

# 7 Perfect Days in . . . Argentina's Wine Country

There are places you can't help but fall in love with at first sight and return to year after year. We've chosen some of the world's most beloved (and touristed) destinations and, with the help of the best travel specialists in the business, ferreted out their secrets, their treasures, their unmissable experiences. The result is a series of step-by-step trips that will surprise and delight those who have never been to the destination before . . . or have been a dozen times. Each of our highly detailed itineraries has been road-tested and perfected by a *Condé Nast Traveler* editor, and each can be bought as is with just one phone call. Let the romance begin! ▶

BY BROOK WILKINSON

Visit [cntraveler.com/iconictrips](http://cntraveler.com/iconictrips) for the first 13 in our series of Iconic Itineraries: The American Southwest (Utah and Arizona), Big Sky Country (Montana and Wyoming), California Wine Country, China, Egypt (Cairo, Aswan, and Luxor), Hawaii (the Big Island, Maui, and Oahu), India (Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra), Peru (Machu Picchu and the Amazon), Provence, Russia (Moscow and St. Petersburg), Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), Turkey, and Tuscany.





DAY

**Monday**  
**MENDOZA'S**  
**PRIMERA**  
**ZONA**

You arrived in Argentina's most storied wine country yesterday and were whisked from the airport, past the outskirts of Mendoza city, to the [Fig. 1] **Cavas Wine Lodge**, your base in the region. Its 14 luxe adobe villas have a minimalist but homey vibe, with llama-wool bedspreads, concrete floors, and chipped-stone bathrooms (54-261-410-6927; doubles, \$325-\$710). Fresh from a night here—perhaps you slept in a sleeping bag on your rooftop terrace, enjoying the southern stars and moonlit Andean peaks—and fueled by the lavish breakfast spread, you'll be ready for your introduction to the fruits of this region when your guide arrives at 9 A.M.

Wine was among the first of a great many influences the Europeans had on the land that would later become Argentina. The earliest vines were planted here in the sixteenth century by Jesuit priests, who followed the conquistadors to the New World, bringing with them the makings of sacramental wine. The fermented juice is heartily slurped by contemporary Argentines, who barely trail French and Italians in consumption. Until recently, the vast majority of Argentinian wine stayed at home; ironically, it was the plunging peso of 2001 that opened up international markets. A silver lining, indeed.

Today's visits are all in the vicinity, in what's known as the Primera Zona; tomorrow you'll strike out south to the Uco Valley. First stop is [Fig. 2] **Bodega Tapiz**. You'll walk from vineyard to production line to cellar—tasting the same

▼ **The Challenge** The secret's out: Argentina produces some of the best—and best value—wines in the world. Its deep-purple, fruity malbecs and floral, aromatic turruntés have won over critics and everyday oenophiles alike. What's still underappreciated is the beauty of the country's two largest grape-growing regions. In both Mendoza—the wine country grande dame, due west of Buenos Aires—and up-and-coming Salta, to the northwest, vineyards back up against the Andes, snowcapped even in summer, and are surrounded by a serene desert landscape. The combination of grapevine, mountain, and cactus makes for unmatched vistas. But Argentina's wine lands weren't developed with travelers in mind, and this is a blessing

and a curse. The wineries are blissfully noncommercial—few tours end with a hard sell—but most require reservations, and they're scattered over a vast terrain. Then there is the trickiest dilemma: how to choose where to taste when the few names you've seen in your local bottle shop are likely the biggest Argentinian wineries but almost certainly not the finest.

