

## THE MAKING OF THE ‘WORLD’S HIGHEST WINE REGION’: GLOBALIZATION AND VITICULTURE RESTRUCTURING IN SALTA (NW ARGENTINA)

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With 3 figures, 1 table and 1 photo

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**Summary:** In the last years a growing body of geographical research has analyzed the relation between rural restructuring and commodity chain globalization. In this context, globalization is often treated as the ‘given frame’. This critique is reflected in recent calls from distinct geographical subfields (mainly economic geography and rural geography) for more ethnographic studies examining the way actors negotiate and construct globalization in particular regions. The current paper addresses this call, analyzing wine production globalization in Salta’s Calchaquí Valleys, a peripheral mountain region of the Argentine Andes. Wine is an agricultural commodity strongly affected by neoliberal de-/re-regulation processes. However, compared to other agricultural products, globalization-related regional restructuring in wine regions has received relatively little attention from geographers. In Argentina, wine industry globalization started with the 1990s neoliberal reforms and has fundamentally transformed a relatively uniform production system supplying the national market. In order to shift towards supplying a global niche market with higher priced wines, the industry has placed a strong emphasis on improving wine quality. Quality wine is distinct from other agricultural commodities as it is a highly globalized product marketed mainly on the basis of terroir – local particularity and distinctiveness. As such, the paper argues that new insights into broader globalization dynamics can be gained through an analysis of regional engagement with the globalized wine industry. Building on long-term ethnographic fieldwork the paper traces the restructuring of Salta’s Calchaquí Valleys into ‘the world’s highest wine region’. The results indicate that local particularity in the form of high-altitude wine is actually a product of globalization. Not only transnational beverage companies, but also traditional local capital, renowned flying winemakers, wine production connected with cultural capital, social status and lifestyle, as well as the associated tourism and leisure boom all play a crucial role in the regional transformation process.

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Geographie hat sich in den letzten Jahren immer stärker mit dem Verhältnis zwischen sich globalisierenden Wertschöpfungsketten und ländlicher Umstrukturierung auseinandergesetzt. Zu oft wird Globalisierung dabei einfach als ‚gegebene Rahmenbedingung‘ angesehen. Vor diesem Hintergrund wurde aus unterschiedlichen geographischen Teildisziplinen (vor allem aus der Wirtschaftsgeographie und Geographie des ländlichen Raumes) die Forderung nach einer stärker ethnographisch orientierten Beschäftigung mit der Art und Weise, wie unterschiedliche Akteure Globalisierung in bestimmten Regionen verhandeln, und eben konstruieren, laut. Der vorliegende Artikel greift diese Forderung auf und analysiert die Globalisierung des Weinsektors in Saltas Calchaquí Tälern, einer peripheren Gebirgsregion in den argentinischen Anden. Wein ist eine der am stärksten von neoliberalen De-/Re-Regulierungsprozessen betroffenen agrarischen commodities. Im Vergleich zu anderen landwirtschaftlichen Produkten wurde der globalisierungsbedingten regionalen Umstrukturierung von Weinregionen jedoch bisher relativ wenig Aufmerksamkeit in der Geographie geschenkt. In Argentinien beginnt die Globalisierung des Weinsektors mit der neoliberalen Wirtschaftsausrichtung der 1990er Jahre und veränderte einen vormals relativ homogenen und auf den nationalen Markt ausgerichteten Wirtschaftszweig grundlegend. Zentraler Aspekt ist dabei eine zunehmende Qualitätsorientierung, um einen globalen Nischenmarkt mit höherpreisigen Weinen bedienen zu können. Qualitätswein unterscheidet sich von anderen agrarischen commodities, da es sich um ein stark globalisiertes Produkt handelt, das gleichzeitig auf der Basis von terroir – regionaler Besonderheit/Einzigartigkeit – vermarktet wird. Vor diesem Hintergrund argumentiert der Artikel, dass aus einer Analyse der regionalen Einbettung in die globalisierte Weinindustrie neue Einsichten in die Dynamik von Globalisierungsprozessen gewonnen werden können. Aufbauend auf einer langen ethnographischen Feldarbeit zeichnet der Aufsatz die Umstrukturierung von Saltas Calchaquí Tälern zur ‘höchsten Weinregion der Welt’ nach. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass lokale Besonderheit in der Form von „Höhenwein“ ein Produkt von Globalisierungsprozessen ist. Sowohl große transnationale Getränkekonzerne als auch (traditionelles) lokales Kapital, renommierte *flying winemakers*, individuelles Streben nach kulturellem Kapital und sozialem Status sowie ein (damit verbundener) Boom der Tourismus- und Freizeitnutzung spielen dabei eine zentrale Rolle.

**Keywords:** Globalization, quality wine production, rural restructuring, North-South relations, ethnography, Salta Wine Route, Argentina

## 1 Introduction

“Most theories of globalization [...] package all cultural developments into a single program: the emergence of a global era. If globalization can be predicted in advance, there is nothing to learn from research except how the details support the plan. And if world centers provide the dynamic impetus for global change, why even study more peripheral places?” (TSING 2005, 3)

In many ways Salta's Calchaquí Valleys fit our imaginations of a highly peripheral rural area. Located in the Northwest-Argentine province of Salta, more than a thousand kilometers from Buenos Aires and reachable only through canyons from the provincial capital, travelling to this intermountain valley has long been a challenge. Some accounts report that by the 16<sup>th</sup> century the first grapes had already been introduced to the area. Argentine geographer AMBROSETTI (1895) documented the region's first viticulture boom at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. European immigrants played a crucial role in introducing new cultivation and wine making techniques as well as constructing wineries in the area. The area's remoteness made wine transportation a complicated matter, as such only a few traditional large wineries, along with some smaller establishments produced rather uniform wines that were primarily sold on a regional and national market. This situation changed little until the 1990s, when neoliberal reforms marked profound transformations in Argentina (see PAOLASSO et al. 2013 for a broader discussion).

