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Weekly Interview: Santiago Achával

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Santiago Achával

Each week, as regular readers know, we pose a series of questions to a winemaker. This week, we're featuring Santiago Achával (pronounced ah-CHA-vahl, like a big sneeze). Santiago is the founding partner and winemaker behind Achával-Ferrer.

Achával-Ferrer, launched in 1995, produces a line of beautiful, age-worthy Argentinean wines, which are now sold in 62 countries.

Born in Rochester, Minnesota, Santiago moved to Argentina when he was six years old. After graduating as Valedictorian from his high school, he went on to attend university also in Cordoba, Argentina. He spent the next few years working for a cement company before deciding to attend business school in the U.S. His life then took a turn when he caught the wine contagion during weekend visits to Napa and Sonoma while getting his MBA at Stanford. He returned to Argentina and soon decided that his "main purpose in life would be to start a small, quality-oriented winery." His first harvest at Achával-Ferrer was in 1998.

I had the chance to meet Santiago during one of his stops in New York this summer. He's an absolute pleasure — his storytelling skills are superb and his wines, while often pricey, represent a sophistication and maturity not always found in the region.

Read more about Santiago and his wines below the fold.

What is your general winemaking philosophy?

I try to listen to what the grapes "want." A grape has some degree of liberty, but generally wants to go in a certain direction. If you try to deviate from that, the resulting wine will lack integrity, purity, and originality. Therefore, my overarching wine philosophy is to listen; to gather enough intuition to help the grape along in the general direction it wants to go.

What's open in your kitchen right now?

Rarely a bottle remains open! With a wife and three kids all of whom are of drinking age, we actively work on the one-bottle-per-dinner basis. But that bottle can be anything, the whim of the moment. California, Spain, Bordeaux, some Achaval-Ferrer. Other Argentina wines... absolutely anything.

Who are your favorite winemakers in history, through personal account, or their wines?

First is Roberto Cipresso, who is my mentor, teacher, and the person who taught me most of what I know about wine. He pointed me in all the right directions – to 1988 Ciacci Piccolomini, 2006 Riserva La Fiorita Brunello, and so many others.

Another favorite winemaker is Ray Kaufman. He taught me the simplicity of allowing nature to express itself. I met him in 2000 in Mendoza and we've been friends ever since.

The third is Patrick Campbell. He demonstrates the energy and vision that makes reality change. I love his Laurel Glen Cabs!

Finally, I really respect Stephan Asseo. He is the maker and “definer” of new wines in Paso Robles. I met him on the road, showing our wines at distributor tastings back in 2004 and we’ve been friends since. He opened his home and winery to me when I started making wine in Paso. His Estate Cuvée is the wine I associate with him, but I also really like his Cuvée Chloe, which was just released (but I tasted from barrel).

What new winemakers are you most excited about, and why?

Marcelo Pelleriti, who makes wine at Monteviejo in Argentina and at Chateau Le Gay and La Violette in Pomerol, France. Also, Alejandro Vigil of Catena in Argentina and Pablo Martorell of Vines of Mendoza. And the Michellini brothers of Zorzal Winery in Mendoza. All these guys are pushing the envelope in Argentina. They are also guys who collaborate and share the joy of discovery instead of competing.

How do you spend your days off?

Barbecuing with family – wine always at my side!

Back in my mid-thirties I found out that I had high cholesterol. So since then, half the surface of my grill is for vegetables. Anything that is ripe can be grilled: eggplant, onions, garlic, bell peppers, cauliflower, mushrooms, etc. And being in Argentina, we have to have a pound of meat per person!

When not barbecuing, I’ll spend time in the mountains, trekking with the kids.

What’s the best wine you’ve ever tasted? The most interesting?

1983 Cassa Basse Brunello de Montalcino, tasted at a tiny restaurant in Venice. Amazing.

What’s the oldest bottle in your cellar? The most expensive?

The oldest is 1970 Viejo Suter Vino de Guarda from Bodegas Suter of San Rafael, Mendoza

The most expensive is a \$600 Mouton Rothschild.

If you had to pick one red and one white to drink for the next month with every dinner, what would you choose?

Achaval-Ferrer Finca Bella Vista Old-Vine Malbec. It has that combination of a texture that veers from velvet to almost silk. It has a restraint that invites dialogue. It has big, but fine-grained tannins that keep it upright. And the freshness that invites you to drink more.

For the white, I’d pick the Hand of God Fingerprint Series White Blend. An exotic blend for Argentina. One third each of Viognier, Roussanne, and Marsanne, co-fermented in third time used oak. The personality of a red in a white body.

What’s your biggest challenge as a winemaker?

Not to let wild ideas and new challenges deviate us from our core focus. Not to go out in a simple pursuit of “the new.” The new is nice and inviting, because it’s a challenge. But it has to make sense with our vineyards, with our established winemaking philosophy. For example, fermenting in cement “eggs” is intriguing. But it doesn’t make a lot of sense with our Malbecs.

What’s your favorite wine region in the world — other than your own?

Paso Robles, California. My best friends from business school bought land there and invited me and my wife Mercedes to start a winery. So in 2009, we did a tiny 300 case harvest. We are now at 800 cases per year, all with our own hands. Great West Side terroir, great vineyard partners. And a whole new learning experience. It’s called the Farm Winery.

Is beer ever better than wine?

Yes! After a day of working in the winery, tasting grapes, and tasting fermenting musts, you really crave a tall cold beer!

What would people be surprised to know about you?

How much of what I do is gut feeling...I come across as very rational and analytic, but in wine, many times I don't know exactly why I decide to do something.

If you weren't making wine for a living, what would you be doing?

Playing classical guitar.

How do you define success?

Loving what you do!