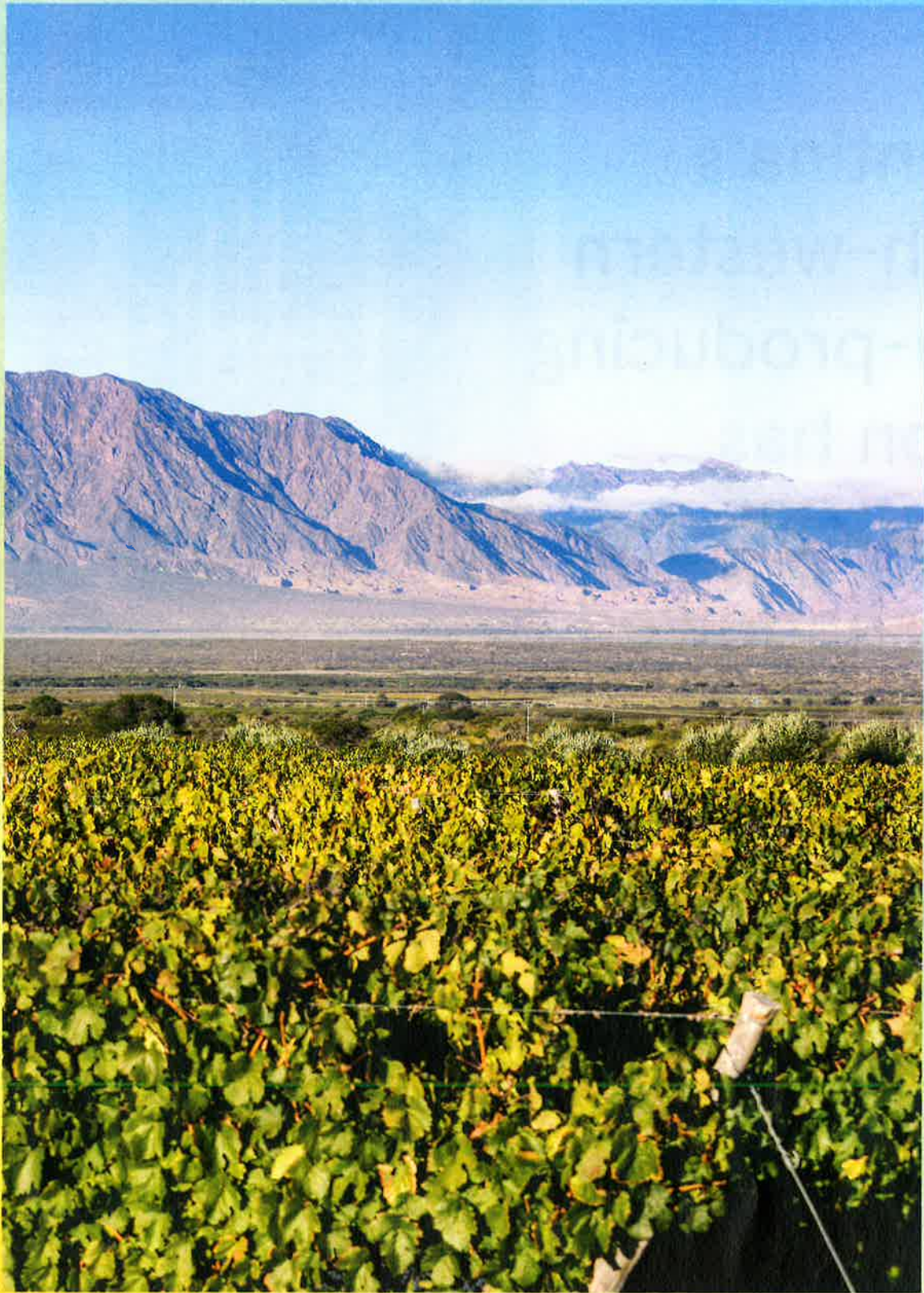


Argentina's north-western wine-producing region has historically been overshadowed by the more famous Mendoza. But its industry is growing dramatically – bringing new life and tourism to one of South America's most stunning destinations







Sunlight streams between the ginkgo biloba trees in 20 de Febrero square, where an artisan sells handwoven straw *simbol* place mats from her bicycle. Around the corner, Los Toneles (“The Casks”) hotel rents out bikes to an energetic group keen to work up a thirst on the rugged local hills and canyons. The warm air is tinged with the scent of *asado* (Argentinian barbecue) as cooks at El Rancho prepare juicy beef empanadas and *llajua* (fresh tomato and chilli salsa).

