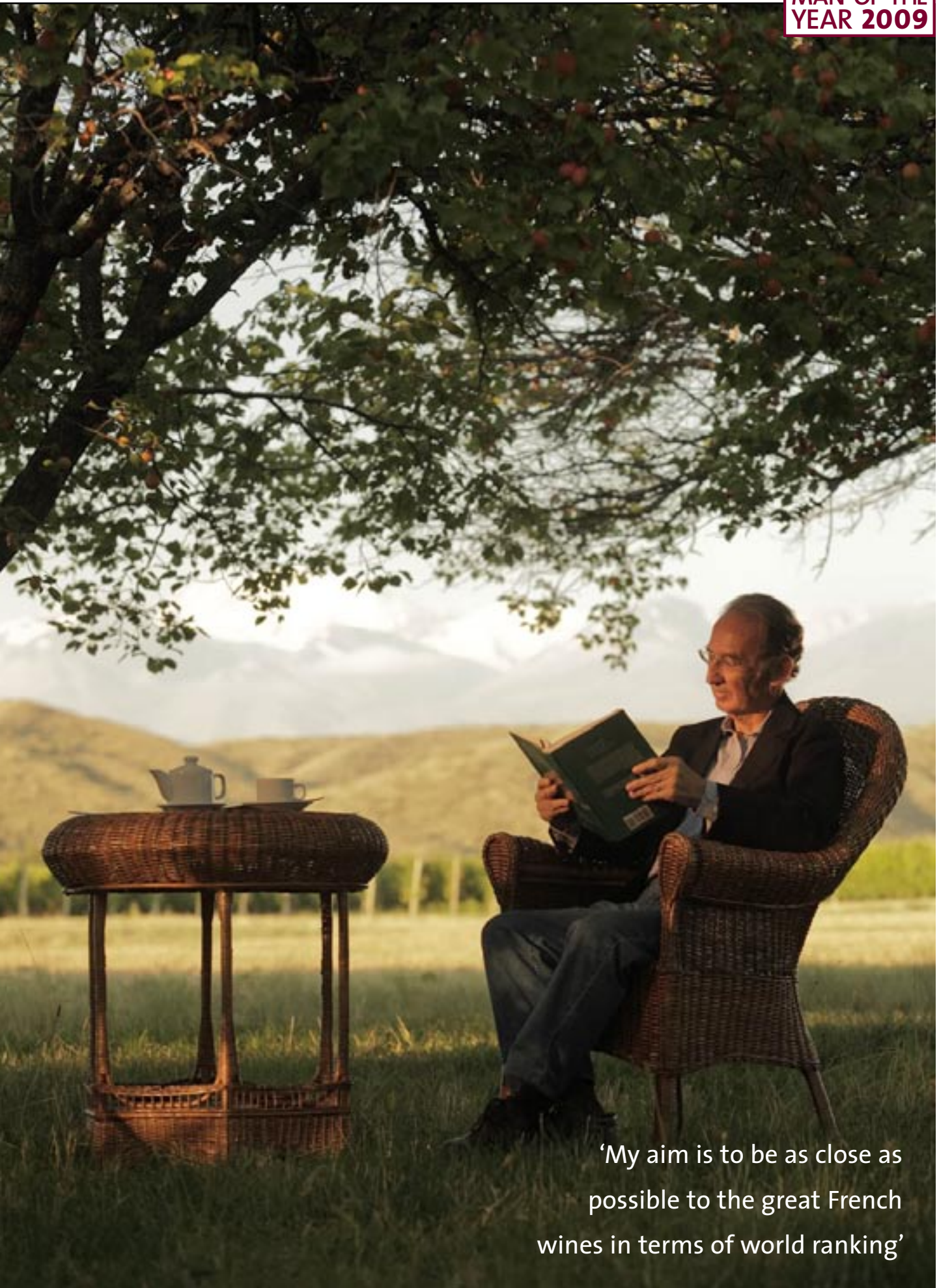
Steven Spurrier, *Decanter* consultant editor

'Nicolás Catena has such a zest for life and love of wine – but also great wisdom. It's a pleasure to offer my admiration and congratulations to him.'

Francis Ford Coppola, Rubicon Estate

'Nicolás Catena is a man of vision, of high intellect, always curious about others and about how the world is developing. He has been instrumental in changing the Argentinian wine scene more than anybody else, pushing it towards high quality and intelligent marketing.'