▼ **The Solution** You could fly into Mendoza, rent a car, and strike out for the nearest winery. But we tried that, and it led to missed appointments and hours lost on unmarked roads. This time, we called expert planner Vanessa Guibert Heitner, of Limitless Argentina. Heitner lives in her native Buenos Aires with a Black-Berry full of the country's

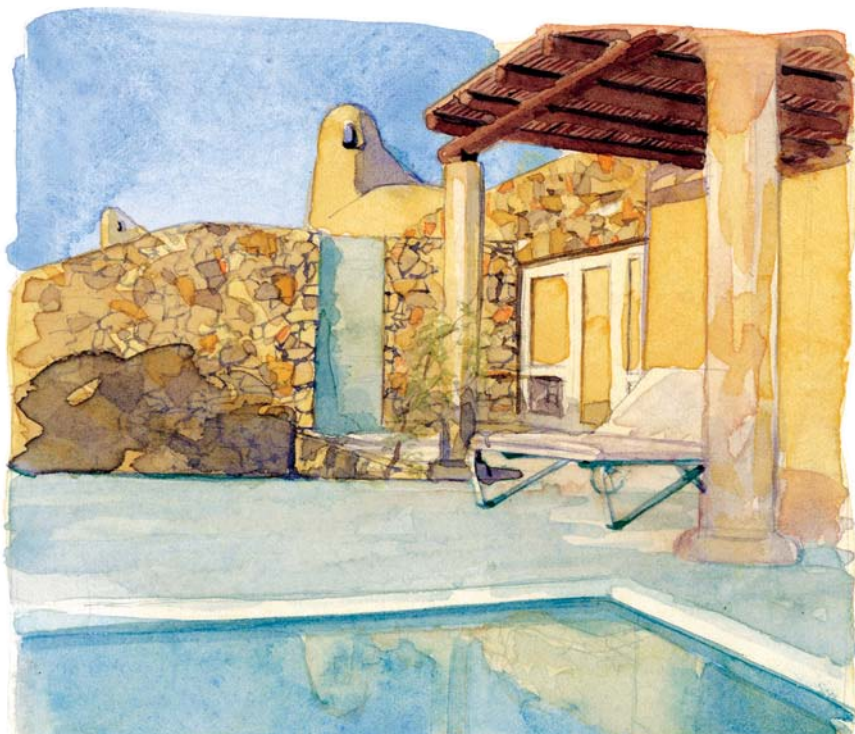
top-notch guides, winemakers, and sommeliers. We assembled an itinerary for vino novices and aficionados alike, showcasing producers large and small, old and new, foreign-owned and local, all with one thing in common: damn fine wine. Argentinian wines are robust and bold, highlighted with fruit flavors. They pair perfectly with the country's beefy cuisine and the Italian fare loved by second- and third-generation immigrants. Every winery tour we recommend is private, chauffeured, and includes a tasting. You can enjoy these regions at any time, but Heitner particularly loves early March through late April, after the crowded Grape Harvest Festival but before the colors fade, and October through early December for the vernal bloom.

varietal in tank, barrel, and bottle—and get a blow-by-blow account of exactly how grapes become wine. The high altitude of Argentina's vineyards is a major asset: Strong sun and large temperature shifts from night to day make for thicker grape skins, the fruit's attempt to protect its seeds. And skin just happens to be where much of the tannins are found, polyphenols that add mouth-feel and color to wine and may act as cancer-inhibiting antioxidants. So Argentinian

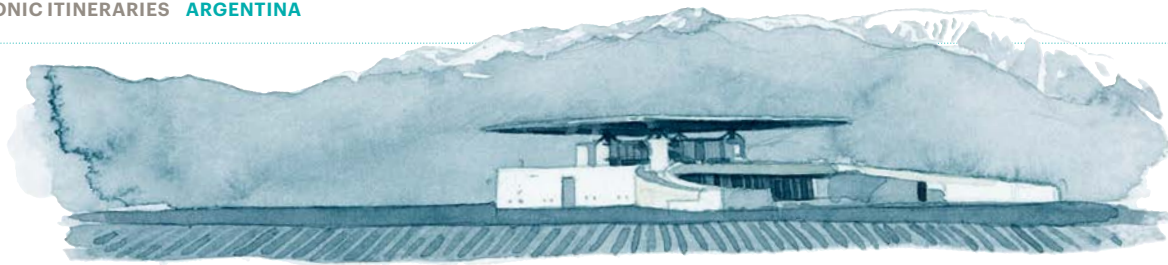
wine doesn't just taste better, it may be healthier. Tapiz was started by Californian mass-market behemoth Kendall-Jackson in the '90s, then sold to an Argentinian family after the country's financial collapse (a welcome reversal of the typical trend to foreign ownership). The Tapiz label tends toward bold flavors; the lighter Zolo line is more popular with Americans (Rte. 15, km. 32; 54-261-490-0202; tasting, \$10).

