

IN THE EXTREME NORTH OF ARGENTINA'S SALTA PROVINCE, WINEMAKER THIBAUT DELMOTTE TAMES OLD VINES GROWN IN THE WORLD'S HIGHEST-ELEVATION VINEYARDS FOR **BODEGA COLOMÉ**

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Colomé winemaker Thibaut Delmotte with 100-year-old Malbec vines.

Taking Remote Control

by Meredith May

WHEN FRENCH-BORN THIBAUT DELMOTTE was invited up—way up—to the Colomé winery in the northernmost portion of Argentina by proprietor and entrepreneur Donald Hess, he bravely took to the road from Salta, which is already located at the Tropic of Capricorn (about a 14-hour drive north from Mendoza). Hess, who has revitalized the property that is claimed to have the world's highest vineyards—up to 10,000 feet above sea level—encouraged Delmotte to take the four-hour drive further north from Salta for the job interview.

Born and raised in Bourgogne, with winemaking stints in Bordeaux, Delmotte was simply a tourist visiting Argentina when he was introduced through a colleague to Hess. "I made the drive in 2004," notes Delmotte. "This was before GPS, and I was driving this long distance on gravelly mountain roads, thinking it was a four-hour drive. There was a period of time I thought I was lost."

It actually took Delmotte six-and-a-half hours, climbing further and further north, ascending towards the Bolivian/Chilean border in the Andes Mountains, but the trip to Colomé wound up being worth the time and effort. Delmotte has been living there ever since, and lived alone for four years before he met his wife, a local Argentinian. They now have two children, who love running through the isolated countryside. "I enjoy the challenge of living here."

Impressed by the beauty of the area, Delmotte compares the majesty of Colomé to that of the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. "Only it's greener," he tells *The Somm Journal*. "And more arid—we average about five inches of rain fall a year." With such low levels of rain, irrigation is a must; fortunately, a river runs through Colomé.

"We planted 170 acres [over three different farms] and we have just enough water from ice that melts in the spring," insists Delmotte. "And from new plantations, we have access to well water that also happens to generate our electricity with carbide-powered energy. There is no electricity in this remote region."

Situated close to the equator, but way over a mile above sea level, Colomé's days are warm (90 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and 70 in the winter during the day) but can drop over 60 degrees at night. "The diurnal swing keeps our fruit fresh," Delmotte explains.

Colomé dates back to 1831, and today's Colomé wines express themselves through elevation, biodynamic practices and vine age. "We have Malbec vines that date back 150 years," says Delmotte. The cuttings were brought here from Bordeaux."

When Delmotte journeyed to Los Angeles recently, we met up with him to taste through some of the latest vintages from Colomé and sister Salta winery Amalaya. Here are some favorites.

Amalaya 2016 Torrontes/Riesling, Northern Calchaquí Valley, Argentina (SRP \$12) From grapes grown in the eastern foothills of the Andes Mountains at about 5,500 feet in elevation, this decisively mineral-rich white offers a lanolin texture with bright acidity with a touch of grassiness. No oak and no ML.

Colomé Estate 2016 Torrontés, Salta, Argentina (SRP \$16) Grown at elevations from 6,500 to 7,000 feet; sturdy rock-slate notes, with a squeeze of lime, come through. It's fresh and elegant.

Colomé 2015 Auténtico Malbec, Salta, Argentina (SRP \$25) A single-vineyard wine; violets and bright, juicy blueberry are fragrant and flavorful. Surprisingly, there is no oak regimen here. "There is very little human intervention with these grapes," says Winemaker Thibaut Delmotte. "The vines are very old plantings and the non-oak production is a style that's coming to the fore in Argentina. Malbec should possess round tannins. It's a friendly variety that shouldn't require oak influence." This wine is on-premise only.

Colomé 2013 Estate Malbec, Salta, Argentina (SRP \$25) A blend of three different terroirs, with elevations ranging from 6,000 to 8,500 feet high. Using ten percent new oak and the rest aged in used barrels, the wine is plush and round with spiced plum liqueur and espresso bean minerality. Blackberry and dark bittersweet chocolate mingle. "There's a new generation of winemakers who are looking for a different style of wine here in Argentina," says Delmotte. *The Somm Journal* applauds him for being a leader in that category. ■

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