Against this background, the paper analyzes the globalization-related restructuring in the Salta Wine Region that starts slowly in the 1990s and gains strong momentum in the 2000s. In so doing, I follow recent calls from economic geography and rural geography for more qualitative, grounded research examining how globalization-related regional restructuring is engaged, sustained, experienced and negotiated. While the restructuring of 'New World wine regions' in the context of neoliberal reforms is acknowledged (see for example OVERTON et al. 2012a; OVERTON and MURRAY 2013), there is little scholarly work on how this process is initiated nor research examining the micro-scale effects on particular wine regions. The main goal of this paper is to begin to fill this gap in the literature. The following literature review introduces perspectives on globalization and regional restructuring from economic and rural geography and then outlines

the added value of studying regional restructuring related to the wine industry. Subsequently, I will introduce the research area and methodology and then present and discuss the research findings.

## 2 Globalization and regional restructuring: perspectives from economic and rural geography

Understanding regional restructuring has always been a key geography topic, while traditional economic geography was focused on identifying and describing regional economic formations. However, due to advances in relational understandings of space, the logics of firms, individuals, and policy makers in *constructing* the spatiality of particular economies became the focus of analysis (BATHELT and GLÜCKLER 2012; JONES 2014). As BATHELT (2006, 230) stated: “Such a conceptualization involves a strong actor perspective, integrates economic, social, cultural and political influences on economic action, rejects deterministic interpretations related to spatial categories and, instead, emphasizes the importance of a spatial perspective in analyses”. Leaving the considerable variations in relational conceptualizations forwarded in economic geography aside, an interest in formerly taken for granted economic ‘categories’ (or space economy categories) can be detected. Particularly, the broadly-defined German-school of economic geography has called for more grounded analyses of their active *making*, focusing especially on the market (OUMA 2012; see also BERNDT and BOECKLER 2009; OUMA et al. 2013). Ethnographic methods have been shown to be particularly fruitful for such endeavors (see OUMA 2012; OUMA et al. 2013). Much in vein with this “practice-oriented globalization research” (OUMA 2012, 204) I will focus on how wine industry actors actively *construct* economic globalization on the ground. The objective is to demonstrate that economic globalization is not a straightforward process providing a regional transformation frame, but rather, as COE and YEUNG (2001, 375) argued: “it is about the painstaking initiation, formation, and maintenance of social relationships between groups of variously powerful actors and intermediaries in different (and often distant) localities [...] and their] often conflicting and contradictory motivations for that involvement”. This said, it is crucial to stress that calls for more place-based studies on how globalization is initiated, sustained, contested, and produced go beyond

the subfield of economic geography. I will now look at research on globalization-related restructuring in the subfield of rural geography that can be framed in stronger dialog with the formerly outlined economic geography research agendas.

The dynamism of rural geography – a more dynamic subfield in Anglo-Saxon than in German-speaking geography – is strongly related to the adoption of relational thinking in the formerly probably most traditional geographical subfield. Rural geographers have taken much inspiration from economic geography but, I would argue, the other way round this is less the case. Bearing this in mind, I will now focus on recent advancements of relational perspectives on globalization in rural geography, with particular emphasis on the work of MICHAEL WOODS.

WOODS drew heavily on MASSEY's seminal work *For Space* (2005) when introducing the *global countryside* notion as a counterpoint to the global city (WOODS 2007). By doing so, his primary goal is to contribute to a more differentiated analysis of spatial transformation under globalization, much more commonplace in urban geography. In his view many recent interventions in rural geography focus on a variety of current restructuring processes (from farm restructuring to rural outmigration and rural heritage commodification), but view globalization more as “[...] a ‘given’ in structuring the contemporary rural experience” (WOODS 2007, 490) than as a phenomenon under analysis. He argues that in the *global countryside* “rural localities are transformed by new connections that are forged with global networks, global processes and global actors; yet this transformation cannot occur without the enrolment and acquiescence of local actors, both human and non-human, whose very incorporation in turn modifies the networks of which they are part to produce new, hybrid, outcomes” (WOODS 2007, 501 see also WOODS 2011, 2012). Pointing to a similar direction as many of the economic geographers introduced above, he calls for more studies of the micro-processes and micro-politics through which globalization is negotiated and produced in particular rural places. By doing so, a more geographically differentiated picture of rural globalization can emerge. Considering the loosely developed rural geography in German-speaking geography (more research is undertaken under the umbrella of *Agrargeographie* [agrarian geography], *Siedlungsgeographie* [settlement geography] or *Geographische Entwicklungsforschung* [geographical development research] in the Global South; see also

GRABSKI-KIERON 2011, 821), WOODS' conceptualization of the reconstitution of rural place under globalization provides guidelines for enriching and advancing this geographical subfield. Particularly, the *global countryside* concept provides the opportunity for more dialogue between rural restructuring research in the Global North and the Global South.

In the case of wine production, regions of the Global South and the Global North are currently transformed; but, as I will show in the discussion, this has not led to a homogeneous experience, and the geographies of production and consumption are more complex than with other agricultural commodities. Hence, examining wine regions restructuring provides an excellent starting point for research on the global countryside across the analytical separation between the Global North and Global South.

### 3 Globalization and the restructuring of wine regions towards quality production

Researchers describe global wine production as an industry most affected by neoliberalization processes (OVERTON et al. 2012a; OVERTON and MURRAY 2013). Indeed, in many countries domestic wine industry protection, mainly through tariff barriers, has been reduced or eliminated completely (OVERTON et al. 2012a, 280). The two most important wine producing countries in Latin America, Chile and Argentina, are emblematic examples.

One of the most notable changes on a global scale concerns the geographies of quality wine production. While formerly quality wine regions were located quasi exclusively in Europe (in the world of wine frequently referred to as ‘Old World wine regions’) this has changed fundamentally in the last thirty years. New quality wine regions in countries such as New Zealand (OVERTON and HEITGER 2008; OVERTON 2010; MURRAY and OVERTON 2011; PERKINS et al. 2015), Chile (MURRAY and OVERTON 2011; OVERTON et al. 2012b) or Mendoza in Argentina (MORRIS 2000) have emerged.