Next up: **Melipal Viña & Bodega**, another family-run winery devoted to the iconic, full-bodied grape of Argentina, malbec. Here, you'll get a sense of how this varietal can run the gamut from fruity to smoky, always with its signature opaque, purplish hue, and later enjoy a five-course tasting menu with dishes like grilled beef tenderloin and tomato chimichurri, paired with a 100 percent malbec reserve, aged 18 months in French oak (Rte. 7, km. 1056; 54-261-524-8040; tasting, \$15; lunch, \$64).

Spend the afternoon in your private plunge pool back at Cavas—sear for just a few moments in this fierce sun and you'll understand why the lodge's vines are trained unusually high, forming a protective canopy of thick foliage over the grapes. It's 35 min-



◀ **FIG. 1**  
The plunge pools at Cavas Wine Lodge stay icy cold even in the heat of summer, thanks to the chilly nighttime temperatures.



utes from here to downtown Mendoza, where you'll want to dine at least two of the next three nights. **Club Tapiz**—a vineyard resort by the same owners as the bodega you visited—is much closer, but the rooms are less plush (54-261-496-3433; doubles, \$194).

At Cavas, ask the front desk for a car this evening at 6:30 P.M. to take you to the city's **Vines of Mendoza** wine bar, which carries a rotating selection of wines not exported to the United States. Membership in its wine club will get you shipments of only-in-Argentina bottles four times a year (Espejo 567; 54-261-438-1031). Should you already be amassing a collection, the wine shop on the same street, near the Plaza Independencia, sells boxes with foam molds that hold up to six bottles, which you can check as luggage. (There is no restriction on the amount of alcohol you may bring into the United States, as long as it is a quantity reasonable for personal use.)

It's just a few blocks to your 9 P.M. table at **Azafrán**, a place as noteworthy for its walk-in wine library—instead of a wine list, there's a room full of bottles arranged by varietal and price, and a very helpful sommelier—as for its inventive cuisine: conchiglie filled with eggplant and Parmesan cheese; empanadas filled with sweetbreads and mushrooms (Sarmiento 765; 54-261-429-4200; entrées, \$17–\$23).

DAY  
**2** Tuesday  
**UCO VALLEY**

Thanks to recent investment, the Uco Valley is all the buzz in wine circles, although the valley floor has been carpeted in grapes for decades. What's new is the vineyards climbing the Andean foothills to the west, some reaching 4,500 feet. One fusion of new and old is **Bodega Atamisque**, a seventeenth-century estancia purchased five years ago by a former executive of the French hotel operator Accor, who kept the orchards and trout farm but made the vineyards the center of the operation. Your guide will pick you up from your hotel at 9 A.M. for your tour. There's no script; the guides are adept at adjusting to each guest's interests and knowledge—and they do the driving so you can do the boozing. Make sure to try the Catalpa pinot noir after the tour, a rarity in this land of inky malbecs (Rte. 86, km. 30; 54-9-261-453-4881; tastings, \$10–\$35).