Welcome to Cafayate – but don’t

let its laid-back attitude deceive you. This high-altitude gem of north-western Argentina, located 1,683 metres above sea level (masl), has been a winemaking hub for three centuries, ever since Jesuits planted vines here in the 18th century. And it’s getting busier each year.

Today the town and its vineyards are the economic motor of the Calchaquies Valleys, Salta’s main wine-producing region, making millions of litres of wines each year. It still lags behind Argentina’s most famous grape-growing area Mendoza – contributing just 1.5% of the country’s production to the latter’s 70% – but with South American wine tourism on the up, its unusual high-altitude tipples are bringing new income to the area.

Fifty years ago, just six wineries existed. Now there are 42 of them. Each has hired local staff to work in *bodegas* (wineries), hotels and restaurants or as guides, and employed artisans from the region to build and furnish facilities. Alongside the draws of sunny days, towering cacti and lunar landscapes with literally breathtaking altitudes (ranging between 1,550 and 3,111 masl), wine is now helping to attract 1.2 million annual visitors, up from 300,000 a decade ago. »





"Wine has really helped Cafayate a lot," says Virginia Marín, chef at La Rosa, the restaurant at Patios de Cafayate, Bodega El Esteco's hotel. Her menus have been designed to reflect what her birthplace – and the region as a whole – has to offer.

"The idea is to showcase Cafayate," she says of her ice cream, made with blood oranges from the hotel's orchard, and ingredients used to flavour her stylish regional cuisine. "Cumin, for example, is grown and dried in nearby San Carlos, known for its spices, while our bread baskets are handmade from *simbol* straw in the village of Animaná."

Her food and vision is part of a wider ambition set out by Bodega El Esteco, which pioneered wine tourism to the region back in 2000 by building Patios de Cafayate. Its stunning colonial mansion, overlooking the red-hued Cumbres Calchaquíes mountains, is filled with details that shine a light on Salta's local culture.

Alpaca silver key rings in the form of bunched grapes were crafted by silversmith Jorge Barraco, while soap dishes are made from mud. Textiles come from Seclantás, a village on the Camino de los Artesanos ("Artisans' Way") whose weavers are respected for their red-and-black sheep's wool ponchos that are a must for any self-respecting Argentinian – even the current pope has one.

Nursing a glass as the lowering sun casts a pink sheen across the mountains, it's easy to fall for the region's bottled charms. El Esteco is one of the stops on La Ruta del Vino, the wine route pioneered

LA RUTA DEL VINO



Previous page from top left: Cafayate's otherworldly landscape; shopping for artisanal products in Cafayate and Cachi

This page, clockwise from top left: La Ruta del Vino; rolling out a barrel at El Porvenir de Cafayate; a gateway at El Esteco de Cafayate

a decade ago to bring together disparate bodegas of the Calchaquíes Valleys and give the region a wine-focused identity. Starting in the capital, Salta, it makes for a wine-derful road trip. An ideal circuit is Salta-Cafayate-Colomé-Cachi, a drive that takes in the legendary Ruta 40 mountain road and weaves through the Quebrada de las Conchas, whose vibrant red rock formations date back to the Cretaceous period.

