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Correspondents' Picks: Mendoza, Argentina

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By Kate Tedesco

NEWSWEEK's Kate Tedesco has been covering Latin America on various fronts for more than a decade. She spent a chunk of a recent trip to Argentina exploring the dynamic wine scene, and its corresponding culinary and design boom, in the city of Mendoza, which is fast developing an international reputation as the "New Napa."

Mendoza is nestled in the shadow of Acongagua, South America's tallest peak, and has some of the highest vineyards in the world, so in addition to tasting world-class wine visitors can also take in some stunning scenery. The desert-like climate and rocky soil don't necessarily make for easy agriculture, but area vineyards are irrigated by a pre-colonial canal system that channels melting snow from the surrounding Andes, and the challenging growing conditions contribute to the depth and complexity of the region's wines. Malbec, Argentina's signature red grape, thrives under Mendoza's nearly-constant and highly-concentrated sunshine, but there are also a number of excellent local Cabernets and Merlots, and some younger vineyards are beginning to diversify into edgier varietals like Shiraz and Bornada.

Taste: Start with a swing by the [Vines of Mendoza](#), South America's first regional tasting room. Its cozy courtyard garden serves as a gathering spot for enthusiasts of all stripes, and the knowledgeable staff guide visitors through flights of boutique local labels, many of which are not available abroad (and all of which can be purchased and shipped back home at minimal cost through their Acequia Wine Club). The Vines also serves as a comprehensive concierge, and will help tailor itineraries and tours—an important service, since many wineries are located off the beaten path, about an hour's drive outside the city, and require reservations in advance. [O Fournier](#) is a bit of a trek, but worth it for the winery's sleek, almost space-age design, offset by a sweeping snow-capped backdrop. The post-modern theme continues inside as automatic sliding doors dramatically beckon visitors to enter the cavernous, steel-beamed wine cellar, which also doubles as a contemporary art gallery. A tasting at [La Azul](#) is by no means grand, but at this informal boutique winery—which handpicks just a fraction of each year's harvest to produce extremely small quantities of extremely fine wine—straight-from-the-barrel never tasted so good. [Achaval-Ferrer](#) is a newer winery, passionately helmed by a former national business executive and Stanford MBA, who has in just a decade already unveiled two of the world's highest rated Malbecs. And for a truly authentic tasting experience, go straight to the suburban home of **Carmelo Patti** (0261-498-1379). A modern Mendoza legend, for more than three decades Patti has been producing top-quality Cabernet and Espumante (sparkling wine) with antiquated equipment, directly from his family's garage.

Eat: Many wineries offer formal four-course lunch pairings in rather spectacular settings, like the sun-soaked dining room at [Bodega Septima](#), or the lush garden café at [Ruca Malen](#). [Almacen del Sur](#) does not make wine, but this renowned lunch spot on a family farm also functions as an artisanal delicatessen, and produces instead its own line of gourmet spreads, chutneys and jams.

Dinner in Mendoza often doesn't get underway until after 10:00 pm, so if your stomach has not adjusted to local time, stop by the outdoor cafe next to the retail chain [Winery](#) for an early evening snack of tapas with a glass of espumante. But when the dinner hour arrives, don't be afraid to stray from steak and try some other dishes made with locally-raised meat, especially traditional specialties like Chivito (young goat). At [Azafrán](#), diners can visit the restaurant's on-site wine cellar to select their own bottles to pair with some of the city's most creative contemporary cuisine, like a succulent pork tenderloin glazed with pomegranate sauce. [La Sal](#) offers a more intimate, artsy setting, with a seasonal menu and live music. But if you insist on beef and nothing but, locals swear by [Don Mario](#) as having the best cut in town, and the menu more than trumps the restaurant's modest décor.

Stroll: The center of Mendoza is easily navigable on foot, and the best time to be seen in its parks and plazas is right before sunset, when the city begins to come alive after a long afternoon siesta. The **Plaza Espana** is especially beautiful for its intricate tile work, and the public gardens in the **Parque San Martin** are impressively lush considering the city's dry air. A walk down **Avenida Sarmiento** presents a number of shopping distractions. **Sol & Vino** (Sarmiento 664) carries a fine assortment of quality leather products, gaucho-inspired gear and Asado carving knives: but if you buy one, just make sure not to store it in your carry-on. And if you eventually tire of wine, peruse the bars along **Calle Aristides Villanueva** for viable beverage alternatives. [Antares](#) specializes in microbrews and—despite the long-standing national rivalry with neighboring Chile—any bartender worth his salt working along the block can still whip up a fine Pisco Sour.