Driving farther south, past miles of pear, apple, peach, cherry, quince, and nut orchards, you'll soon spot the unmistakable [Fig. 3] **O. Fournier**. Though most Mendoza wineries favor sleek, modern architecture, this one takes the cake, with its UFO-like design. You'll tour its production facilities from top to bottom, just as the grapes do: Here they use the gentler force of gravity rather than pumps to move from pressing to

▲ **FIG. 3**  
**O. Fournier's design uses gravity to move grapes: Come harvest, trucks drive up a ramp and deposit the fruit at the top of the building.**

fermentation. Sample the tempranillo; Spanish owner José Manuel Ortega was one of the first to bring the grape from La Rioja. His tempranillo and malbec blends are lush and complex, full of fruit and tobacco. O.

Fournier's [Fig. 4] Urban label has received international recognition, and the Alfa Crux 100 percent malbecs are superb. The final stop is the winery's Urban Restaurant, where the excellent Basque-influenced, six-course tasting menus—featuring dishes such as an indulgent wedge of baked Brie with malbec sauce—come with a spectacular view of the Andes through glass walls (Calle Los Indios; 54-2622-451-579; six-course tasting menus, \$32–\$57). At sunset, clamber up to your roof at Cavas Wine Lodge (perhaps with a bottle of vino you've purchased) as the sky turns champagne and rosé. Cavas's restaurant doesn't turn out the noteworthy fare you can find in Mendoza proper—heavy pastas and poorly cut rib-eyes were our experience—but if you're still peckish this evening, you'll appreciate not getting in a car again after your long day on the road.

DAY  
**3** Wednesday  
**OUTDOORS IN MENDOZA**

It's time to take a break from the sybaritic life and burn off some of that steak and vino in the jagged mountains that have framed every view so far. Depending on your preferences, your guide will take you for a meander in the Andean foothills, a vigorous climb above 10,000 feet, or a trek along a trail where you're likely to spot foxes, guanacos, and condors. (You can also go mountain or road biking, rafting, horseback riding, off-roading, or zip-lining.) Have a picnic lunch in the mountains—wine tasting optional—and then return to the valley via **Bodega Benegas**. With straw protruding from its adobe walls and dusty bottles in the cellar, Benegas reminds you that Mendoza's wine industry is no flash in the pan. Note all the antique tools of the trade, and the fine collection of Andean

▲ **FIG. 2**  
**Bodega Tapiz uses a mix of French and American oak barrels; the former can cost \$1,000 each, the latter less than half that.**



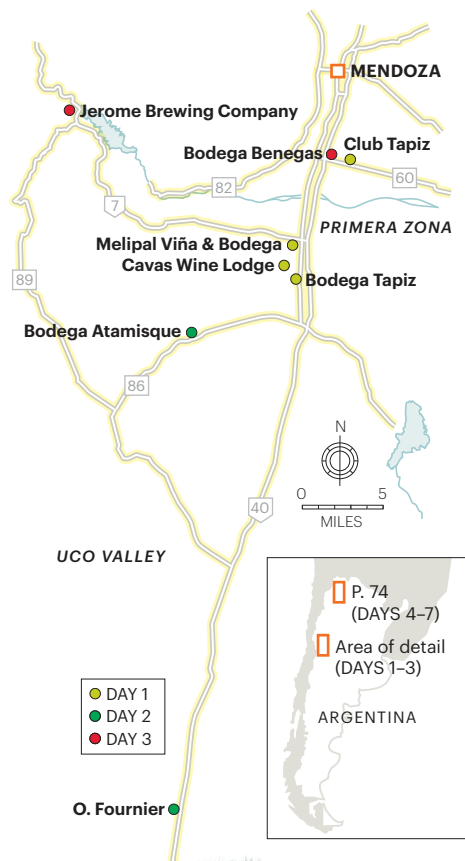


ponchos that recall the days when gauchos ruled these plains (Carril Araoz s/n; 54-261-496-3078; tasting, \$10). Fancy a beer after all that wine? Your hike can be engineered to end at the **Jerome Brewing Company**. One of Argentina's finest microbreweries, it produces a range of beers, from roasty stouts to West Coast-inspired IPAs; bottlings are aged in old wine barrels (Altos Manantiales, El Salto; 54-2624-483-039).