One crucial difference in wine production globalization compared to other agricultural commodities is the direct association between quality wine and its place of origin. As MURRAY and OVERTON (2011, 419) observe, this environmentally deterministic association of wine with the particularities of climate and soil (wine being considered *the expression* of a particular place) counters the relational conceptualizations of place that have become

mainstream in geography in the last decades. A considerable body of literature from geography and related fields has acknowledged that *terroir*<sup>1)</sup>, despite stressing the biophysical characteristics of a bounded place as well as the inherited human knowledge of how to best ‘extract’ these characteristics, is culturally and economically produced (GADE 2004; CHARTERS 2006; BOWEN and VALENZUELA 2009). The process of singularization<sup>2)</sup> of wines is intrinsically linked to *terroir*; as GADE (2004, 848–849) puts it: “[the concept of *terroir*] claims that the special quality of an agricultural product is determined by the character of the place from which it comes”. Consequently, quality wine regions highly depend on the construction and consequent positioning of local/regional particularity on a global market. Thus, geographical diversity/particularity is not an obstacle for global branding and marketing but a central element of it; for small wineries *as well as* for transnational beverage companies (OVERTON et al. 2012a; OVERTON and MURRAY 2013). While the production of many agricultural commodities is based on a search for economies of scale, in the case of quality wine production, the logics are fundamentally different. As HARVEY (2002, 100) outlines, quality wine production is a good example of what he calls “the perpetual search for monopoly rents seeking criteria of specialty, uniqueness, originality and authenticity [...]”. The neoliberalization of the wine industry has extended large beverage companies’ scope, which in terms of high quality wine production, has formerly been concentrated on Europe.

Another major difference between quality wine and other agricultural commodities is wine’s function as a “lifestyle commodity” (HALL et al. 2000, 198) due to the “symbolic prestige value” (OVERTON and MURRAY 2013, 702) attached to it. Hence, quality wine regions are at the same time high amenity regions (PERKINS et al. 2015; RAINER 2016), characterized by multifunctional landscapes with agricultural production and leisure-oriented land use being tightly interrelated. Together with the formerly outlined search for monopoly rents in wine production this explains the extremely high land prices in premium wine regions. Additionally, as OVERTON

and MURRAY (2013, 712) outline, wineries that wish to place their product in a high price niche market are confronted with elevated costs for winery buildings and equipment as these have to reflect the status of the label. Nevertheless, in some cases the primary motivation for engaging in wine production might not be creating a financial surplus, but the social status gains that engaging with the business affords; what OVERTON and BANKS (2015) – following Polanyi – have called “conspicuous production”. Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that the transformation towards quality wine production cannot be understood in purely economic terms. Lifestyle, status, and the active search and accentuation of social differentiation play a more significant role in quality wine production than in other agricultural land use cases and have to be placed at the forefront of discussion.

The above work analyzing the transformation of wine regions towards quality production provides important insights for discussing research findings in the current investigation. Nevertheless, the previous research mainly outlines meso- and macro-scale tendencies of restructuring without paying particular attention to how these changes are actually *initiated* and *negotiated* on the micro-level of a wine region undergoing this type of restructuring, a literature gap that the current paper proposes to fill. In what follows I will introduce the case study area and subsequently detail the empirical approach.

#### 4 The Salta Wine Region

The Salta Wine Region is located in the Calchaquí Valleys approximately 200 kilometers south-west of the provincial capital Salta (see Fig. 1). About two-thirds of the land under vine is concentrated in the district of Cafayate and the other third is cultivated in the three departments of San Carlos, Molinos, and Cachi. In 2010, 34,833 inhabitants lived in the four aforementioned districts with 14,850 living in Cafayate (INDEC 2010), by far the most important town of Salta’s Calchaquí Valleys in terms of wine production and tourism influx. The town of Cafayate is located at an altitude of 1,700 meters and a dirt road winds up north to the about 150 kilometers distant town of Cachi located at an altitude of approximately 2,300 meters.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the Calchaquí Valleys constituted an important region on the route between the silver mining town of Potosí

<sup>1)</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the different connotations of *terroir* see VAUDOUR 2002.

<sup>2)</sup> Following CALLON et al. (2002) the process of singularization – rendering products unique and at the same time comparable to similar ones – is the main aspect of an “economy of qualities”.

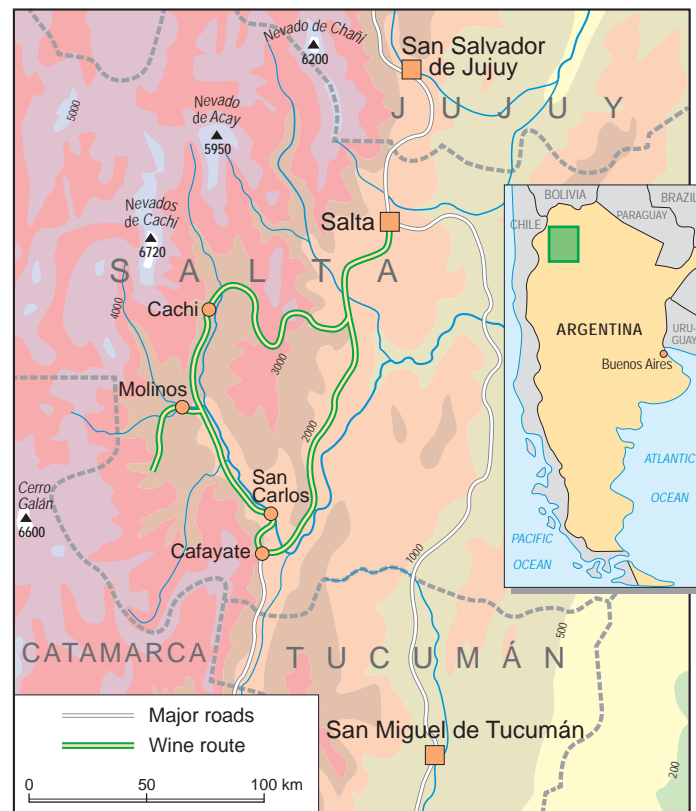


Fig. 1: Location of the Salta Wine Region

in Southern Bolivia and the Buenos Aires port. As a consequence, colonial presence in the area was strong and the land became concentrated in the hands of a few large landowners (MATA DE LÓPEZ 1990). The first considerable wine production growth at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not change this situation. Viticulture was closely linked to a few large land owners that controlled wine production and wine sale with almost the whole production being sold on regional and national markets. A few small-scale wineries employing generally very traditional production techniques complemented the picture. Until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the local population that worked for the wine industry lived on the large estates that constitute the wineries. As a legacy of the colonial, feudal system they lived on a small plot with their family where they cultivated for subsistence and held livestock. Society is still marked by the profound, colonially inherited socio-ecological inequalities between the regional elite of winery owners and dependent workers.

