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Uncorked: Argentine vintners make wine a family affair

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There are plenty of winemaking couples, but not that many in Argentina, and none as high profile as Susana Balbo and Pedro Marchevsky.

Balbo is Argentina's most famous female winemaker, and Marchevsky is arguably the country's most knowledgeable viticulturist. In both cases, she uses the latest winemaking techniques and a skilled hand with French oak to produce wines that show the best of Argentinean grapes, notably Malbec but also Cabernet Sauvignon and even a blend of Syrah and Bonarda, a grape native to Italy (though Argentine Bonarda may actually be Charbono).

Balbo also works with Torrontes, the white grape that has become Argentina's answer to Sauvignon Blanc. Her Crios Torrontes comes from a 5,775-foot elevation vineyard in Cafayate, in the northern province of Salta. Marchevsky's BenMarco label, a tribute to his father Marcos, highlights Mendoza's potential for red wines.

The two met 14 years ago and have been developing their family business ever since. Marchevsky, 60, got his start in 1972 teaching soil and irrigation studies, later working for influential vintner Nicolas Catena on the way to becoming one of the country's most sought-after vine experts.

After getting her enology degree in 1981, Balbo, now 51, worked for several wineries before designing Catena's new facility in 1998, which helped launch an international consulting career. Now they have their own facility in the city of Agrelo. Marchevsky's daughter Gabriela, 34, designs all the labels, while Balbo's son, José, 23, just graduated



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from UC Davis and her daughter Ana, 21, is studying business administration. (Marchevsky also has a son, Emilio, 32.) Given the "Brady Bunch"-like arrangement, it's a safe bet that the winery will remain a family affair.

They are frequent Bay Area visitors thanks to their importers, Ed Lehrman and Nick Ramkowsky, who run **Vine Connections in Sausalito**. We caught up with Susana Balbo and Pedro Marchevsky during a recent visit.

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Q: You specialize in a grape variety that's still something of a mystery here. How can you make Americans drink more Malbec?



Pedro: I think first it's important to understand Malbec is very special. It's the best varietal to show what Argentina is as a country. We're very high - 3,000 feet elevation - (and) it's very dry. The variety can show a very beautiful concentration of fruit. Because we have a very, very long hang time, we can get very ripe tannins. You get a very broad, ripe mouthfeel.

Susana: When I was reading about the most favorite wines for Americans, and what happened with the flavor profile and the tannins, I realized Malbec was one of the most approachable varieties out there. As soon as people realize they have another option, they have only to fall in love with Malbec.

Q: What attracted you to Torrontes?

Susana: Torrontes, as you know, is the most widely planted white grape in Argentina. It's a cross of two varietals, one from Italy and one from Spain (Muscat of Alexandria and Criolla Chica, known in California as the Mission grape). You are able to make wines with great flavor concentration. Our Torrontes ... has some of the most elegant lines. But if it gets to be too strong in flavor, it gets to be a bit much.

Pedro: It was a challenge to make a really fine wine from this variety.

Q: What's your favorite food and wine pairing?

Susana: Our meat is wonderful so we usually make dishes influenced with meat. ... And what am I drinking with this? Usually I like our Cabernet. But the rosé with chicken. Usually in Argentina we make beautiful (rosé). Or the Torrontes is wonderful with spicy food.

Q: How did you get interested in wine?

Susana: The key moment was when I started to study biology, and I liked it very much. Wine is in evolution all the time; it's alive. I compare making a great wine to raising a

child. You need to take care and be soft and loving with them to achieve the best results.

Q: How did you come to create the Crios label?

Susana: It's a sad story. In December 2000, we were working with (our importers) Ed and Nick in our blending. Something very shocking with my first husband happened. (I felt that) I should take care of my children. I left those guys alone. I said, "You do what you want." He passed away 40 days later.

Pedro: At that moment, she said, "My crios come first, my children."

Susana: Ed sent me a letter and said he always knew me as a businesswoman and not as a mom. He said, "Susana, let's name the new wine Crios. You love your children like you love your wine." And it was a very nice name.

Pedro: And after that, my daughter, she developed the label.