

# WINE VS. NATURE

## IN THE BATTLE AGAINST EXTREME CONDITIONS, WINE SOMETIMES WINS.

BY STEVE WINSTON

"It's 25 degrees here," Sandy Vojta said to me on the phone. "And snowing like crazy."

Sandy Vojta owns Prairie Berry Winery, a lonely outpost in the Black Hills of South Dakota. And she uses grapes from her vineyard in distant Yankton, the only place in the state where grapes will grow. Her wines have fanciful names, such as Phat Hogg Chardonnay, Pink Slip (Chardonnay and Catawba) and Red Ass Rhubarb (a fruit wine).

Reflecting nature itself, wine producers show remarkable resilience and determination in growing grapes where conditions say quite clearly, are you serious?

Casa Rondena Winery sits in the high desert of Albuquerque, New Mexico. And the lack of rain (10–12 inches a year) is only the first challenge. "The sunlight here is intense," says owner John Calvin, "and if the foliage of the vines can't protect them, the grapes will die. The wind can be extreme. And daytime temperatures can get near 100. Our saving grace is that they drop by 30–40 degrees at night."

There's probably nowhere on Earth less suited for wine production than Hokkaido, northernmost of Japan's home islands. The winds are fierce. The terrain is mountainous. Winter temperatures hover around zero. There's up to 40 feet of snow every year. And you actually have to bury the vines in the snow to keep the grapes from dying of frostbite.

Yet, Taichi Yamazaki annually produces 20,000 cases of wine here, including Pinot Noir, Merlot and Chardonnay. He's a fourth-generation Hokkaido winemaker. But he's

owns vineyards, he started his own in the Sahara. Desert sand has no nutrients, so the nutrients have to come from compost—thirty tons a year. Drip irrigation requires wells up to 250 yards deep. And if you push the pumping systems too hard, the salinity will rise, which can defoliate vines late in the growing season. Hwaidak coaxes enough fruit from the desert for 16 red wine labels and 14 whites.

He's not alone. Winemakers of the Golan Heights Winery in Israel produce Chardonnays and Merlots on land that's hot and dusty in the summer and windblown and snowy in the winter.

The historical consensus in Europe has been that an elevation of 1,600 feet is the upper limit for worthwhile grape cultivation. But Donald Hess, at Bodega Colome, his property in the farthest north corner of the Argentinean Andes' Salta province, makes wonderful Malbec and Torrontés at approximately 9,849 feet—the highest vineyard in the world.

In the central Canadian province of Saskatchewan, Cypress Hills Winery is the only commercial vineyard in the three prairie provinces. There are frosts in late May. There's hail the size of golf balls, says owner Marie Bohnet; in a 2008 hailstorm, all the grapes were lost. There are ferocious "Chinook" winds. It can be 40-below in winter, and 100-above in summer. Nonetheless, Cypress Hills sells 3,000 cases a year, all of it to folks who happen to be driving by.

"Never let fear—or common sense—hold you back," says Bohnet.