The climate is dry with most areas counting on less than 300 mm of rainfall per year, which is

highly concentrated in the summer months (from December to February). Due to this dry climate wine cultivation is highly dependent on irrigation. The regional wineries have long-established spring water rights from the Andes, which in the north of the Calchaquí Valleys reach altitudes of more than 6,000 meters. Traditional land rights include water rights for irrigation depending on the respective hectares of the estates.

Until the 1990s wine production in Argentina was strongly protected by national tariff barriers of up to 100 % of the import price (MORRIS 2000). Internal differentiation in terms of quality and production techniques was barely existent. Following MORRIS (2000, 145) the wine production system before the 1990s can be characterized as “domestic standard production”. The wineries in Cafayate largely ignored the potential wine variety producing a uniform red wine that was generally a mixture of assorted red grape varieties. However, Torrontés, the emblematic white wine grape of the Salta Wine Region, exceeded the red wine grape cultivation considerably. Salta’s Torrontés was known nationally but its prestige did not exceed the country.

## 5 Research methods

The arguments advanced in this paper are based on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Northwest-Argentina from October 2011 to June 2012 and two shorter stays from July to September 2013 and 2014. As indicated in the literature review, the research design was strongly influenced by recent studies showing that qualitative and particularly ethnographic methods<sup>3)</sup> provide the opportunity to investigate the processes through which local-global relations are actually forged on the ground (TSING 2005; BATHELT 2006; WOODS 2007; OUMA 2012). While formerly published results of this research project have put the focus on tourism and amenity-led restructuring along the Salta Wine Road (RAINER and MALIZIA 2014; RAINER 2016), this paper focuses on globalization-related changes in wine production. After the long field stay in 2011/2012 I felt a need to gain more insights into the restructuring of wine production in order to get an understanding of the interrelations of agricultural production and consumption-oriented land use and hence a more complete picture of local-global relations. For understanding the logics of tourism and amenity-led restructuring I conducted interviews with local and regional politicians, hotel owners and managers, owners and managers of real estate properties, tourism representatives of wineries, and local workers and residents. These interviews have strongly influenced the investigation, however most of the arguments advanced build on interviews with people directly related to wine business. In total, 19 interviews were conducted with winery owners (7); winemakers (7), winery executives in administration and/or commercialization (3), and with the president of Salta's winery association as well as the head of Salta's regional bureau of the National Institute of Viticulture (INV). All interviews took place in the respective wineries/offices and in many cases the interviewee provided a guided visit of their vineyards and/or wine cellars and production sites, which provided the opportunity to see and discuss quality wine making practices.<sup>4)</sup> Furthermore, I analyzed Salta's winery websites. In order to interpret the material I developed codes using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. Additionally, I examined

<sup>3)</sup> See CRANG and COOK 2007 for an excellent introduction into doing ethnographies from a human geography perspective.

<sup>4)</sup> For the sake of confidentiality all names of interview partners and their affiliations to companies remain anonymous.

statistical data provided by the National Institute of Viticulture on the evolution of the wine industry in Argentina, and Salta in particular.

## 6 Presentation and discussion of findings

### 6.1 The 'quality turn' in wine production

#### 6.1.1 Neoliberalization and the entry of global beverage companies

In Argentina the 1990s were marked by state regulation roll-backs, public land and infrastructure privatization, as well as policies attracting foreign capital investment in a diverse set of economic activities (see PAOLASSO et al. 2013). In what concerns wine production the elimination of tariff barriers can be considered a hallmark change that introduced the Argentine wine industry into global markets (see MORRIS 2000). Bodega Etchart and Bodega Michel Torino, the two largest wineries in the Salta Wine Region and family businesses for decades, changed ownership (in both cases this change included winery buildings and vineyards). In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Etchart family had already made efforts to open up new markets for their wines via two complementary strategies: 1) establishing a wine distribution contract for Europe with Pernod Ricard, one of the world's largest beverage companies and, 2) contracting the Frenchman Michel Rolland, a renowned flying winemaker<sup>5)</sup>.

Concerning the latter strategy, Rolland significantly changed wine production with respect to viticultural techniques; i.e. grape control and maturity control. Furthermore, contracting globally-known flying winemakers is a business strategy for positioning wines on a global market as they are quality and marketing symbols (see LAGENDIJK 2004).

In 1996, Pernod Ricard purchased Bodega Etchart and in 1999 the Argentine winery group Peñaflor<sup>6)</sup> purchased 60 % of Bodega Michel Torino, which had formerly been acquired by a winemaker from Mendoza (CLARÍN 30/06/1999). These ownership changes led to a re-orientation of the firms; the companies introduced new wine cultivation and wine making techniques, integrated the wineries into their

<sup>5)</sup> Flying winemakers are oenologists advising wineries in different countries around the world.

<sup>6)</sup> Peñaflor is under the world's largest wine producing groups.

global marketing portfolio, and started to focus mainly on the global competitiveness of their wines. This underlines OVERTON et al.'s (2012a, 275) observation that foreign direct investment through large beverage companies like Pernod Ricard has been a critical element in wine region globalization as it involved winemaking and marketing staff flowing to these areas. Nevertheless, Pernod Ricard did not change the Bodega Etchart's brand identity, which dated back to 1850; instead, they incorporated the name and its history into the company's portfolio<sup>7)</sup>. Consequently, the long-standing local history of wine production became a marketing and selling strategy for one of the largest transnational beverage companies. After the acquisition by Pernod Ricard, the winery stands as an emblematic example of a global beverage company's strategy to globalize by diversifying geographically. At the same time, the Etchart family example demonstrates that traditional wine producers can play an important role in globalizing their companies by opening up new markets and establishing contracts with global companies and professionals.