First stop out of Cafayate is family-owned El Porvenir de Cafayate, where every care has been taken to nurture the »



**"Wine has helped
Cafayate a lot"**

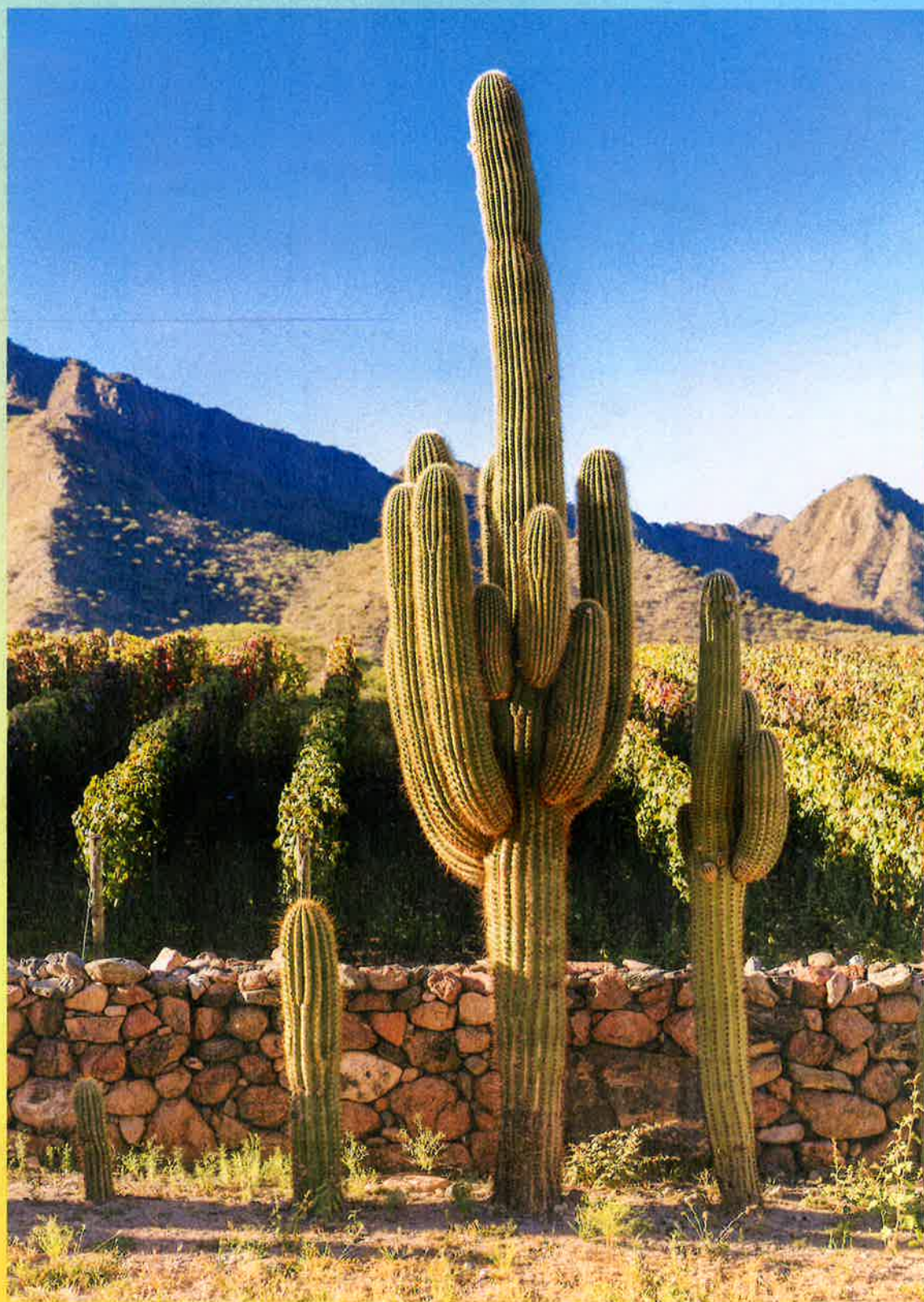
Tasting notes

The Salta region has been producing wine since the Spanish conquistadors arrived, with growing areas largely gathered around Cafayate, Tolombón, Colomé and Cachi.

↓
The terroir's geography of high-altitude vineyards close to the equator is exposed to temperatures of up to 37°C by day but much lower at night, giving high-acidity, complexity and depth to its atypical wines.

