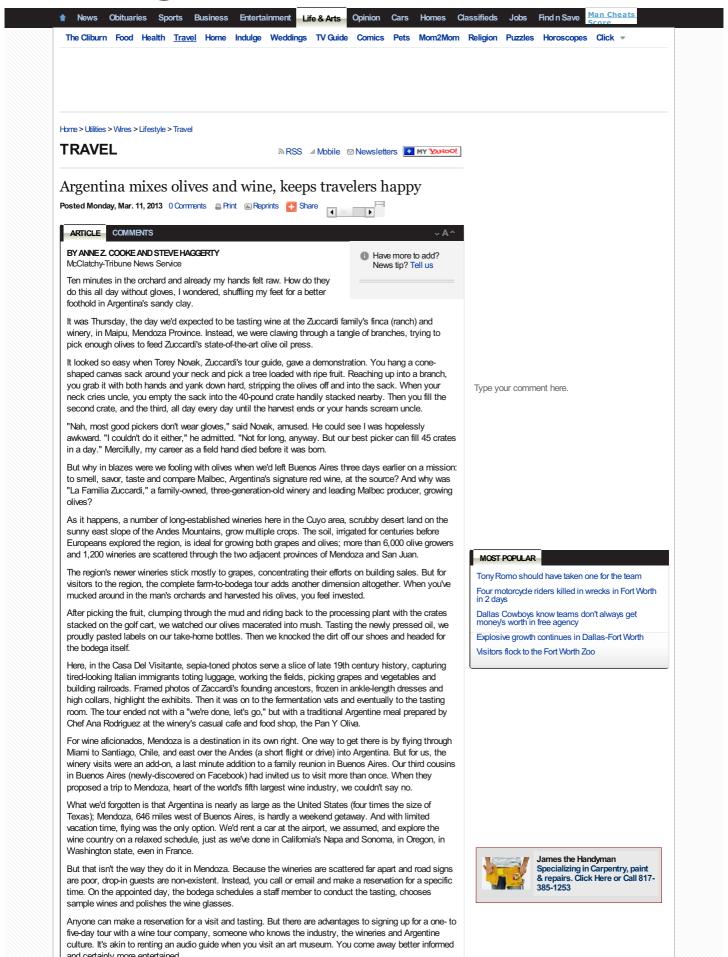
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A typical tour - you choose the length - generally visits three wineries each day and includes daily lunch

customize your route. Our cousins, who knew the drill, handled it for the four of us, arranging a three-day quided tour with a quide they'd used before.

We started in San Juan Province, going first to Callia Winery and then to Graffigna, where Chief Wine Maker Gerardo Danitz, eager to answer even the dumbest question, fielded a tasting that could have doubled as Wine Wisdom 101. His patient explanations were an ideal send-off for what would be three days of tasting, spitting, tasting, sneaking a swallow here and there - for the strength to push on - and running out of adjectives to describe the infinite range of fruity, nutty flavors.

Heading south to Mendoza, we stopped first at Vistalba Bodega, wine czar Carlos Pulenta's show place, where most visits include both tasting and lunch at his much-acclaimed five-star restaurant, La Bourgogne. Then it was on to Tupungato Winelands to see recently planted vineyards and the new golf course; to Salentein and a culture museum; and finally to Zuccardi. Which is how we found ourselves in the dirt, discussing olive cultivation.

Until then I hadn't given much thought to immigrant history and the parallels between Argentina and the United States. But in most of the towns we saw, you could walk down the street and - except for the signs in Spanish - think you were at home. Both countries were settled by immigrants from Europe who brought farming skills to the New World. Settling in places like Wisconsin, lowa, Virginia and throughout Argentina, they saw what looked like empty land, and displacing or killing the indigenous tribes, claimed if

Early Spanish explorers and missionaries had already introduced grapes and cattle; with land to spare, beef cattle, herded by cowboys in the U.S. and by gauchos in Argentina, became a staple. And grapes, initially grown for the fruit or to make table wine for home use, became a commercial success.

Like Argentina's immigrants, Malbec grapes are also an import, brought from France. But it took Mendoza's sandy clay to create those tongue-tingling perfect fruity, nutty, oaky, you-name-it flavors. A wine bottle, tucked into my luggage for the return trip, would have been nice. But the custom-picked, personally selected, orchard-to-table olive oil made a better souvenir.

## IF YOU GO:

GOING THERE: Fly from Miami to Buenos Aires, and on a regional carrier to Mendoza or San Juan. Or fly LAN Chile Airline to Santiago, in Chile, and on to San Juan or Mendoza.

WHEN TO GO: Any time of year is lovely in Mendoza. But February, March and April (autumn in the Southern Hemisphere), when the harvest is under way or just completed, is especially nice.

## PLANNING A TOUR

Our tour guide, a family friend, no longer leads wine tours. Other recommended tour guides are listed below. Before making reservations, visit all the websites listed here, which, taken together, offer a wealth of information on Mendoza, on the types of tours available, and the wineries each guide or outfitter likes to visit. There are differences. The listed phone numbers in Argentina are preceded by 54, the country code. The rest are in the United States.

The Ampora Wine Tours: mendozawinetours.com

Mendoza Holidays: www.mendozaholidays.com (917)267-8781

Trout & Wine: www.troutandwine.com 54-261-425-5613

Uncorking Argentina: uncorkingarentina.com (866) 529-2861, or (916) 396-0456

Aventura & Wine: www.aventurawine.com 54-261-429-3014

The Grapevine Wine Tours: the grapevine-winetours.com 54-261-429-7522

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