### 6.1.2 Boutique wineries

The Etchart family sold their winery to Pernod Ricard but kept some vineyards located at higher altitudes, approximately ten kilometers from the town of Cafayate. There, they started to invest in a different type of winery, one that emerged from the changes since the 1990s and has consequently gained strong importance in the region: the so-called *bodega boutique*. Ironically, as Pernod Ricard still operates with their family name, the Etchart family had to give their own winery a different name. The new boutique wineries have radically changed traditional business logics in the region. Boutique wineries are relatively small (for example, the Etchart families' Bodega Yacochuya encompasses 16 hectares) and produce small quantities of high quality wine aiming to supply the global quality wine niche market. In order to achieve their desired monopoly rents (see HARVEY 2002), different production and marketing strategies are applied. Salta wineries have contracted other renowned flying winemakers and Bodega Yacochuya continues to work with previously discussed Michel Rolland. The bou-

tique winery El Porvenir de los Andes established in 1999 by the then governor of the Salta Province is assessed by Paul Hobbs, renowned US winemaker who visits the winery approximately three times a year.

A winery manager who works with a flying winemaker states: "He opens up the international market, it is his reputation that is important for the winery. If you have two bottles of wine with the same price, one from a well-known winemaker and one not, the customer buys the first one." Hence, flying winemakers can play an important role as agents for small wine companies looking to enter the global quality wine niche market.

### 6.1.3 Grape varietal changes

The newly built or modernized wineries cultivate grape types that are considered to best express the particular advantages of local/regional soil conditions and of equal importance, fit what a global clientele demands and expects of Argentine wine. The increasing prominence of red wine grapes is an expression of the latter point. One winemaker who has worked in different wineries in Salta since the 1970s expressed: "In the 70s and 80s, red wine was not demanded at all. With the new machinery and market changes over the last years, red wines are as demanded as the Torrontés" (Interview 13/01/2012). In many interviews and informal talks the international reputation and direct association of the Malbec grape with Argentina has been stressed as a key factor for its current boom. In what concerns export markets, the role of Malbec as *the* Argentine grape is much more important than the local wine production area. Like one boutique winery owner and winemaker put it bluntly: "If you export, let's say to the United States, you are lucky if they even know where Argentina is located. It is the Argentine Malbec that they are familiar with" (Interview 03/09/2014).

Figure 2 demonstrates that vineyard growth from 1999 to 2012 is mainly attributable to red wine cultivation. While the area under Torrontés exceeded all red wine grapes taken together in 1999, in 2012 the Malbec cultivation area, the most important red wine grape, nearly equals Torrontés. Figure 2 also demonstrates that the emblematic Torrontés grape did not lose its importance in the context of modernization and global market integration.

The area that vineyards encompass in Salta has increased from 1,794 hectares in 2001 to 3,051 hectares in 2014 (INV 2014, 2015). Nevertheless, in terms of total hectares under vine, the Salta Wine

<sup>7)</sup> On the homepage of Bodega Etchart the history of the winery from the 1850 onwards until now can be traced and the combination of tradition and innovation is stressed (<http://www.bodegasetchart.com/> [accessed: 10/08/2015]).

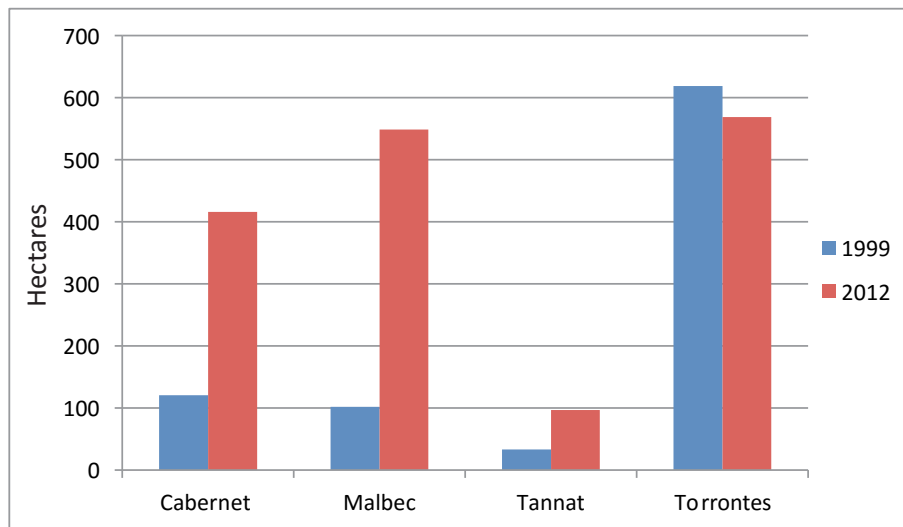


Fig. 2: Salta areas under different grape varieties in 1999 and 2012 (in hectares). Source: Own elaboration based on unpublished data kindly provided by the INV (Instituto Nacional de Vitivinicultura).

Region still plays a minor role in the Argentine context. While the relative share has grown since 2001, the 3,051 hectares total in 2014 is still very low (1.35 % of Argentine total), with Mendoza concentrating 71 % of areas under vines and San Juan 21 % (INV 2015).

#### 6.1.4 From national to global market?

The Salta Wine Region growth is much more pronounced in terms of wine exportation than cultivation area. Its share in total Argentine wine exportation is significantly higher (see Tab. 1). In Salta, the total value of wine exports has increased from 2.6 million US\$ in 2001 to more than 20 million US\$ in 2014 (INV 2014; INV n.y.). Despite this exportation increase and the orientation towards global markets, the Argentine market remains important due to an increasing tendency for the places where the wines are actually sold to fluctuate rapidly depending on global economic developments as well the Argentine pesos consistent devaluation in relation to the US\$. As a winemaker from one of Salta's largest wineries (and part of a large wine group) explains: "Before the year 2000 everything [of the winery's production] was sold on a national market. Then, especially because of the Argentine crisis in 2001, exportation rapidly gains importance. Until the years 2008–2009 the relation between exportation and internal consumption was about 70 % to 30 %. Since the year 2009 it has changed again and now it is about 40 % exportation and 60 % internal consumption"

(Interview 09/09/2013). At the same time, various winemakers have highlighted that some of the smaller (boutique) wineries sell up to 80 % or even 90 % of their production at the cellar door.