↓
Although Malbec, Argentina's most planted red, dominates here as in Mendoza, local vintages are spicier than those found further south. Cabernet Sauvignon's bell pepper notes are notable, while Tannat is often floral.

↓
Torrontés is Argentina's most famous white – a cross between Mission and Muscat of Alexandria grapes. Smooth and peachy, it's popular and very drinkable.



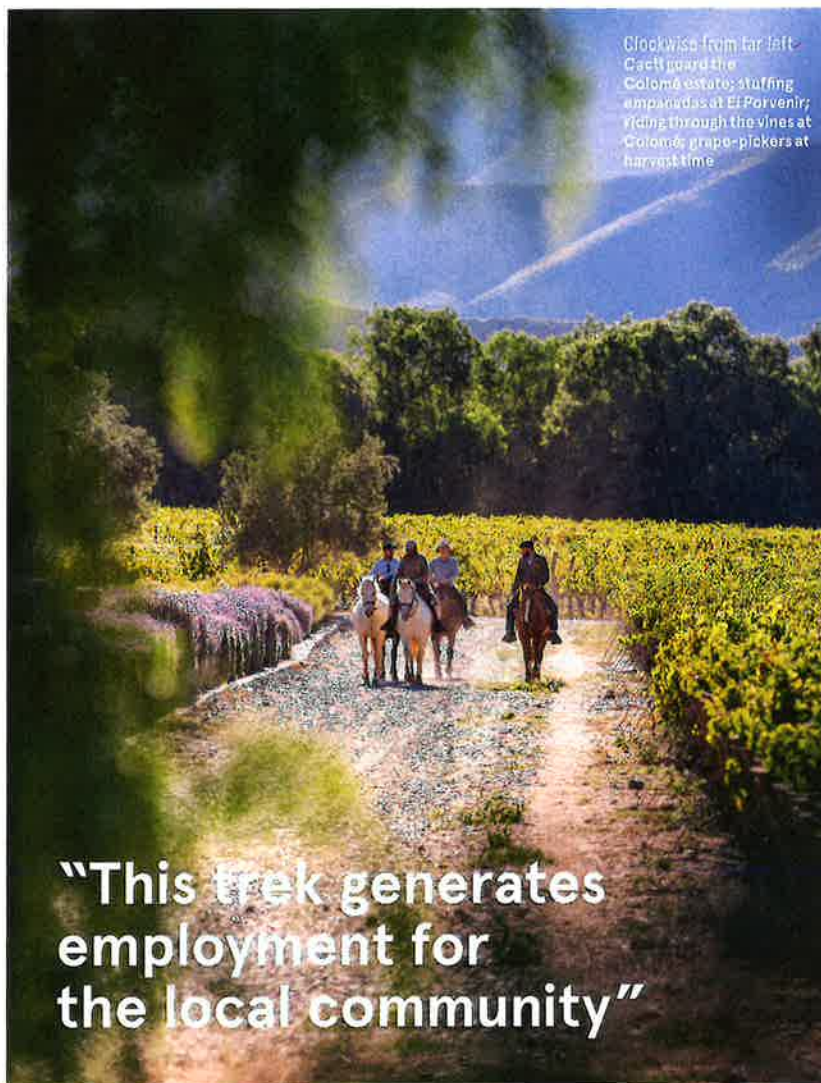


tourist experience. Visitors can opt for a package that includes a three-vintage tasting in the 19th century bodega, followed by a beautiful vineyard lunch at its stunning El Retiro estate, where cook Carmen Días prepares beef empanadas and an asado for an authentic taste of north-west Argentina.

Tourist tastes have been catered for, even in the actual making of the wines, which have become better balanced and with lower alcohol content to make them more palatable for the casual tourist. "Our wines used to be very intense and rather traditional," says winemaker Paco Puga. "But we've learned to produce wines that are fruitier, fresher and have improved acidity and balance."

Some 14km south of Cafayate at Estancia Los Cardones, a distinctive-looking winery that opened in 2017 near Tolombón, local French-teacher-turned-sommelier Raquel Humano recalls how tourism here has changed in two years. "When Estancia Los Cardones opened, I received just 20 visitors a month. But today, at least three groups book in daily to sample wine, to buy cases or for lunch, and many stop by out of curiosity."