Back at Cavas, take an alfresco shower, and arrange for a car to pick you up at 8:15 P.M. for dinner at **Siete Cocinas de Argentina**, where the best cuisine from seven Argentinian regions

is served, including Patagonian lamb ribs with eggplant puree and scallops from the coast (Av. Mitre 794, Mendoza; 54-261-423-8823; entrées, \$16–\$21).

**FIG. 4**  
O. Fournier's Urban line sells for about \$10 a bottle in the States—we loved the malbec, tempranillo, and torrionés.



**DAY 4** Thursday **SALTA TO CAFAYATE**  
You'll be fetched at 9:45 A.M. to catch your flight to Salta, which lands in the city at 1:05 P.M. Flights operate nonstop from Mendoza to Salta on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays; we've timed this itinerary to have you in Cafayate—where you'll see the most local color of the trip—on a bustling Friday night. Approaching Salta from above, it's clear why the Spanish chose this spot to build their city back in the sixteenth century—fields of tobacco surround the urban sprawl, Salta being one of Argentina's fastest-growing cities. But as you ride south out of town toward Cafayate, the cultivated landscape gives way to crimson rocks. This arid valley area is known as Calchaquí, a name bestowed by the Diaguita Indians before the Europeans arrived. These "original people" resisted the Spanish fiercely, and their existence is palpable here.

Stop about midway at **La Posta de las Cabras** and order the Quesos de Cabra Variados, an antipasto platter with fresh goat cheese—the nannies live next door (Rte. 68, km. 88; 54-387-499-1093; cheese plate, \$9 per person). As you thread the needle between two ranges of the Andes, the rest of the drive is an exercise in living geology. You'll pass striated cliffs uplifted to near vertical, a gorge named after seashells that today is 200 miles from the ocean, and an enormous amphitheater cut into the rock by a waterfall that last flowed when dinosaurs swung by for a gulp. You may be surprised when the spiny cactuses give way to vineyards, but planting in this desert valley is no fool's game: Great wine comes from seriously stressed-out grapes. As in Mendoza, the fields have been irrigated by runoff from the mountain snowmelt for cen-

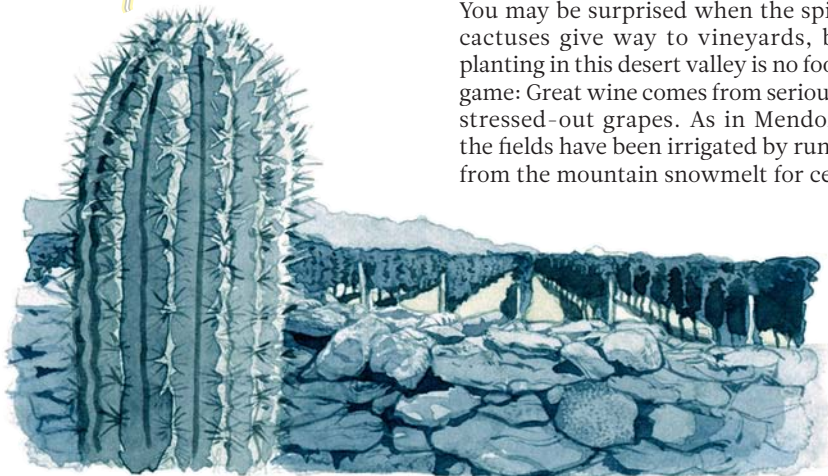
turies, but new well-drilling technology is increasing the area of arable land.