Hence, the Salta Wine Region's integration into global markets did not result in a simple switch from supplying national to supplying global markets. In contrast, the phenomenon is best described as a simultaneous expansion *and* contraction of supply chains: exportations as well as cellar door sales have gained importance. Additionally, national and/or global market fluctuations have profound implications for the wine distribution geographies of the Salta Wine Region.

#### 6.2 Quality wine and the importance of status

Many of the newly established wineries that are not part of a national or international company have been built by individual entrepreneurs that have not formerly worked in the wine business. People who made money from other economic activities and thus can count on a surplus to spend are attracted to the wine world because of the inherent associations with status and class. Like one traditional winery owner and winemaker states with reference to new establishments: "A lot of people come from different businesses; bankers, doctors, greengrocers, and real estate companies. Wine is related to the good life, arts and this is why it is attractive to enter the business" (Interview 03/09/2014). This also means that the primary expectation of these new businesses



**Tab. 1: Wine exportation from different Argentine wine regions in 2014. Source: INV n. y.**

Province	Wine exports in million U.S. dollars	% of Argentine total
Mendoza	758,163	90.5%
San Juan	28,265	3.3%
La Rioja	17,960	2.1%
Salta	<b>20,597</b>	<b>2.4%</b>
Catamarca	0,120	0.01%
Neuquén	7,693	0.9%

might not be to make a lot of money but to enhance social status which puts return on investment in second place. Another traditional winery owner states: “Before [the change to quality production] it was not like that but now being a winery owner gives you a status. It is like being a prince” (Interview 11/09/2013).

This association between wine and status explains the high visibility of individual entrepreneurs in the regional wine business. In general, investment in globalized agricultural production is becoming a more complex process with different actors not primarily related to agriculture (e.g. financial investors) playing more significant roles (see for example OUMA 2014). As a consequence, tracing who invests and what is bought is frequently a difficult task. However, Salta's wine sector is distinct as many investors actively enhance their visibility. Companies with a well-developed global profile make important investments, but even these companies frequently highlight their owners' family background and their strong personal connection to the place of investment. On their websites it is common to find accounts on how they have discovered the Calchaquí Valleys, on their personal commitment to the region, and on the family-oriented corporate culture. This is the case with Bodega Colomé and Bodega Piatelli. Donald Hess is the leader of Hess Family Wine Estates, a global business with wineries on all five continents. In 2001 the Hess Company bought the winery at Colomé, located in the upper-Calchaquí Valleys approximately 120 kilometers from Cafayate. The sale included 39,000 hectares of land (at that time there were only 20 hectares of vineyards) and the small hamlet of Colomé, a place where people used to do subsistence agriculture and worked for the former landlord. Donald Hess's visions have profoundly transformed the area since the purchase. The company did not only alter the production sys-

tem and plant new vineyards but also opened a visitor center, a luxury hotel, and a museum exclusively dedicated to the work of US-American artist James Turrell. The image of personal commitment to the region does not only figure prominently in the Hess companies' marketing strategies; the main plaza of the hamlet Colomé has been rebuilt and now bears the name of the Hess couple (see Photo 1).

Hence, compared to other agricultural activities, wine production goes beyond economic logic and is intrinsically connected to cultural capital, social status, and lifestyle (see also OVERTON and MURRAY 2013; OVERTON and BANKS 2015). This argument is



**Photo 1: Connecting personal entrepreneurial competencies to place: Plaza Ursula and Donald Hess in the hamlet of Colomé. (Photo: G. RAINER)**

strongly supported by participatory observations in wineries and informal talks with boutique winery owners who explained passionately and in detail that through the execution of their projects a long-lasting dream to engage with the wine world has become reality. I will return to this point in the last section of the discussion and connect it to changes in the tourism and real estate sector along the Salta Wine Route. The next section examines economic logics, focusing on the production of the Calchaquí Valleys' singularity.

### 6.3 Wine globalization and singularity production: *producing altitude*

The aforementioned Bodega Colomé actively constructs *terroir* and place along the Salta Wine Route in order to achieve monopoly rents on a global marketplace. The Bodega Colomé winery building is located at a high altitude, 2,300 meters above sea-level. Additionally, the winery has extended vineyards in proximity to the winery and established in higher places. Finca Altura Máxima (Estate maximum altitude) is located at 3,111 meters and the vineyards are marketed as the highest in the world. High-altitude wine has specific characteristics as the altitude and the related strong temperature differences between day and night have strong impacts on the grapes and the wine produced. The thicker skin of grapes, higher concentration of sugar in the grapes, and higher alcohol content afford high altitude wines their particular expression.

Nevertheless, by far the most important aspect of high altitude is its differentiating role, giving wines of the Calchaquí Valleys an eye-catching particularity that stands out on a global market. It is less the conditions of soil as in most other wine regions (even though they also play a crucial role) but the altitude that is the most visible aspect of the Calchaquí Valleys specific *terroir*. Even though the region boasts a long tradition of wine cultivation, the production area's high altitude played a less important role in the past. As one local winemaker who started his business in the 1970s states: "In the 1970s and 1980s there was no high-altitude wine. Actually it is less the altitude but the fact that better wines are elaborated and from that on enters the play with the altitude as we have the advantage to be higher located than Mendoza and other countries" (Interview 11/09/2013). For the Calchaquí Valleys the importance of altitude starts with winery modernization, international capital influx, global market

orientation, and the related search for singularization through the particularities of place. As CALLON et al. (2002, 203) outline with respect to product singularization: "the difference that enables a product to capture the consumer always involves the prior assertion of a resemblance which suggests an association between the consumer's former attachments and the new ones proposed." The altitude of Salta's wines is not only an eye-catching particularity but also, and crucially, easily comparable to other premium wine regions. Hence, high-altitude *terroir* is produced by a host of actors ranging from small boutique wineries to transnational beverage companies in their attempt to globally position Salta's wines.