Also south of Cafayate, another enterprise links the community with wine lovers – and horses. Baltasar Puló of Tolombón Aventuras y Experiencias works as a registrar in the morning, but after lunch he indulges his equine passion, taking visitors on easy three-hour outings into the Sierras del Cajón



Clockwise from far left: Cacti guard the Colomé estate; stuffing empanadas at El Porvenir; riding through the vines at Colomé; grape-pickers at harvest time



foothills, complementing the excursion with a bottle of refreshing Tukma Torrontés and local cheese. "Visitors love sharing a picnic and a glass of wine with the López family at their mountain-side farm," he says. "It works both ways, as this trek generates employment for the local community."

Driving 130km may never feel as lengthy as it does between Cafayate and Colomé, but the bumpy three-hour ride is rewarded with otherworldly Quebrada de las Flechas rock formations that feel transplanted from the Moon. The destination is pretty special, too: an enormous 74,000-hectare estate, Colomé, has produced wine since 1831. »



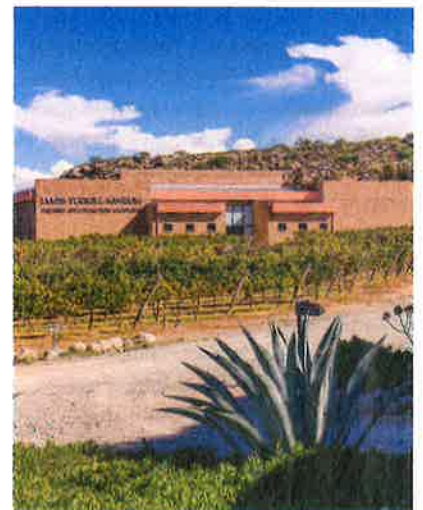
Clockwise from top left:
The area's landscape makes driving a pleasure; Andreas Hoy, vineyard manager at Bodega Colomé; the estate's James Turrell Museum has added to Salta's tourist cachet

“Our passion for wine is greater than ever”