You should arrive by 6 P.M. at your hotel, **Killa Cafayate**. The name means moon in Quechua, and sounds like *key-ja* (Argentines pronounce *ll* and *y* like the French *je*). Killa more than makes up for its rusticity with charm—everything from the clay coffee cups to the gnarled wood lamps has been made by hand—and a great location, one block off the plaza. Your specialist has booked you one of the best rooms, on the third floor, with views over town to the mountains beyond (54-3868-422-254; doubles, \$116). Tonight, stroll to the plaza for dinner at **Restaurante el Rancho**, packed with locals eating their beloved asado: barbecued steaks, ribs, and sausages, with the requisite starchy sides (Vicario Toscano 4; 54-3868-421-256; entrées, \$12–\$16).

**DAY 5** Friday **CAFAYATE**  
This morning is another chance to expend some gastronomic calories.

Your guide can take you for a hike in the red-rock formations you drove through yesterday or along the Divisadero area just outside town. Either way, you'll have time to freshen up at Killa before an in-depth tour, tasting, and lunch at **San Pedro de Yacochuya**, on the mountain slope overlooking Cafayate. The bodega is owned by the Etchart family, one of the most respected names in the Argentine wine industry, and your host is the delightful Cecilia, wife of winemaker Marcos Etchart. They have an impressively outfitted production facility, given their tiny 90,000-liter capacity, and you'll be welcomed into the family's private house—filled with pieces by well-known local artists—for a lunch that would cause a strident locavore to swoon: cheese made in-house from local goat's milk, nuts from the property's trees, raisins dried by Mama Etchart, spinach from the garden (Rte. 2, km. 6; 54-9-3868-639-027).

The Etcharts were the first to bring famed wine consultant Michel Rolland to Argentina back in 1988. His stamp is now all over Mendoza and





Salta; like him or not (some argue that all his wines have the same big, ripe flavor profile, regardless of *terroir*), he's done a lot to put this country on the oenophile map. Yacochuya's torrentés—Argentina's iconic white grape, thought to be a blend of muscat and criolla—is a lovely example of the varietal: floral and aromatic in the nose; unexpectedly dry and acidic on the palate; and a great value at about \$10 a bottle. This afternoon is free so you can wander about town. Be sure to stop in one of the ice-cream shops on the square—Argentines take their dense scoops almost as seriously as they do their beef. By dusk, Cafayate's plaza should be coming alive; this is a tourist town, but with a vibrant local spirit. Today, the square is filled with teenagers practicing folk dancing, parents drinking maté, kids taking turns riding donkeys, and caricature artists doling out lopsided smiles and gooly

**The Five Best Views**

1. The Southern Hemisphere night sky from the rooftop terrace of your villa at the Cavas Wine Lodge.
2. The chocolate-brown and cream-colored llamas roaming the vineyards at Bodega Tapiz.
3. Watching local life happen around you—canoodling couples, friends sipping a Salta Rubia beer—from a bench in the Cafayate town plaza.
4. Gazing over the flat,

Andes-ringed Calchaquí Valleys from the Etchart's front porch at San Pedro de Yacochuya.

5. The red dirt and vineyard panorama from the end of the purple trail at Colomé (it's not on the map but is well marked).

**The Five Best Tastes**

1. O. Fournier's Alfa Crux Malbec 2005, a mammoth red with lots of fruit and oak.
2. The seven types of warm, fresh-baked bread

- at Siete Cocinas de Argentina (the *chipa* variety is made from yucca).
3. *Helado de dulce de leche granizado*: dulce de leche transformed into ice cream, with shards of chocolate—sold all over Argentina.
4. San Pedro de Yacochuya's 2009 torrentés paired with local pecans and raisins.
5. Any version of the tender homemade pasta at Colomé—spring for the *lagnagne* if it's on the menu.

eyes. When you're ready for dinner, snag an outdoor table at **Restaurant Terruño**, the best place in town for a modern rendition of local dishes, and enjoy the action (Guemes Sur 28; 54-3868-422-460; entrées, \$8-\$15).

