



LAURA

the explorer

The managing director of Catena Zapata in Argentina
tells *Lucy Shaw* about her plans to put the country's
sub-regions on the world wine map

the big interview

LAURA CATENA puts in the hard yards. Since the Covid-19 lockdown began in March in the US, where she and her family are based, she has taken part in over 50 online tastings to promote her family winery – Catena Zapata – one of Argentina’s best known and most respected estates. A qualified physician, after obtaining a BA in biology from Harvard followed by a medical degree from Stanford, Catena worked full-time as an emergency room doctor in San Francisco, first looking after adults, then children. She continued working part time as an emergency physician, while running Catena Zapata, until recently.

Used to working in a stressful environment, Catena’s medical background has helped her to stay calm while steering her company through the pandemic. “Preventing the transmission of diseases is part of my DNA as a doctor, so I knew what needed to be done early on. We closed the winery to tourists straight away, and put strict social distancing measures in place for our

slow down, halting her intense travel schedule. A trip to Asia in September, where Catena is growing its presence, is now looking unlikely. Before the US went into lockdown, Catena spent a week a month in Argentina and juggled two high pressure jobs – ER doctor in California and managing director of Catena in Mendoza. Having successfully performed this juggling act for 25 years, Laura recently decided to take a step back from medicine, moving from the emergency room to volunteer work at a healthcare clinic for the homeless in San Francisco. “While my father is still very involved in the business, he turns 80 this year, so I need to dedicate myself fully to the winery now,” she says.

TEAMWORK, TRUTHFULNESS

Working as a doctor has given Laura a sense of perspective when it comes to the wine trade. “Teamwork and truthfulness are crucial in an ER department, so I’ve tried to create a working environment at Catena where people are comfortable

with admitting that they don’t know the answer to something – it’s vital to progress,” she says.

She has also made a point of helping the female members of the Catena team to rise through the ranks into senior positions. “There are more women graduating as doctors in Argentina and the US today than men, so I came from a field with a high degree of equality between the sexes and entered the wine industry with that

mindset. Companies with at least one woman on the board perform better than firms with male-only executives. People think of Argentina as having a very macho culture, but it’s very forward-thinking in terms of employing women in leadership positions.”

While she may miss the instant gratification that comes with saving lives on a daily basis, through working in wine Catena has learnt the art of patience. “I’ve come to appreciate the things that require years of work – it takes at least a decade to know a vineyard’s greatness. There is something beautiful in the fact that you have to wait for it to reveal its potential.”

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staff,” says Catena, who is keen to keep the winery, based in the Mendoza sub-region of Luján de Cuyo, as clean as a hospital – all staff wear masks indoors, and surfaces are cleaned every two hours. Luckily for Catena, Mendoza has been relatively spared from the virus, with just 550 confirmed cases in the city compared with 73,340 in Buenos Aires. “We are still making and selling wine, and haven’t had to close because the government declared wine an essential product.”

Nicknamed ‘lauchita’ (little mouse) by her grandfather, Domingo, because she was always on the move as child, the coronavirus crisis has forced Catena to

Laura Catena at a glance

- > Laura Catena was born in 1967.
- > In 1988 she graduated from Harvard with a BA in biology. She went on to attain a degree in medicine from Stamford, graduating in 1992.
- > Following a three-year residency at UCLA Medical Centre, Catena has worked as a part-time ER physician in San Francisco for the past 25 years.
- > In 1995 she began working at Bodega Catena Zapata, founding the Catena Institute of Wine, which has pioneered projects in Malbec clonal research and the effects of altitude.
- > From 1998-2001 Catena looked after North American exports for the estate, then global exports.
- > In 1999 she founded Luca Wines, a side project focused on small-batch wines that use quality grapes that would have gone into bulk wines.
- > In 2001 she became executive export director for Catena.
- > Since 2009, Catena has been the managing director of Catena Zapata, a role that sees her sign off all wines before they’re bottled and travel the world promoting her family winery at tastings and events. She continues to manage global exports.
- > In 2012 Catena released Argentina’s first sustainability code, which has been widely adopted by the Argentine wine industry.
- > In 2019 she was named vice-chair of the UC Davis School of Viticulture, and is set to become chair in 2021.
- > She has three children with her Irish-American ER physician husband Dan McDermott – Luca (22), Dante (18) and Nicola (15).
- > Laura likes to unwind after work by walking her Goldendoodle, Nala, and listening to audiobooks. She’s currently enjoying *L’Étranger* by Albert Camus, narrated in French.

