

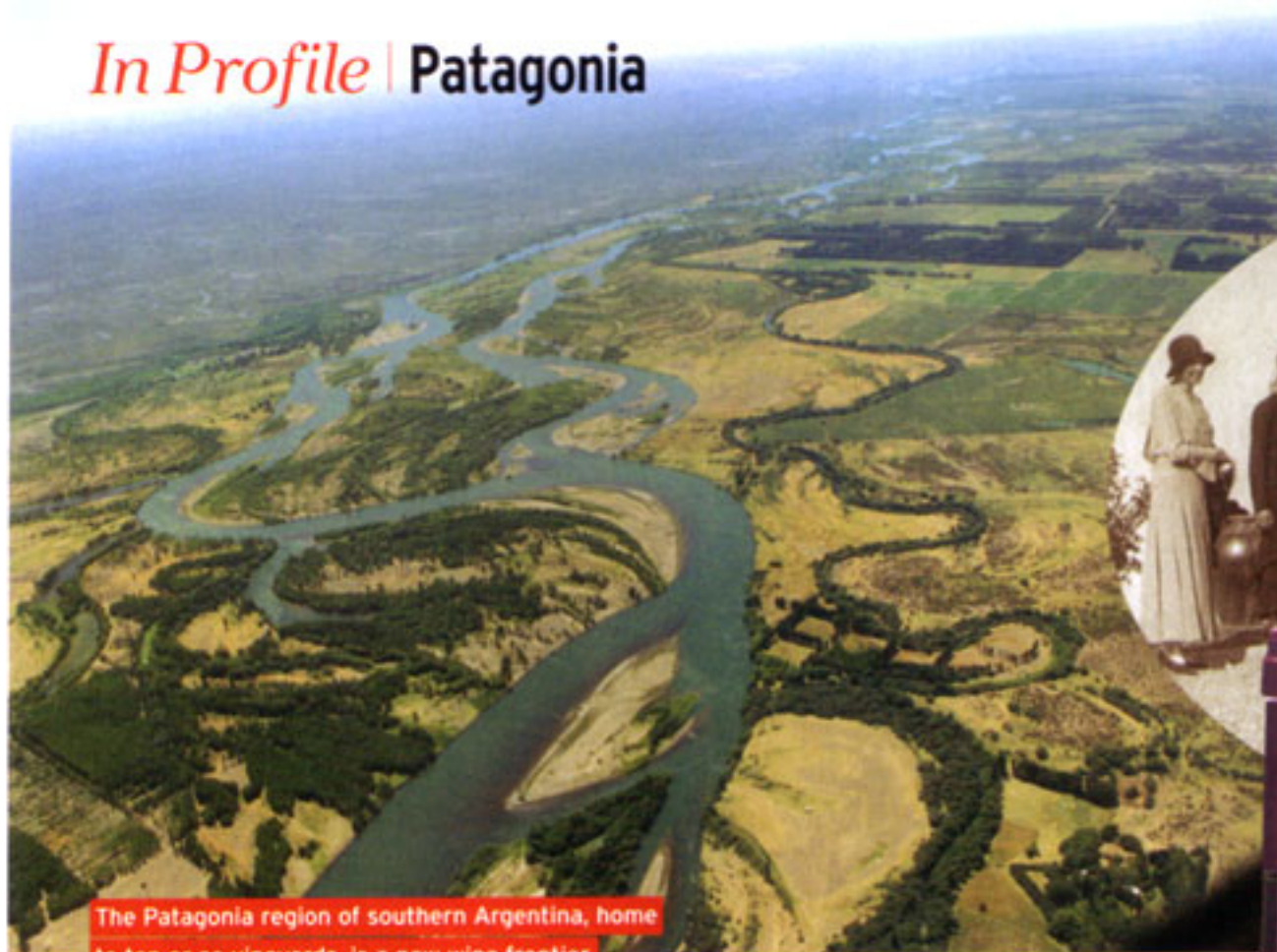
Winemaker Piero Incisa della Rocchetta, owner of the Patagonia vineyard Bodega Chacra

SUMMER HITS PATAGONIA IN January—the sky shines bright blue, the poplar trees turn a lush green, and the air is warmed from the 16-hour days of sun. But in the vineyard at the Estación Experimental Agropecuaria Alta Valle, a government facility that studies agricultural technology, the men inspecting bunches of grapes on orderly rows of vines don't seem to care. There's Mario, the local agriculturalist, Hans, the wine guru, and Piero, the vintner from Italy who believes Patagonia may be the world's great undiscovered wine country. These three have a problem.