Baron Eric de Rothschild, Domaines Barons de Rothschild



'My aim is to be as close as possible to the great French wines in terms of world ranking'



Though Catena is still heavily involved, Bodega Catena Zapato in Mendoza (above) is now run by his son Ernesto and daughter Laura

about following overseas trips. One day a call came through from the Argentinian consulate, inviting him for lunch on the pretext of discussing exports of Argentinian wine to New York. The Consul ordered Latour, Lafite and Margaux. These enjoyable ‘meetings’ were repeated every three or four weeks, and while no conclusion was ever reached, they turned out to be more significant than anticipated. ‘It was my introduction to great wines and reinforced my feeling that great Bordeaux was incomparable.’

Depressed at the thought that he’d never be able to scale such heights, Catena returned to Argentina, resolving nonetheless to improve the wines. Perónism flickered

briefly again a month after Pinochet’s coup in Chile, and in 1976 the infamous junta of Galtieri and the generals took power. Catena founded CEMA, the Argentinian Centre of Macroeconomic Studies, an achievement of which he is justifiably proud, and sold all his facilities that were making non-premium wines.

His stint as a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley was a major turning point. At Elena’s suggestion, on their first weekend off, the couple headed for the Napa Valley with Adrianna, their new baby, in a backpack. ‘We visited Robert Mondavi and tasting the wines was a shock. I loved the fruit and freshness of the Fumé Blanc, and the

Cabernet Sauvignon, although young, was so full of fruit, aroma and flavour. It was a revelation.’ He felt the application of hard work and money to the best Cabernet and Chardonnay, plus a dash of oak, would bring him Argentina’s answer to Médoc and Montrachet. ‘But I forgot about climate, or terroir – my conclusion was superficial, premature.’

It wasn’t entirely a false dawn. Planting Cabernet and Chardonnay in Agrelo on his return to Argentina in 1983 marked the beginning of an understanding of the relationship between temperature and climate. He was less convinced about Malbec, but felt he owed it to his ageing father to try it. In 1984, he resurrected the neglected old-vine Malbec, still known as Uva Francesa, growing in the 80ha (hectare) Angélica vineyard in Maipù’s Lunlunta district.

For a master in search of apostles, California’s renowned Paul Hobbs arrived in 1997 and the globetrotting French winemaker Jacques Lurton a year later. Lurton’s arrival crystallised Catena’s view that climate and temperature were the keys to terroir in Argentina. ‘One day, we served a Cabernet, and Jacques smelt it and said “this is from a hot region, it reminds me of the Languedoc; you have the same problem as they do in Australia”. Then it struck me: if we were to have great wine in Argentina, we ➤

DECANTER HALL OF FAME: PAST RECIPIENTS

2008	Christian Moueix	Bordeaux	1995	Hugh Johnson OBE	London
2007	Anthony Barton	Bordeaux	1994	May-Eliane de Lencquesaing	Bordeaux
2006	Marcel Guigal	Rhône	1993	Michael Broadbent	London
2005	Ernst Loosen	Mosel	1992	André Tchelistcheff	California
2004	Brian Croser	Adelaide Hills	1991	José Ignacio Domecq	Jerez
2003	Jean-Michel Cazes	Bordeaux	1990	Prof Emile Peynaud	Bordeaux
2002	Miguel Torres	Penedès	1989	Robert Mondavi	California
2001	Jean-Claude Rouzaud	Champagne	1988	Max Schubert	Australia
2000	Paul Draper	California	1987	Alexis Lichine	Bordeaux
1999	Jancis Robinson MW OBE	London	1986	Marchese Piero Antinori	Florence
1998	Angelo Gaja	Piedmont	1985	Laura and Corinne Mentzelopoulos	Bordeaux
1997	Len Evans OBE AO	Australia	1984	Serge Hochar	Lebanon
1996	Georg Riedel	Austria			

would need vineyards at much lower temperatures.’ Resolving to move all future plantings south to the Uco Valley, he air-freighted a consignment of Argentinian beef for 1,000 people to Lurton’s wedding dinner in Bordeaux.

Trial and success

1990 was the first of the new vintages using extended maceration and new French oak barriques. Argentina was still known only as an exporter of cheap wine (then, Fond de Cave was Argentina’s most expensive Argentinian wine at \$4 retail) but the Catena Cabernet, priced at \$15, and the Chardonnay, at \$13, were instant hits in the US. ‘The fact I had no trouble selling this vintage at those prices changed everything.’