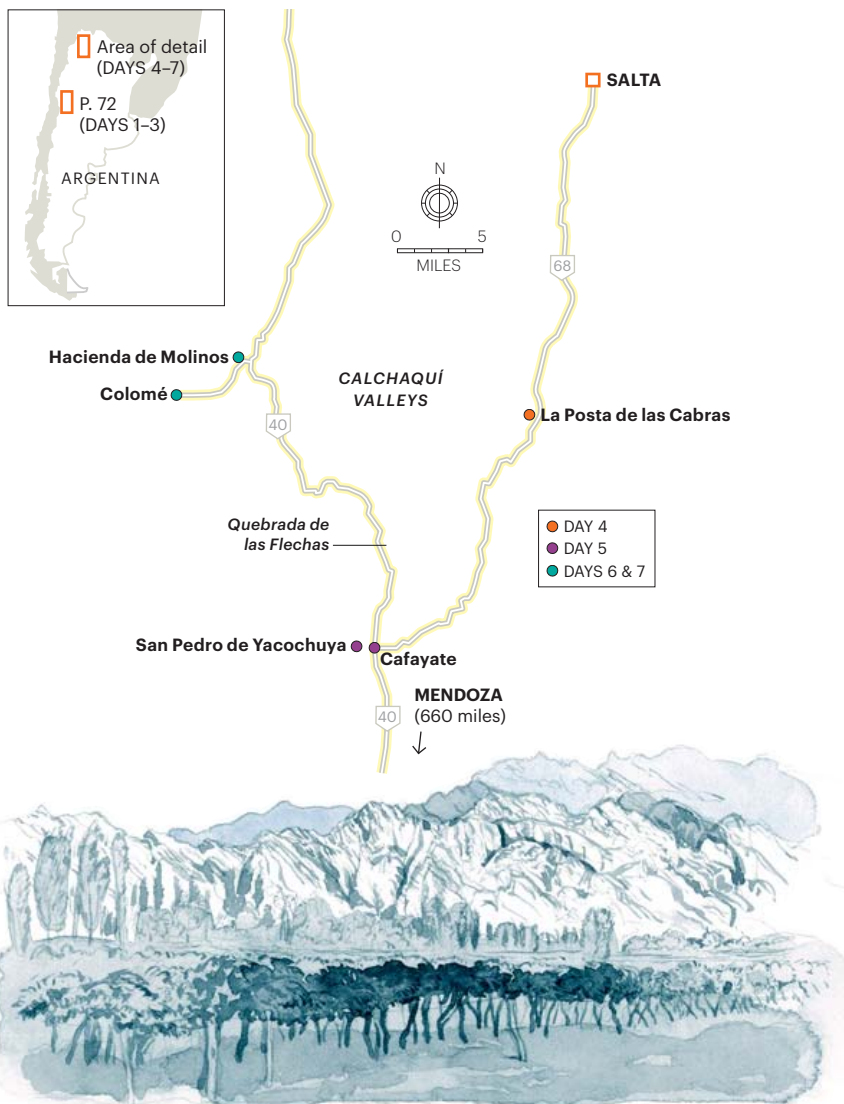
**DAY 6** Saturday **COLOMÉ**

Your guide will be waiting in the lobby at 10 A.M. to start your journey north

to **Colomé**, a 180-year-old estancia and bodega enjoying a second life as a wine resort under the ownership of Swiss wine mogul Donald Hess (54-3868-494-200; suites, \$390). It's a three-and-a-half-hour trip up Route 40, a top-to-toe cross-country road that's Argentina's answer to Route 66. In Salta Province, this gravel two-lane (at best) runs through the Quebrada de las Flechas (Gorge of Arrows), where the layers of flaky pink rock jut out of the earth like shark fins. If you're here in April, acres of red peppers laid out to dry in the sun streak the landscape. Even in this stronghold of indigenous culture, you'll see the Spanish influence, and the tiny town of Molinos is a good example of this melding: Don Nicolás Severo de Isasmendi y Echalar, the last Spanish governor of Salta, lived here for two decades after independence. Before lunch under the shade of a giant pink pepper tree at his old residence-turned-hotel, **Hacienda de Molinos**, glance at the seventeenth-century church, with its cactus-wood ceiling (Calle Abraham Cornejo; 54-3868-494-094; entrées, \$15-\$22).