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Feeling sheepish: Catena in the vineyard

Catena's wine story has roots that stretch back to 1902, when Laura's great-grandfather, Nicola, founded Bodega Catena Zapata in Mendoza. Focusing on high altitude vineyards, Laura's father, Nicolas, has been instrumental in putting high quality Argentine Malbec, Cabernet and Chardonnay on the wine map, introducing temperature control and French oak to the family estate to retain freshness in the wines and avoid oxidation. The jewel in the Catena crown is the Adrianna vineyard, named after

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Laura's younger sister, which sits at an elevation of 1,500m. Since joining the family firm in 1995 – the same year she founded the Catena Institute of Wine – Laura has championed cool climate mountain viticulture, dividing the Adrianna vineyard into lots and making wines from small parcels that highlight the terroir differences from plot to plot.

DIFFERENT SOIL PROFILES

This obsessive quest to let the terroir talk is perfectly exemplified in Catena's highly regarded Chardonnays, White Stones and White Bones, which are made from nearby lots within the Adrianna vineyard with different soil profiles. The latter gets its name from the fossilised animal remains in its limestone-rich soils. For Catena, high altitude (and its effects on grapes) is fundamental to the character of Argentine wine. "Altitude has determined the soil composition in Argentina, and

our soils are incredibly diverse from region to region. Grapes are exposed to more intense sunlight at high altitude, giving them thicker skins and making them rich in polyphenols, which improves their ability to age," she says.

Her dream is for Argentine wine to stand alongside the best wines in the world, and for there to be at least one bottle of Catena in the cellars of the world's top collectors, though she admits to being a long way off achieving that goal. To help her in her quest, last year Catena joined La Place de Bordeaux to widen the estate's distribution network and get the wines into the hands of collectors. While she's pleased with how the wines have been received in France, she feels Argentine wine is largely misunderstood. "Selling our wines through La Place should be very helpful



Star performer: night at the Adrianna vineyard

eventually, but there's still a lot of work to do within the négociant network. There is still snobbery in France towards Argentine wine – most French wine experts don't understand our terroir and climate. There is very little knowledge in the French wine trade about Argentine wine. Once they taste the wines they love them – the difficult thing is to get people to show an interest," Catena admits.

UPHILL STRUGGLE

She is also candid about the fact that convincing the sommelier community of the merits of Argentine wine has been an uphill struggle. "There is still the opinion among sommeliers that all Malbec tastes the same despite the fact that there is more genetic diversity in Argentine Malbec than in Malbec from Europe."

To help change their minds, Catena contacted the Wine and Spirits Education Trust to inform them that the Argentina chapter of the diploma needed more depth. It has since been revised. "It's our responsibility as producers to bring educators over to Argentina and tell them

the story of our wines. Educators have open minds, but I'd love for them to work even harder to get to know us."

Having written the first English-language book about Argentine wine in 2010 – *Vino Argentino, An Insider's Guide to the Wines and Wine Country of Argentina* – Catena is currently co-writing a book on the geography and geology of Malbec with her chief winemaker, Alejandro Vigil, which will be published in Spanish, English and French. This year her second book from 2017 – *Gold in the Vineyards* – was published in English. It tells the stories of a dozen of the wine world's most celebrated sites, from Guigal's La Mouline in the northern Rhône, and Lopez de Heredia's Viña Tondonia in Rioja Alta, to Henschke's Hill of Grace in Australia's Eden Valley.

While many winemakers in Argentina are moving towards fresher, more floral expressions of Malbec from high altitude vineyards, Catena believes there is also a place for the riper, richer, more traditional styles. "In its warmer regions, Argentina can produce bigger, richer styles of

Malbec with smooth tannins that are similar to Merlot in style, and fresher, more floral Malbecs that are more Pinot Noir-like in the country's cooler regions. Part of Malbec's popularity came from these richer styles, because the tannins are always smooth, and big wines with smooth tannins are attractive to a lot of consumers," she says.