A project was started in 1992 to select the best five clones from 145 or so in the Angélica vineyard. Cluster, berry size and resistance to disease were the criteria for the subsequent planting at La Pirámide in Agrelo. Tuscany’s Attilio Pagli was taken on as a consultant for the Malbec, and when he produced the first quality vintage for export, the 1994, Catena’s daughter Laura convinced her father it would be well received. It was, but the 1996 vintage was Malbec’s watershed, encouraging him to plant at different altitudes and blend across microclimates.

Keen to share his successes, Catena credits Laura, who started working at the winery from the end of the 1990s, with the discovery of the effects of sunlight intensity. ‘She noticed how different our Chardonnay and Cabernet from hail-netted lots was, and that’s what made her start studying the effects of sunlight intensity. The higher the intensity, the higher the transformation of bitter tannins into smooth tannins. The effects are greater in Malbec than in Cabernet, with a reduction of aromatic pyrazines in Cabernet and an increase in the violet aroma carotenoids in Malbec.’

Trial and error, and trial and success, have led Catena to a uniquely New World view of terroir: ‘In Argentina, the physical composition of soils is not relevant because humidity is controlled through irrigation. The relevant terroir factors affecting aroma and flavour are temperature, which depends on the latitude, and sunlight intensity, which depends on altitude.’ He selects the best vineyard lots and then blends the best lots from different altitudes. ‘Wines blended from different altitudes and temperatures may be less concentrated than the wine from the highest altitude and the lowest temperature, but there is greater complexity and elegance.’

Elegance is another favourite word, much used in his admiration of great wine, not least Château Lafite, with which he initiated a joint venture, Caro, in 2000. Christian Le Sommer, Lafite’s winemaker, convinced owner Baron Eric de Rothschild that a Cabernet-Malbec blend would be better than a pure Cabernet. This mirrored Catena’s own long and winding road towards the view that the two varieties work better in tandem than on their own.

The business today is in the hands of his son Ernesto, and Laura. ‘They joined entirely of their own accord. We never put any pressure on them but everything changed in them as they were having their own families. It was as if they needed to rediscover their own roots.’ Meanwhile, from the comfort of his Buenos Aires home, he continues to pull strings to refine the Nicolás Catena Zapata blend,



Catena’s flagship wine, the Cabernet-Malbec blend Nicolás Catena Zapata

while improving the top single-varietal Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Acknowledging that Malbec has the upper hand in Argentina’s industry today, Catena feels that as the higher altitude vineyards mature, ‘they will give us great Cabernet Sauvignons and at some point, the market will discover it’. Will it ever embody the elegance of a Lafite? ‘I don’t think anyone can produce something like Lafite. That’s the mystery and the greatness of wine. My aim is to be as close as possible to the great French wines in terms of world ranking, but with my father’s comments at the back of my mind, I feel it’s almost impossible.’

Note the ‘almost’. The Holy Grail of great wine may be elusive, but the diffident tone amid the pride of achievement is a sure indicator that Nicolás Catena, and his children, won’t give up on the quest. **D**

‘Nicolás Catena is justly credited with putting Argentinian wines on the world map – by the best expedient of focusing entirely on quality. It’s great to know he has started a wine dynasty, too.’

Jancis Robinson MW

‘Nicolás Catena is an inspiration, not only to the wine industry in Argentina, but to the global industry as a whole. His foresight and passion have carried the fine wine business forward for generations to come. We congratulate him on this well-deserved award.’

Michael Yurch, president, Sherry-Lehmann

‘The arrival of Argentinian wines on the world stage was initiated by Catena’s vision and the way he changed the quality of wines for export, helped by his daughter. I have a deep admiration of him as visionary – a Mondavi in his own way.’

Alfred Bonnie, DiamAndes and Château Malartic-Lagravière

‘Nicolás Catena is a figure in Argentina of the stature of Robert Mondavi in Napa or Angelo Gaja in Piedmont. He inspired an entire region to strive for a higher level of quality by his successful exploration of high altitude vineyards and rigorous clonal selection.’

Larry Stone, Master Sommelier and trustee, James Beard Foundation

‘Nicolás has theories for everything from advertising spend as a percentage of profit to why you should spoil your kids. He balances this by enjoying the good things in life. He is a visionary and a risk taker, so long as the arguments are good.’

Marina Gayan MW, Argentina’s only Master of Wine