



Uruguay – only a fifth the size of Brazil, a bit smaller than the state of Washington – forms a fertile rectangle bordered by water on three sides. To the west, the Rio Uruguay traces a 360 miles of navigable border with Argentina. To the south is the vast funnel-shaped estuary of the Rio de la Plata and to the east the Atlantic with its long beaches and broad coastal lagoons. In the north where the country’s best-known hill, the Cerro Cathedral, rises to 1,690 feet, the border with Brazil runs for nearly 625 miles.

The Uruguayans descend from immigrants from numerous different countries. Most newcomers were Spanish; the country’s language and culture derive essentially from them. Then, following on their heels in numbers, came the Italians whose pronunciation has softened the rough tone of the national language. Today Uruguay is a multi-ethnic country where innumerable influences, including African, have merged to create a modern, tolerant society. Nine out of ten Uruguayans live in a city, four out of ten in Montevideo and three quarters of the population live in the South of the country. One of the country’s strong points is its outstanding educational system. Every child has a laptop and there are no fees for attending a school or university. So no surprise, then, that the majority of the 3.4 million inhabitants belongs to the middle class, though this can be divided into upper and lower. There is very little poverty while unemployment is only 5% and on a downward trend.

Life is good in Uruguay – and the eating and drinking too. Naturally Uruguayans swear by their country’s outstanding beef and lamb from the farms inland and by their wine. People love football 24 hours a day, horses passionately, and the beach. It’s how they occupy their free time, not only on holidays and the weekends in summer but in the evenings after work, especially in Montevideo.

A HERO CALLED TANNATⁱ

For Uruguayan winegrowers, the world-renowned red varieties have without a doubt become their strong suit. The winegrowers here have continuously enhanced their know-how in handling these grapes and getting great wines from them.

In the world of wine, Tannat has become Uruguay’s business card. The country’s winegrowers have understood how to make the most of their great opportunity. When they first began modifying the conditions in their vineyards in the mid-1980s, in order to produce fine wines and then create an export market, the Tannat grape in the New World was like a blank page. The only country where Tannat was, and is, planted on the grand scale is Uruguay: a good quarter of the country’s present 8,200 hectares of vineyards is under Tannat. While neighbouring Argentina was

backing Malbec, Uruguay put Tannat on its coat-of-arms and it has proved the right decision. At that time, too, interest was growing for sound but original, deep-hued red wines.

From 1870 on, the grape variety was brought over by Basque immigrants from its original home in the Western Pyrenees of France. The variety's erstwhile European capital is the town of Madiran where planting Tannat goes back to the 13th century, though the first mention of it in written records dates only from the 18th. Its name first of all suggests high tannin content though "tanned", on the other hand, is related to the idea of darker colour – in fact, both characteristics jointly are its hallmark. In France, on account of the angular structure of its wines, Tannat was not well appreciated and for this reason was often blended with other varieties. Alain Brumont was the first to show with Château Montus 1985 that 100 percent Tannat possessed real class and triggered a new and strong interest in the grape. Meanwhile, Uruguayan winegrowers have come to understand how to tame Tannat and really bring out its highly attractive qualities.

It is obvious that in Uruguay Tannat has found terroirs that suit it. Thus, first and foremost it is an Atlantic grape variety that in order to flourish needs a certain amount of moisture. In Tannat, drought stress during the growing season generates harsh tannins. Many vineyards with their loamy soils provide excellent conditions. Thanks to the cool breezes off the Atlantic the Tannat grapes enjoy a long ripening period. Thus, the crop's potential alcohol is limited while it maintains a certain natural acidity. The resulting wines, displaying balance and lively freshness, are nowadays in ever-increasing demand by wine lovers.

A profile for the future

To develop such a profile and to perfect the requisite practices in vineyard and winery are the tasks facing Uruguayan winegrowers for the future. Certainly the very ripe, highly-concentrated prestige wines which have emerged over recent years are impressive. They show that the Tannat's very prolific nature can be mastered. Moreover, they have very ripe, soft tannin and a seductive velvety structure. These wines have been highly praised, and rightfully so, as they are the outcome of a real commitment to high quality. But their level of alcohol is often no less than that of their international competitors. Important though these wines may be in the current context for their own and the general image, Uruguay's actual potential has not yet been exhausted.

Useful Links: www.winesofuruguay.com - www.uruguaywinetours.com - www.inavi.com.uy - www.uruguaynatural.tv - www.welcomeuruguay.com/winesofUruguay - www.turismo.gub.uy

¹ Text written by André Dominé