

Wine Searcher

Q&A: Laura Catena

Laura Catena is an emergency room doctor in San Francisco. She is also a fourth-generation winemaker from a family credited with revolutionizing Argentinian wine - Bodega Catena Zapata's flagship label, Nicolás Catena Zapata, was the first wine from Argentina to score a Robert Parker 98+.



HOW DID YOU FIRST FALL IN LOVE WITH WINE?

When my father was starting this whole revolution with Argentine wine in the '80s and I was going to school in the United States [Harvard and Stanford]. My father used to visit me and one of our traditions was to go to really nice restaurants. His objective was to make Argentine wines that could stand with the rest of the world, so we had to try the best wines on the list. I became a wine snob rather quickly. That's really how I started: sitting and having these incredible conversations with my father over wine.

IS GREAT WINE MADE IN THE VINEYARD OR THE WINERY?

Definitely in the vineyard. There's no way you can make a great wine without a great vineyard. Impossible. However, you can ruin a great vineyard by making a bad wine. I think both are important, but without the great vineyard, there isn't a great wine.

CATENA ZAPATA AND ARGENTINA IN GENERAL FOUND GREAT SUCCESS IN MARKETING SINGLE-VARIETAL MALBEC WINE. WHAT'S

THE FUTURE OF WINE – SINGLE VARIETALS OR TERROIR BLENDS?

In terms of the near future, I think it's about both. My father introduced high-altitude malbec, which was a new flavor at the time. You can get a new flavor from a single variety or a blend. To me, the future of wine is more about experimenting with different blends, maybe with the same variety in different places, but bringing to wine drinkers new experiences and new flavors.

DO YOU MAKE WINE FOR YOURSELF, THE PUBLIC OR THE CRITICS?

I first make wine that I like to drink. I've been drinking wine with my father for 25 years and we've drunk a lot of the same wines, so we do kind of create a family palate. I feel this is one of the things I can give the consumers. They are drinking a Catena wine and it's a wine that I made that I like to drink.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ROBERT PARKER'S POINTS SYSTEM FOR RANKING WINES?

To me, wine is this really beautiful thing with a history, a sense of

place, a family. A number doesn't encompass all these beautiful things. On the other hand, how does a consumer deal with the quantity of labels out there? I think this system helps the consumer in some way. It takes a bit of the romance away, but life is all about compromises. If somebody could come up with a more romantic system, I'd go for it!

IS MALBEC JUST A 'BOOM' VARIETAL?

Malbec is one of the longest-surviving wine varieties in the world. If you think back to the Middle Ages, it was totally the most famous wine – the 'black wine' of Cahors. Now, it's having its renaissance in Argentina. I don't think it's just a boom variety, because it has great concentration, good aromatics. It just tastes good!

IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE BETWEEN BEING A DOCTOR OR A WINEMAKER, WHICH WOULD YOU PICK AND WHY?

Being a doctor, your goal is always clear: you do everything to keep that person healthy and safe. Making wine is difficult – every year you have a different harvest and anything could happen. There's a lot more risk. I'd have to pick medicine, but I hope I never have to make that choice.

IN WINE TERMS, WHO ARE YOUR HEROES?

No. 1: Papi, my dad, Nicolas Catena. Another is my brother Ernesto. He is not fearful to change labels or styles. And I admire someone who has so much fearlessness. I have great respect for Angelo Gaja [owner of the Gaja winery in Piedmont] for what he did for his home region, to go out there and not just promote his own wines but his whole region. And also that he is an importer. He actually introduced wines from around the world to Italy and I think that takes an openness of mind that's really extraordinary.

WHAT DO YOU MOST DISLIKE IN A WINE?

I really don't like this new style of sweetened red wines. I don't like the way it tastes, and I also think it's bad for your health. To me, wine in moderation is one of the best medicines and when you add sugar, I think it's ruining the health benefits.

DURING HARVEST, WHO OR WHAT DO YOU PRAY TO?

I am one of those people who believes in black cats. My grandfather, Domingo, used to hire witchdoctors who would come to the vineyard to sing songs and make the bad spirits go away. I like crossing my fingers, thinking good thoughts, etc. Being a doctor, I see lots of suffering and I think I reserve God for family and more serious things. The things that happen in the vineyard are more about luck; in the end, there's not much you can do. The weather is the weather!

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST WINEMAKING ACHIEVEMENT, AND FAILURE?

My greatest wine achievement was starting my own wines, Luca. I saw a great opportunity of buying grapes from old family vineyards in Argentina. I really believe in old vines because they have this natural balance and low yields. That's when I started Luca, to take advantage of these beautiful old vineyards. Luca Malbec made it to the best 100 wines in Wine Spectator and they are now sold all over the world.

And writing the first English language book about Argentine wine,

"Vino Argentino: An Insider's Guide to the Wines and Wine Country of Argentina." I am not one of those people who dwell on failure. I've made some really bad mistakes in wine but I don't bottle them.

WHAT DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU LOOK IN THE MIRROR?

Usually a bad-hair day.

WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE BURIED?

In Mendoza, where my grandparents and great-grandparents are buried, with the Catena Zapatas.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR LAST MEAL AND WINE?

That's easy! I would drink 1999 Luca Pinot Noir. It was the best Luca wine I ever made. And I would drink it with hamburger and fries.

TELL US ABOUT A SURPRISING WINE IN YOUR CELLAR.

I have a Nicolás Catena Zapata 2008 with a label made by a cartoon artist that I donated to my son's school, then I bought it. It has a cartoon of my father and me as superheroes. I love seeing this fancy wine with a whimsical label on it. I also have some homemade wine a friend gave me that I am never planning to drink. I've never dared to open it, but I feel too guilty to throw it away.

WHAT DO YOU DRINK ON A "SCHOOL NIGHT"?

I try to drink as many different wines as I can. Right now, I'm sort of obsessed with an Italian wine from Salice Salentino, Leone de Castri. Another wine I love at the moment is a Sicilian white blend. It's made by a friend of mine, Andrea Franchetti.

IF YOU COULD INVITE ANYONE TO BE YOUR DINNER GUEST TONIGHT, WHO WOULD IT BE?

Nelson Mandela. I've always loved Africa, I spent a lot of time there [hospital volunteer, translating folklore in Senegal, honeymooning in South Africa, biology teacher in Kenya]. I've always loved the spirit of Africans – they are very warm people, very welcoming and generous. When I've heard Nelson Mandela speak, I've been completely inspired. What he did for his country is so extraordinary, and the way he was able to forgive.

DO YOU HAVE ANY REGRETS?

I don't spend time regretting things – I move on. If there's something I wish I'd done, I go and do it.

WHAT BRINGS YOU THE GREATEST HAPPINESS?

Being with my family.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

I'm a big believer that your impact is strongest in your immediate surroundings. If we were to focus on more kindness, more warmth and love in all our day-to-day interactions, I think the world would be a better place.

IN THE END, WHAT REALLY MATTERS?

Happiness. The only way to be happy is when you feel that you are doing things for others, helping the world become a better place.