Something flies past my head and punctures the leaves on a nearby vine. *Whiz...pop, pop.* I look up and see nothing but blinding sun. The vineyard was just irrigated, and as we walk through it our shoes make sloshing and sucking noises. I'm advised to place

Taking **ROOT**

The grandson of one of Italy's most lauded winemakers strikes out on his own—and winds up halfway around the world. DANIELLE PERGAMENT reports from Argentina.



The Patagonia region of southern Argentina, home to ten or so vineyards, is a new wine frontier.



The wedding of Mario Incisa, Piero's grandfather, in Bolgheri, Italy, 1930

"THERE WERE SAINTS, POPES, BISHOPS, AND QUITE A FEW MAYORS," PIERO SAYS, SO CASUAL ABOUT HIS LINEAGE, WHICH GOES BACK A THOUSAND YEARS.

my feet on the small white flowers that grow between the vines so I don't sink. Again, *whiz...pop, pop*. I glance around, confused. Mario points to a kid, maybe 14 years old, sitting on a rickety wooden stand 20 feet above the ground—a slingshot in his hand and a wide grin on his face. "That's Mariano," he tells me. "There is a big problem with birds here. They have eaten half the grapes in some parts." I watch as the boy gnaws on his slingshot like it's beef jerky. "We have tried nets," Piero says, "but this method works the best." In the high desert region of southern Argentina, it's not pesticides, hailstorms, or swarms of locusts that threaten the vines; it's the pigeons. For now at least, the first line of defense is a boy named Mariano armed with a homemade slingshot and a bucket of gravel.

PIERO INCISA DELLA ROCCHETTA has come to the Southern Hemisphere to make not routine red table wine but, as he describes it, one of the best Pinot Noirs on earth. Piero's goal sounds a lot less lofty when you consider that he hails from one of Italy's legendary winemaking families. His paternal

grandfather, Mario, created Sassicaia wine in Tuscany in the early forties and is regarded as both the forefather of Italian wine and one of the top makers in the world. In addition to being ranked among the ten best wines of the 20th century, Sassicaia has been awarded the highest honor by the Italian Sommelier Association.

The Incisa della Rocchetta family tree is something you would expect to find in a dusty leather-bound book with gilded pages. "There were saints,



popes, bishops, and quite a few mayors," Piero says, so casual about his lineage, which goes back a thousand years. His great-great-grandfather, Moses Taylor, was the president of City Bank in New York and a railroad magnate who helped the Lincoln administration finance the Civil War. Further back, his ancestors descended from one of the Roman Empire's largest landowners; Mario Incisa della Rocchetta's first home later became Rome's house of parliament. "It's hard to keep track of how we all fit together in my family," says Piero, who out of habit refers to anyone in his family as a cousin. Massimo Ferragamo, president of Salvatore Ferragamo USA, is one of these cousins (by marriage), as is Piero Antinori, owner of the Antinori vineyards. Piero himself bears the title of marchese, though he'd rather not dwell on that.

THE VERDICT IS IN....

"Bodega Chacra 2004 is what I would call a well-knit wine, which is a wine-geek way of saying that it has all its elements in nice proportions—not too much wood or tannin, great color, backbone, and proper structure. It is also very velvety and has a long finish. The overarching word is luscious. It heads toward the darker edge of the Pinot Noir flavor spectrum—darker berries as opposed to a bright cherry kind of fruit. The perfumy quality of Pinot Noir isn't there because of its youth and the fact that it's exceptionally concentrated. It's obviously a powerful wine from very old vines."

