

Forbes

January 17th, 2019

Online Circulation: 29,759,863

Meet Susana Balbo, The Best Winemaker in Argentina



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I cover the world's best hotels, restaurants and wine.



Susana Balbo and her daughter Ana and son José keep her winery a family affair. SUSANA BALBO

Few winemakers of whatever sex have in so short a period of time achieved the respect and honors of Argentina's Susana Balbo, whose wines I have long counted among the best coming out of the Mendoza territory.

Early on, Balbo sought to pursue a career in nuclear physics, which her parents thought a “very unconventional choice for the time” and refused to let her leave Mendoza. So she knuckled under and became involved with the family’s viticultural business and in 1981 became the first woman in Argentina to receive a degree in enology. She then devoted herself to researching the Torrontes grape at the Michel Torino winery, then worked at Martins and Catena Zapata and began consulting at wineries in South America, Europe and Australia. In 1999 she founded Susana Balbo Wines in Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza, and today her son, José, graduate of UC Davis, and daughter, Ana, graduate of University San Andrés (Buenos Aires), have joined her in the family venture.



The vineyards of Susana Balbo are located in the cool mountain region of Mendoza. SUSANA BALBO

To date she has won a wide array of awards. In 1997, she was elected Woman Entrepreneur of the Year by the Argentine Organization of Businesswomen; between 2006 and 2016, three times served as president of Wines of Argentina, and last year made *The Drink Business* magazine’s list of “The 10 most influential women in the wine world.” Space alone prevents me from listing so many more achievements.

As you'd expect from a woman with such energy and drive, she has opened her winery to agro-tourism, with two *restaurantes* on the property, **Osadia de Crear** and **Espacio Crios**.

Of course, the ultimate proof of quality is in the bottle, and Balbo has said that “the winery is like my third child, a dream come true.” In that regard there are many siblings, though not so many as to make me question whether the winery is straining to please everyone. I've tasted several that are now in the market and here's what I found.

Susana Balbo Rosé of Malbec 2018 (\$20)—Rosés have made considerable headway in South America, and this one, made from 60% Malbec and 40% Pinot Noir, has real finesse to it, with just enough alcohol (13.2%) to bolster its fruit flavors. It is cold macerated with dry ice for one hour. An ideal August apéritif that can go with any seafood that comes afterwards.

Susana Balbo Brioso White 2017 (\$24)—This is a white blend of 45% Semillón, 30% Torrontes and 25% Sauvignon Blanc, the last enriching the fruit component, with the Semillón providing the lush aroma. The grapes are pressed without maceration, and after fermentation the wine spends a month on the lees, spending 4 months in 60% first-use French oak and 40% second-use. There's a light, pleasing grassy edge along with a good acid content and alcohol of 12.9%.



MENDOZA

SUSANA
Balbo

BRIOSÓ

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Susana Balbo Brioso Red 2016 (\$45)—This is the winery’s top-of-the-line Bordeaux-style blend, with 53% Cabernet Sauvignon, 24% Cabernet Franc, 16% Malbec and 7% Petit Verdot. It undergoes extended maceration of 35 days, then spends 15 months in new French oak barrels, coming out at a fine 14% alcohol, so it is neither plummy nor hot on the palate. Instead, you have a smooth, multi-faceted red that shows off the cool Mendoza terroir.

BenMarco Expresivo 2016 (\$35)—General Manager Edgardo “Edy” Del Popolo is in charge of Balbo’s BenMarco vineyards, where the terroir is allowed to speak with as little intervention by the winemaker as possible. Prices are amazingly reasonable. This blend of 75% Malbec and 25% Cabernet Franc, with just 13.5% alcohol, is a red wine of brightness and earthiness without being overpowered or out of balance. Terrific with steak.



BenMarco Malbec 2016 (\$20)—Malbec is currently the darling of Argentine viniculture, and this bottle contains 100% of it, at 13.5% alcohol. Unlike its often inky French cousin Cahors, made from the same grape, this is a softer, silkier version that is ideal with pork, roast chicken or veal Milanese.

BenMarco Cabernet Sauvignon 2016 (\$20)—On the other hand, if you like more tannin, this 100% Cab, at just 13.8% alcohol, shows how vivid the grape can be if not allowed to ferment into a one-dimensional blockbuster. Char-grilled anything, spicy sausages, Italian pasta sauces will all be enhanced by this excellent offering.