Additionally, this active promotion of high-altitude wine characteristics has led to new tendencies regarding new vineyard plantation in the region. Finca Altura Máxima of Bodega Colomé is the most extreme example of this added altitude value and the general tendency of planting new vineyards on slopes and not on the valley-floor as was formerly commonplace. In the words of a traditional winemaker and winery owner: "Now altitude is a synonym of quality. The most expensive wines come from the highest locations. Formerly vineyards were planted in the most convenient places, now people search for altitude" (Interview 03/09/2014). Hence, if higher financial returns due to altitude can be expected, higher costs for positioning vineyards on slopes are accepted.

The wine cultivation area expansion in the Calchaquí Valleys is dependent on water accessibility for irrigation purposes. In most cases there is no spring water available for this expansion as water rights had already been awarded decades ago. Thus, wine cultivation expansion is highly dependent on ground water exploitation. Before the shift to quality wine production, ground water extraction would have been too costly for businesses, but now it has become a highly profitable opportunity for converting what were formerly considered unproductive lands into premium vineyards. Indeed, a political ecological truism showing that natural resources are not a given, but always constructed in particular political-economic constellations (TSING 2005; KRINGS 2011; ROBBINS 2012; RAINER 2016). Through various actors' decisions to re-direct wine production towards quality, groundwater has *become* a key resource, being its physical availability at the same time a precondition for doing so.<sup>8)</sup>

<sup>8)</sup> Groundwater is frequently extracted from a considerable depth; in some cases more than 200 meters. All new wells have to be legally registered but currently

Wine cultivation on slopes and groundwater extraction for irrigation imply high investment costs in addition to the existing expenditures inherent to quality wine production such as winery construction and up-to-date technology. Furthermore, the grapes planted take years until the first wines can be produced. Hence, the investment logic is necessarily long-term, nearly all wineries own their vineyards, and grape purchasing is not a common practice. The switch towards high-quality production has reinforced this tendency. As a winemaker who works in one of the largest wineries in the region explains: “If you want to produce high quality wines you have to make sure that the grapes are of best quality. If you buy the grapes you cannot control that” (Interview 09/09/2013).

Despite these high cultivation and production costs, the Salta Wine Region offers lower-priced investment opportunities compared to the world's most well-known premium wine regions such as Tuscany, Bordeaux or Napa Valley. Some wine companies firmly established in other wine regions (mainly Mendoza) have bought land and planted vineyards but have yet to build wineries. This might be a strategy to secure a piece of land in the region to be able to benefit from the expected growth in the next years. As a site manager of a winery explains: “They [the companies recently investing] want to have a foot in the region” (Interview 01/09/2013). Land prices in the region have risen tremendously in the last years and this is not only a direct result of wine production expansion but also, and to an important degree, of the tourism and leisure boom related to the amenity qualities of premium wine regions.

#### 6.4 Wine, tourism, and real estate along the Salta Wine Route

Since the Salta Wine Route's establishment in 2005 almost all wineries in the Province have started to engage in tourism.<sup>9)</sup> Tourists are vital wine purchasers for the smaller boutique wineries that sell a large proportion of their production at the cellar door, whereas larger wineries producing more quan-

no requests for drilling are rejected as there are no studies on the amount of groundwater available in the region. Nevertheless, the responsible undersecretariat of the Salta Province expresses that most likely groundwater is currently overused.

<sup>9)</sup> For a thorough discussion of the establishment of the Wine Route and the tourism and leisure boom in the region see RAINER 2016.

tity tend to stress the marketing aspect. As the tourism representative of a large winery states: “What is sold here [at the cellar door] compared to what the company sells is not a lot but the publicity is very good and cheaper than radio, TV, or magazine advertisements. Apart from that, it is better because you generate more loyalty.” Hence, for the larger wineries cellar door visitations provide an important opportunity to initiate and sustain relationships with potential clients over large distances, ranging from the regional capitals of Northwest-Argentina to European and North-American cities. In the last years wineries have also invested significant amounts of money to reform and update their tourism infrastructures. Many of them, such as Piatelli – built by a US-American investor who started his business in the early 2000s in Mendoza and in 2013 inaugurated the winery in Cafayate – use tourism as a cornerstone offering visitations, tastings, and a restaurant. Wine tourism in Salta grew rapidly from 75,586 visitors in 2007 to 246,078 visitors in 2013, making the Salta wine region the second most important wine tourism destination in the country after Mendoza (BODEGAS ARGENTINA 2014).

In addition to wine tourism offers, new real estate projects exploiting the amenity quality of living and owning vineyards have emerged. In 2014 the department of Cafayate had six gated estates in different construction phases with three of them offering buyers a direct connection with vineyards and wine in their interior (RAINER and MALIZIA 2014). The possibility to get one's own bottle of wine from one's own vineyards without having to invest and engage in the wine production process (from the acquisition of land to irrigation, planting, maintenance, and harvest) is a key real estate project selling point. This recently emerged business is a crucial factor in escalating land prices. Returns on investment through subdividing and selling land are generated much faster than with long-term investment horizons of viticulture detailed above. Despite being a prestigious agricultural activity, winemakers and winery owners along the Salta Wine Route vividly described wine production as an arduous task, a business marked by an assortment of invisible daily routines and problems. Not least due to these challenges presented by wine production, some winery owners have begun to invest in real estate projects. A member of a traditional family winery and now simultaneously a gated community manager stated: “My mum was a little bit tired of the winery [of working in the family winery] and wanted to do something different. She has many friends in Pilar

[neighborhood of Buenos Aires] in gated communities and decided that we build one here” (Interview 28/05/2012).

Additionally, the long-term investment risks inherent to the wine industry with respect to global and/or national economic changes and the pronounced currency fluctuations commonplace in Argentina are circumvented once investors successfully sell the individual plots on these estates. The national and international marketing of real estate projects, as well as the demand for plots offering an idyllic rural lifestyle, status gains, and high, albeit speculative, returns on investment are key aspects for understanding the current boom. Comparing viticulture expansion and real estate growth demonstrates the tremendous real estate project boom over the last fifteen years. In the department of Cafayate, the Salta Wine Region’s production center, growth in areas dedicated to vines has been lower than areas with gated real estate (individual land acquisitions and open real estate developments not included) (see Fig. 3).