—DAVID LYNCH, WINE DIRECTOR OF NEW YORK'S BABBO AND COAUTHOR OF *VINO ITALIANO*

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Bodega Chacra's oldest Pinot Noir vines, planted in the '30s, and Mario Incisa with his nephew Nicolò in 1982

For generations, members of the Incisa della Rocchetta family have been good stewards of the land—and in the business of beauty and refinement. They have raised Thoroughbreds in Bolgheri, Italy, founded a bird sanctuary in Tuscany, and created

one of the world's finest olive oils (also bearing the Sassicaia name). The strongest gene, of course, is the one for winemaking. "I have been around wine my whole life," Piero explains. "When I was six years old, my grandfather would give me and

my cousins wine at the dinner table and ask us what we thought."

On first impression Piero doesn't fit the image of Italian winemaking royalty. Despite his slight frame, he's more like a Tibetan mountaineer: thick dark beard,

tattered cargo pants dusty from days of wear, a tattoo of a bumblebee needled into the top of his right foot. A string of Buddha beads hangs loosely around his neck. "My mother was so happy when she thought I was wearing a rosary," he says.

Today Piero is in charge of marketing for the Sassicaia wines. In the United States he is the face of the company and the family ambassador. But before now he never had his own wine. Three years ago Piero followed another cousin, Noemi Cinzano—as in the Vermouth and umbrella company—to the Rio Negro, in Argentina, not sure what he would find. A few other Europeans are making wine in South America, among them Antonio Terni in Argentina and Michel Roland in Chile. Yet there are only about ten working wineries on the Argentinean side of Patagonia, the best known being Canale, which has produced the wine of record here for generations (some other vineyards supply just enough wine for the family that makes it and their neighbors). "Hans Vinding-Diers [Noemi's boyfriend] had given me the Canale Pinot Noir and for weeks I couldn't get



Piero crushing a batch of Pinot Noir, and some of the grapes used in Bodega Chacra's first vintage

it out of my head," says Piero, pinching his fingers together as only an Italian can without looking silly. "I wanted to know if superb Pinot could come from Patagonia, not only from Burgundy or Oregon. I had to come here and see what was going on."

What was going on, it turned out, was winemaking conditions as ideal as any Piero had ever known. "When I saw the vineyard, I couldn't believe it," he says. "The vines were planted seventy years ago, so they were thick and pure, not grafted with other vines."



Piero's hometown of Bolgheri, Italy, above left; a Bodega Chacra vine.



Mario Incisa in the 1940s in front of his 16th-century casale; behind him, his children Orietta and Enrico, right.

Before selling the land to Piero, the previous owner was preparing to raze it to build an orchard. "He asked me 'Why would you want to make wine?' because he'd only sold grapes to wineries," Piero recalls. "I think he was a bit puzzled. And he thought I was a bit nuts." Piero purchased 89 acres (22 of which are vines) and named his vineyard Bodega Chacra, using the Spanish word *chacra*, which in Patagonia describes plots of land surrounded by tall, tightly packed poplar trees that protect whatever grows within from the whipping desert wind. (From the air, Patagonia *chacras* resemble hundreds of tennis courts covered in green fuzz.) Noemi and Hans were working on their third vintage

of Bodega Noemia, the Malbec they started in 2000, when Piero arrived, suitcase in tow. "Hans knows everything about wine in Patagonia, and Noemi was in the process of building a winery," Piero explains. "It was the perfect setting to try my Pinot."

Meeting Piero, you might believe that joie de vivre and a resounding passion for outstanding wine are all that is needed to make great Pinot Noir. But savvy is involved as well, even if he is shy about displaying it. His plans are not as spontaneous as the bohemian demeanor would suggest. Piero, who lives "on a plane between New York, Italy, Los Angeles, and Patagonia," intends to build a house and winery adjacent to his

vineyard in the next year. "I'll be spending more and more time down here," he says. "I can't live with Noemi and Hans forever." Also in the next year, Bodega Chacra will produce a second Pinot Noir. Piero flips through a notebook—part journal, part business plan—and shows me the fastidious, almost maniacal notations tracking the size, growth, and flavor of the grapes. "It's the Swiss boarding school in me, I suppose," he says with a shrug.