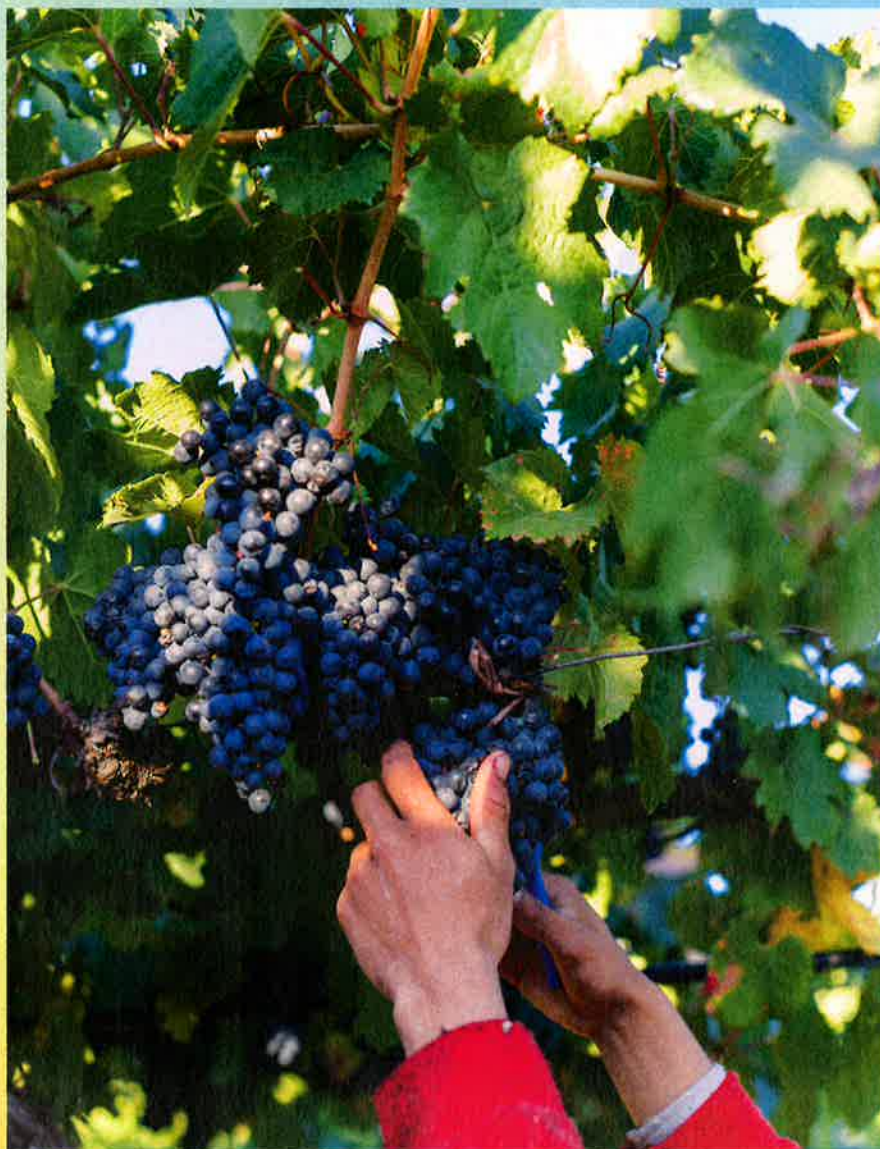
Not only is it the oldest bodega in Argentina (the original adobe building stands firm though it's no longer in use), it also makes the region's highest-altitude wines – its Malbec grapes are sourced from the Altura Máxima vineyard, which clocks in at 3,111 masl. Swiss visionaries Donald and Ursula Hess purchased the vast estate in 2001, opening a luxury lodge two years later and the James Turrell Museum in 2009. The latter is a real jewel in north-west Argentina's crown, a collection of the American artist's spectacular light installations, which attracts art lovers from around the globe, some of whom are surprised to find a world-class winery next door.

As staff tend to come from Colomé's hamlet, the Hess's ambitious project has had a big impact on the local community, according to hotel manager Connie Bearzi. “It generated employment from the offset, from road creation to construction and staffing – the winery and vineyards, hotel and museum,” she says. Further opportunities will soon arise when Colomé's Cafayate-based sister winery Amalaya opens a visitor's centre later this year.

The area continues to invest in the future. El Esteco installed 21st-century wine dispensers in May, and will open a small museum later this year. Colomé's even more remote neighbour Bodega »







While you're in Cafayate



Stay Casa de la Bodega

Live out your fantasy of owning a vineyard with a night at El Porvenir de Cafayate's stunning colonial farmhouse. Stylish rural decor and family heirlooms give the estate property that personal touch.

elporvenirdecafayate.com



Eat La Rosa

Regional dishes made with contemporary flair are paired with vineyard vistas at La Rosa. Start with llama carpaccio followed by kid goat ragout, all washed down with a spicy Cabernet Franc.

patiosdecafayate.com



Do Museo de la Vid y el Vino

Inside a former bodega in Cafayate, learn how altitude, geography and year-round sun come together to help create Salta's special terroir.

museodelavidyelvino.gov.ar

Tacuil opened a visitor's centre in July, allowing for regular tastings of its terroir-driven oak-free wines, while small winemaking projects such as Burbujas de Altura and Cola de Zorro have started marking terroir.

"We are definitely growing, but at our own pace," says Estancia Los Cardones' Raquel Humano. "Our passion for wine is greater than ever, and it shows as we bodegas are always looking to attract wine lovers in different ways."

With year-round sunshine, vintages from 42 wineries to sample and the knowledge that local communities continue to flourish with every sip and empanada you enjoy, it seems there are ever more reasons for oenophiles to add the chilled-out Calchaquies Valleys to their bucket lists. hesscollection.com, estancialoscardones.com
Norwegian flies to Salta from Buenos Aires. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com

Above
Checking the vines at Bodega Colomé