Though regionality seems the logical next step for Argentina

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Branching out

Having noticed that a lot of high quality old vine grapes were being used to make bulk wine in Argentina, in 1999 Laura Catena founded Luca Wines, named after her oldest son, to help small growers get a fair price for their grapes, and save their old vines from being grubbed up by elevating the grapes to more worthy expressions befitting of their ancient roots. "At the time, very few Argentine winemakers believed a great wine could be made from purchased grapes," she says. "It was not easy at first. The yield reduction required was beyond anything the growers could imagine and they feared the economic consequences." The project provided a chance for Catena to experiment with varieties other than Malbec. Her range includes an organically farmed, high altitude Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the Uco Valley, and Argentina's oldest massal selection Syrah made from cuttings from the Rhône planted in La Consulta in 1955. "The Luca project gives me a chance to make interesting things. I don't make a lot so I don't have to work too hard at selling it. There's not a lot of Pinot planted in Argentina and it's very fashionable right now, so I can sell all my Pinot locally if need be."

when it comes to educating the wine trade, Catena feels it may be asking too much of consumers to expect them to understand of terroir nuances of Mendoza's many sub-regions. "How much space is there in someone's brain for that? Our first priority should be communicating that Argentina is a country with a long wine history and an

the big interview



Cutting edge: Laura during harvest

Old World outlook – we have been drinking wine for centuries; it's our national beverage. I want people to understand how ancient our wine traditions are and the fact that half of Argentina's wineries are family-owned. Argentina offers both Old World tradition and New World dynamism."

While Catena may not feel consumers are ready to learn about Argentine regionality at a granular level, she is keen to show them there is more to the country than Mendoza Malbec. In 2015 she launched a range called Pasarisa, which shines a light on the country's other wine

regions, from Salta in the north to Patagonia down south. The range is also an opportunity to showcase grape varieties outside of Malbec, and includes a Pinot Noir from Patagonia, a savoury Syrah from La Rioja, and an aromatic Torrontés from Salta. Targeted at the on-trade and independent merchants, the labels, designer by Stranger & Stranger, feature hand-drawn sketches that tell the story of Argentina's wine heritage.

Two of Catena's key focuses at the moment are natural wines and sustainability. In 2013, the bodega launched Argentina's first sustainability code through its wine institute, which has been widely adopted by the Argentine wine industry. Like Miguel Torres in Spain, Laura wants Catena to champion sustainable viticulture in Argentina. Honouring the Italian winemaking traditions her great-grandfather, Nicola, brought with him when arriving in Mendoza from Le Marche at the end of the 19th century, Catena's new sulphite-free

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La Marchigiana range includes a skin-contact Chardonnay, Bonarda and Criolla Chica, all of which are fermented and aged in clay pots. Catena was inspired to create the range after reading Alice Feiring's natural wine tome, *For the Love of Wine*, and chancing upon an old clay pot once used by Nicola at the winery. "What's particularly exciting about this project is that Criolla Chica and Bonarda are so well suited to natural winemaking that they might provide an economic opportunity for the eastern region of Mendoza, which has suffered because of the recent popularity of the Uco Valley. A lot of the country's Criolla vineyards will be pulled out unless we can create a market for the wines," she says.

CONDUIT FOR THE TERROIR

Catena is also pouring energy into her high altitude Pinot Noir project, Domaine Nico, formed of five Pinot Noirs from five 'crus' in Tupungato, boasting a range of soil types and altitudes, allowing the grapes to be a conduit for the terroir. The French wine names, including *Histoire d'A* (inspired by Pauline Réage/Anna Desclos' erotic novel *The Story of O*) and DRC-inspired labels reflect Catena's ambition to produce Argentina's answer to top Burgundy. Having been taught to be a better listener by her father, Laura's proudest achievement is continuing his ambition to raise the global profile of Argentine wine with "very little conflict" – not always easy for a family-run winery.

Outside of Catena, her dream for Argentina is that its winemaking traditions will continue to thrive. "In 100 years I'd like there to be a vibrant agricultural community in Mendoza making great wine, like there was 100 years ago, but it's at risk at the moment," she admits, though feels that life in lockdown has taught people to live more simply and with less impact on the environment. "The pandemic has taught us that it's possible to live in a way that is less disruptive to the earth – I hope we continue to do so." **db**