

# Making Wine At The Top Of The World

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Bodega Colomé Vista

Robert A. Russo

Isolated and rugged—Colomé Winery in Calchaqui Valley, Argentina, is so close to being off the grid it has no cell service, limited wifi, and until recently, had to provide its own electricity. From Salta, a three hour drive to Cafayate, followed by an additional three hour drive on a gravel road, terminates at Colomé. No one arrives by accident, including winemaker Thibaut Delmotte.

Colomé, started in 1831, is the oldest continuously run winery in Argentina. However, its modern history began with the purchase by Donald Hess, Hess Family Estates, in 2001. “I was 27 years old with little winemaking experience when Hess hired me,” explains Delmotte. Having left France for a “change of scenery” he backpacked across Argentina. In Salta, he met a woman who told him “about a Swiss guy who is building a winery at 7,000 feet.” Claiming to not know much about wine, Delmotte sent Hess an email with his resume. Upon meeting and seeing the property, he realized Hess’s plans for the winery went well beyond its original eight hectares. Delmotte felt under-qualified and unsure about “working for a crazy millionaire living his dream.”

The two visited the nearby village of Moreno. It was there Delmotte witness Hess's integrity—he was building a church, roads, and expanding the school for the villagers—and realized the wineries impact on the community. "At this point Hess asked me to stay and I said yes," shares Delmotte, "He told me not to worry, we would start small and build it together." Today, Hess owns two wineries in Argentina, Colomé and Amalaya, employing over 200 people with 250 total hectares.

Comprised of four estate vineyards with elevation ranging from 5,740 feet to 10,207 feet, viticulture here is like nowhere else in the world, in fact, it's only due to the proximity to the equator that grapes grow here at all. The conditions are ideal—wide diurnal range, endless sun, complex soil with lots of sand, and irrigation water found in wells from melting snow on the Andes offsets the low annual rainfall. But the extreme elevation results in grapes with tougher skins leading to concentrated juice and heavy tannins. Winemakers must proceed with restraint.



Colomé Winemaker Thibaut Delmotte

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Delmotte explains prior to Colomé he worked in Bordeaux, utilizing high temperature fermentation, punch downs, and lots of new oak. Those techniques with the high elevation fruit resulted in wines that were over the top. Hess told him, "we don't want to wait ten years to be able to drink the wines, you must use a softer approach." Now he utilizes gentle extraction techniques and little to no new oak in the wines to achieve the wineries signature freshness.

Colomé wines are terroir driven, Altura Maxima, cultivated from vineyards at 10,207 feet, is the flagship. Delmotte says the area was once an ancient river bed, resulting in an interesting array of alluvial soils comprised of stones and pink and gray granite. The eight year old vineyard produces a low yield of tiny clusters that are highly concentrated—low intervention is a must. “There is no point in being at 10k feet if we are going to mask the terroir in the winery.”

Together Hess and Delmotte have learned how to craft outstanding Argentine wines, showcasing Torrontes and Malbec at their finest, and they have only begun. “We are still learning about the vineyard, we have a long way to go, but it has fantastic potential that we have only begun to tap into,” shares Delmotte.

**2018 Colomé Estate Torrontes** - 100% Torrontes; exuberant notes of fresh roses, citrus, and stone fruit; round with medium acidity on the palate; refreshing

**2017 Colomé Autético Malbec** – 100% Malbec from 90 year old vines growing over 7,000 feet; complex notes of ripe fruit, spice, black pepper, and violets; silky texture, elegant and balanced; no oak used

**2016 Colomé Estate Malbec** – 100% Malbec sourced from 3 estate vineyards—La Brava over 5,500 feet, Colome 7,000 feet, and Finca Maximum over 10,000 feet; rich notes of red and black fruit, minerality, fresh red flowers and herbs, spice, and olive tapenade; layers and complex, silky on palate, fresh and balanced; aged 15 months in neutral French oak and 6 months in bottle

**2015 Colomé Altura Maxima** – 100% Malbec sourced from vineyards over 10,000 feet; baked and raisin dark fruit, spice, black pepper, tobacco, medicinal notes, and dried flowers; tastes much older than its age, rich and integrated, sophisticated with a crushed velvet texture, structured and balanced; a dazzling wine; aged 24 months

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