Piero leads me through Noemi's cellar, where his Pinot Noir will be bottled for the first time later today. "A cellar is very zen," he says. "It is completely quiet, like walking into a church." His hair has lightened from the sun and faint white creases have formed around his eyes from squinting. He could have been airlifted from a desert island moments ago—except for his crisp white shirt with a red monogram at the waist, the only visible vestige of Italian aristocracy. As my tour begins, Piero handles whatever he is referring to as though he were blind and could sense only through touch; he squats to feel the damp gravel, running his fingers over the barrels to show that they're not dirty, they only look that way. "Ninety-nine percent of wineries use a destemming machine to pull off the grapes," he explains. "We destem by hand—not one stem, not one leaf, not one bad grape gets through. It's me and thirty Argentinean

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women going through, grape by grape. It's like caviar. You have to be very careful. People have said to me, 'Don't worry, you will make money, then you can buy a destemmer,' and I think, Well, you just don't get it." Like a painter who has been given a box of crayons, Piero just shakes his head at all the fools out there.

We stop at the six Bodega Chacra barrels and Pollo, the cellar master, climbs a ladder to the top barrel, inserts a small rubber hose, fills a glass, and hands it to Piero, who then hands it to me. Only four people

bounce between English, Italian, French, and Spanish—to them it's as simple as flipping through a magazine. (Apparently Italian is safest when there's an American reporter in the room.) "This is what we do here," says Hans, by which he means eating steak and talking wine. He smiles mischievously at his good fortune. Piero, chopping herbs for the salad, has slipped into another comfortable role: the philosopher. "The more you keep it simple, the easier it is to live," he tells me. "That is what my grandfather taught me about wine. It's liberating when

"WE DESTEM BY HAND—NOT ONE STEM, NOT ONE LEAF, NOT ONE BAD GRAPE GETS THROUGH," SAYS PIERO. "IT'S ME AND THIRTY ARGENTINEAN WOMEN GOING THROUGH, GRAPE BY GRAPE."

have tried the wine so far: Piero, Hans, Pollo, and Piero's uncle at Sassicaia. I am about to become the fifth. Piero and Pollo try to look relaxed as I take a sip. Then another. It tastes rich and velvety, almost creamy—not like the light wine I've always associated with Pinot Noir.

"It's extremely elegant and luscious," says David Lynch, wine director at Babbo restaurant in New York and coauthor of *Vino Italiano* (Random House). As the sixth person ever to drink Chacra (see "The Verdict Is In..."), he is now one of Piero's champions. "When you're making wine on such a small, handcrafted scale as Piero is, there is no question it's going to be a fine one. His is the kind of pursuit that has nothing to do with money—it is about doing something beautiful and right."

That evening there is cause for celebration: Piero and Hans have finalized the blend that will be known globally as Bodega Chacra. Over the next few months, 1,650 bottles will be shipped to Argentina, Brazil, and the United States and will sell for around \$120 each. (The States are slated to get 600 bottles, available through www.bodega-chacra.com.) In the open ranch-style living room of Noemi's house, the air smells the way it does every night, of marinating steak, sizzling garlic, and the lingering scent of Deet. Piero is standing at the stove and Hans has lined up three bottles of Argentinean wine for us to try. When Piero, Hans, and Noemi get together, they

you let go of your need to control and trust that things are in nature's hands."

I ask him if creating Bodega Chacra has roused more memories of his grandfather than usual. "I get goose bumps when I talk about him," Piero says, rubbing his forearms. "It's like he's around here. He was the most curious person I've ever known, totally self-educated. He was a genius and a bon vivant, and Sassicaia came out of his vision. Would he have been proud of me? I don't know. But I will say this: If he were around to see my wine, I think he would be extremely...interested."

Winemakers, more than most people, tend to draw metaphors from their work—Pinot is the holy grail of wine, Cabernet is an SUV—and Piero is no exception. "Wine is usually like the winemaker. If you meet a big guy who drives a Hummer and chews on his cigar, chances are he's making a big wine," he says. "I'm a little guy. I like to think that my wine is more elegant." Piero considers his perfect parcel of land and, for the moment, seems simultaneously humbled and elated by the 70-year-old vines. His is the view from a vineyard in the middle of the desert at the bottom of the world. "I've been around vineyards my whole life, but in a way, this one is my first." He hands me two fragile, tissue-thin leaves he keeps pressed between the pages of his journal. "They're from my first harvest." He looks at me apologetically. "I'm Italian. We're dramatic. Don't you know?" ■