From Molinos, it's a short but teeth-rattling four-wheel-drive trip to Colomé. When Hess arrived ten years ago, he committed to hiring at least one of the old estancia's laborers and their descendants from every family, and built them a community center, housing, medical facilities, and a church. The staff can be a bit timid, but chat with them (if your Spanish allows) and you'll see that the revitalization of Colomé wasn't just a PR stunt. When you arrive, sign up for the museum visit this evening, and the

(Continued on page 83)



horseback ride and winery tour tomorrow (request a premium tasting). The accommodations ring a small courtyard in the original hacienda; Nos. 3 through 8 have the best views. The high-ceilinged rooms are simply but beautifully furnished with local earth-tone textiles and ceramics; each has a fireplace and a private patio. This afternoon, walk the paths around the vineyards, and don't miss the immaculately pruned garden, which supplies the restaurant.

Some guests make the arduous journey to Colomé simply to visit the James Turrell Museum. As avid a contemporary art collector as he is a wine producer, Hess has devoted an entire museum to this extraordinary artist, who uses powerful light projections to create optical illusions. The climax of the visit is Turrell's *Skyspace*, an installation that brilliantly frames the vista through a window in the ceiling. After a guided visit (each evening for guests), float back to the main building for dinner. The produce is largely from Colomé's biodynamic garden; the dairy products, jams, breads, and pastas are made in-house; and most of the meat

comes from the farm (visit the piglets and bunnies if you dare).

DAY 7 Sunday **COLOMÉ**

Start your last morning in wine country with a horseback ride in the surrounding hills. Horse whisperer Ernesto is a gaucho's son who found a gentler way to tame his animals using body language and will show off his tricks. Opt for a [Fig. 5] Peruvian horse if you want a smooth ride—its distinctive gait means you'll barely bounce even at a trot—or one of the famously strong criollos if you'd like to gallop. After the ride, clean up and join the winery tour.

Colomé's main claim to fame is that, two hours north of the estancia, it owns the highest vineyards in the world, at an elevation of more than 10,000 feet. The winery tour is a bit perfunctory, but as you've requested the premium service, this will be your most exhaustive tasting of the trip. Appropriately, most of it will be torrontés and malbec. Colomé's Estate Malbec has been highly decorated, and the malbec from its special lot label—with aromas of ripe black fruits

and a chocolaty finish—is available only to estancia guests and in some special wine shops. Lunch is on the terrace, overlooking 150-year-old malbec and cabernet sauvignon vines.

After all that wine, you'll probably want to snooze the afternoon away, although there's tennis, boccie, bikes, and a game area for high-octane guests. If you've left a stressful lifestyle at home, linger by the pool, perhaps with a book from the library's excellent English-language wine and art collections. Tomorrow you'll drive back to Salta, maybe with a trunk full of liquid memories. But today, take time to soak in the strong desert sun and fresh mountain air that have helped produce some superlative wine. □



**FIG. 5** Colomé's Peruvian horses have a distinctive natural gait that makes for a very smooth ride.

**How to Book** Contact Vanessa Guibert Heitner of Limitless Argentina (202-536-5812; [vanessa@limitlessargentina.com](mailto:vanessa@limitlessargentina.com)). You can buy this trip as is or customize it. But first, go to [travelplanners.truth.travel](http://travelplanners.truth.travel) for crucial advice on how

to get the most out of working with a travel specialist. The cost of the seven-day tour described here is roughly \$3,991 per person, double occupancy. This includes all hotels, airport transfers, breakfasts, guides and drivers, winery

visits and lunches, activities at Colomé (except the premium wine tasting), and Heitner's planning fee. The price does not include round-trip airfare, the domestic flight, tips, or traveler's insurance.