From a business and neoliberal development logic, the Salta Wine Region would likely be considered a global market integration success story. Nevertheless, the exclusive developments related to wine production, wine tourism, and real estate in the Calchaquí Valleys are simultaneously exclusionary developments, provoking socio-spatial fragmentation and deepening the long-lasting socio-ecological inequalities (RAINER and MALIZIA 2014; Rainer 2016).

## 7 Conclusion

This article attempts to overcome wide-spread conceptualizations of globalization as a pre-given phenomenon that structures and drives regional change. In contrast, my ethnographic account of wine business restructuring towards global market integration turns the attention to how globalization actually comes into being in the Northwest-Argentine Andes.

From a global perspective, Salta’s wine region can be considered an emblematic example of the new geographies of quality wine production in which New World wine regions play a more prominent role. Investments by large beverage companies have shown to be influential in other New World countries such as New Zealand (OVERTON and MURRAY 2013, 709) and Chile (MURRAY and OVERTON 2011). Nevertheless, the Salta wine region illustrates that the search for new markets by long-established family-owned businesses was a crucial initial step. Today, re-invented, traditional family businesses, large transnational companies, and new boutique wineries operated by new wine business actors exist side by side. While their commercialization and marketing is global, the national market still plays a central role. Further, related to a tourism boom, cellar door sales have rapidly gained importance; especially for the new boutique wineries. Additionally, I have shown that short-term global and/or national market fluctuations can have profound implications for the geographic location where Salta’s wine is distributed and sold.

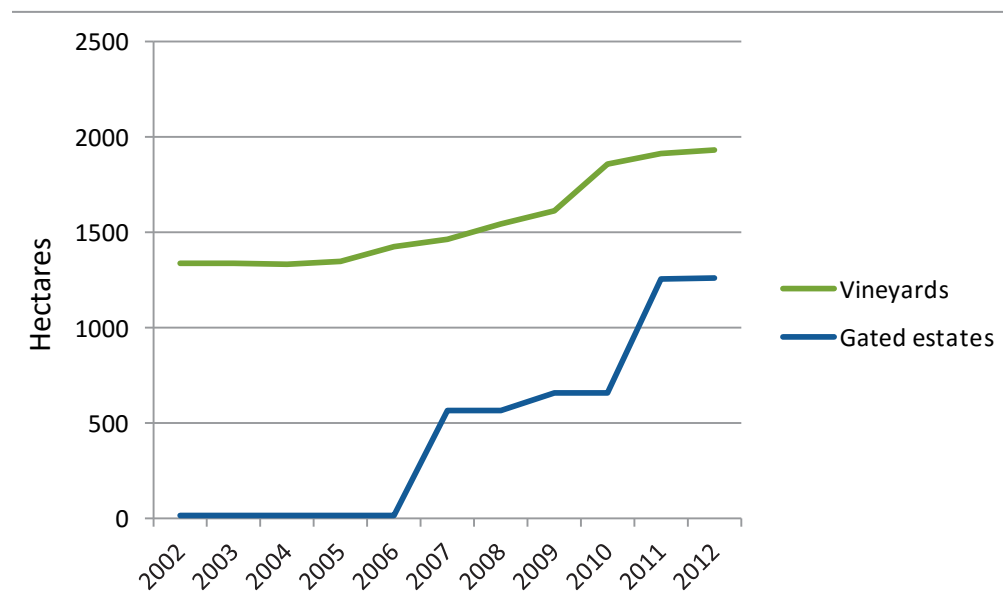


Fig. 3: The evolution of areas under vines and gated estates in the district of Cafayate. Source: Own elaboration based on data from the INV and own fieldwork

The turn towards quality wine production has been intimately related to a search for singularization and as in other quality wine regions the construction of *terroir* has been crucial in this context, though in a different way. In the Salta wine region it is the production area's altitude (with a strong tendency to cultivate on higher locations on slopes) that gives wines its eye-catching particularity on a global market. Nevertheless, the ethnographic account shows that altitude is not a pre-given characteristic of Salta's wines but has been actively constructed by concrete actors in a specific political-economic constellation.

Through an actor perspective it becomes clear that motivations for engaging with the Salta Wine Region, investment objectives, capital accumulation strategies, and potential risks differ profoundly. Quality wine production in Salta's Calchaquí Valleys demands high investment costs, long-term commitment with the area, and long-term intervals before first returns on investment can be expected. At the same time, new capital accumulation strategies more related to the real estate sector with much shorter time lags for investment returns and/or for storing capital have gained momentum. The land speculation and acquisition boom (building on the current price explosion) and construction of gated wine estates offering clients the possibility to live within vineyards and drink their own wine without having to engage with the cultivation and production process are two clear examples.

The new local-global relations that have emerged are much more complex than other agricultural commodities from the Global South that are produced exclusively for exportation and consumption in the Global North. The rising export rates for Salta's wines have led to a stretching of supply chains; while the growing importance of cellar door sales has simultaneously led to their contraction. Additionally, social and cultural factors influencing economic action are crucial, considering that quality wine is directly related to cultural capital, social status, and an idyllic rural lifestyle. This also explains the desire for high visibility of actors engaging with the Salta wine business. Hence, the results of this study support OVERTON and BANKS' speculation (2015) that conspicuous production – investment primarily for aspirational, lifestyle, and identity reasons, and not for surplus extraction – merits stronger scholarly attention in the analysis of the wine industry and rural restructuring in general.

The Salta wine region is marked by an increasing importance of large internationally operating wine/beverage companies' business portfolios *as well as by*

the operating strategies of a growing number of small boutique wineries. It is particularly the latter type of business that is strongly influenced by conspicuous production. Nevertheless, the prominent (marketing) role of close family ties and strong personal connection to the place of investment, even in companies that could arguably be considered global enterprises, demonstrates that the differences between business types and strategies can easily become blurred.

This investigation highlights the complexity of rural globalization and the necessity to advance differentiated analyses in order to better understand current rural change. Regional restructuring in wine regions – an important but under-studied economic sector – provides valuable insights to enrich scholarly work regarding the *global countryside*. Furthermore, this research agenda connects the *Agrargeographie* (agrarian geography), *Siedlungsgeographie* (settlement geography) and *Geographische Entwicklungsforschung* (geographical development research) subfields and demonstrates the added value of further developing a rural geography.

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