

Vines to Wines: A New Class at LLC

By Franette Armstrong



Alex Saragoza Photo provided

Even the most ardent wine lovers will have their eyes and taste buds opened during a six-week course, "Hands on the Vines: The California Wine Story," beginning Jan. 29 at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center, taught by Alex Saragoza — a professor who grew up with grape stains on his fingers.

In his class, Saragoza, who is an author and history professor at UC Berkeley, will survey the centuries leading to the current wine boom, profiling the owners and wine masters who made it happen, the wines they produced, and the \$60 billion economy that resulted.

"It's hard to imagine now what California was like before Mike Grgich's chardonnay won the Paris Wine Tasting in

1976," Saragoza said, "before grapevines lined Highways 101 and 5 and many of the places between. Everything from wine tourism to wine-pairing dinners grew out of that single event, as did much of the foodie movement of the last 40 years."

But even before all of that, pioneering immigrants from several countries began to replicate here what they had learned in vineyards at home. Later, a handful of Mexican immigrants came to California under the 1942 Bracero guest worker program and bootstrapped themselves from working the fields into owning thousands of acres. "They made a little money picking grapes and saved a bit until finally they could buy a little land. At first they sold their grapes to other wineries until they were able to leverage those profits into the multi-generational wineries we know today."

Saragoza's family is an embodiment of the forces that drove immigrants to succeed; when he was only 5 he worked alongside his parents picking cotton in California's central valley. "My parents were extremely hard working," he said. "Eventually they both got jobs at an olive bottling plant but took their vacations during the grape harvest seasons so that they could make extra money."

When Saragoza graduated from college he spent a summer tending vines to help his parents out, then he was off to graduate school at Harvard and earned his Ph.D. at UC San Diego before beginning his 37-year career at Cal.

His new class will feature guests such as a wine critic, winery owners and a

winemaker. Tastings in each session will underscore the concepts presented and trends in wine will also be examined.

"Every generation has its hallmark drink for celebration, holidays and romance. In the 1920s it was hard liquor, in the '50s it was mixed drinks, and since the mid-70s it has been wine in one form or another," Saragoza maintains.

Each bottle of wine reflects a particular historical, social and cultural background — that is part of the romance of wine, he said. "Those of us of a certain age might remember drinking Mateus and Lancers during our younger days. Those tastes morphed into an appetite for heavy

reds and oaky chardonnays. Then one film, 'Sideways,' which we will briefly view in class, won an Oscar, and suddenly many of us moved to pinot noir. Now the young and hip are discovering rosés ... like Lancers and Mateus."

This class is Saragoza's fourth for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Most recently he taught a Spanish Civil War history class in Lafayette, and earlier, one on Cuba. In June he will be leading a 12-day OLLI Travel Study trip to Catalonia.

For more information on Saragoza's class or the upcoming Catalonia trip, go to olli.berkeley.edu or call (510) 642-9934.

New OLLI Classes in Lafayette

Three new six-week courses from UC Berkeley's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) begin on Jan. 27 at the Lafayette Library. Instructors will present their courses as well as the travel study program to Catalonia offered in June by Dr. Alex Saragoza during a free Info Session on Thursday, Jan. 8.

Exploring Philosophical Issues Through film, taught by Richard Lichtman, examines how the dynamic of "moving pictures" can reveal the flow of everyday life and the grandeur and minutia of being. Tuesdays from 1 to 3 p.m.

Hands on the Vines: The California Wine Story surveys the history of the California wine industry from its roots in Europe to its present boom. Taught by Alex Saragoza on Thursdays from 10 a.m. to noon.

Dilemmas in Biomedical Ethics explores the ethical issues arising from new biomedical technology and its effect on society, patients, families, and consumers. Taught by Marjorie Schulz on Thursday from 1 to 3 p.m.

For more information, visit olli.berkeley.edu or call (510) 642-9934.

The Making of the President

Or, Finding the meaning of Christmas and New Year's in Argentina

By Nick Marnell



Cafe in the trendy Palermo district

Photos Nick Marnell

A few issues ago I wrote about my online dating experiences. What Lamorinda readers do not know is that my terrestrial dating experiences have spanned both hemispheres. In fact, I once traveled to Argentina to ask its president, Cristina Fernandez, for a date. I was bored in Moraga, she was newly single and she seemed like a lot of fun, so I bought a plane ticket, rented an apartment in Buenos Aires for a month, and I flew there.

It was the first time I tried international apartment living. I always stayed at hostels or guest houses, and at those, a front desk person will help you, or fellow travelers will guide you. Even the time I rolled off of a boat and stumbled into a snake farm in Nicaragua, the owner at least told me what snakes to avoid as I walked to my quarters. Here, I was on my own, totally dependent upon strangers.

First, I sent Madame Presidente a Christmas card. Since she was all by herself, maybe lonely during the holidays, I asked her to take a break from the madness of her job and meet me for coffee. I enclosed my contact information and mailed her the card and hit the Buenos Aires streets.

My first observation: Forget that "dressed to kill" myth about Argentina. Young people, texting away on their iPhones, wore American clothes, usually T-shirts, tennis shoes, even flip flops. The late hours required an adjustment. A

10:30 p.m. dinner was routine, and the bars picked up around midnight, at the earliest. Victor, a bouncer, told me that the ladies in Buenos Aires love to practice their English so I shouldn't get too carried away with learning Spanish.

Most of the folks whom I told about my plan for coffee with the president thought I was out of my mind. Justina, a tough, tiny, opinionated lady who worked in the import-export business, did not speak kindly of her leader. "Everyone knows she was having an affair with one of the senators," she said.

Neither was Maria, an attorney, amused by my attempt to go on a date with Ms. Fernandez. She hated her; nearly everybody I talked to hated her. "The educated people do not like her," said Maria. "Those who are lazy, and want handouts, they love her;" which was how I felt she had marginalized me. Maria did give me her phone number, but I wasn't sure if it was for social reasons, or if she thought I might need her legal representation while I was in the country.

Christmas approached and as my hopes to meet the president faded, I did learn plenty about the culture. Christmas feels like a minor holiday in Argentina. The neighborhoods hang no lights, no wreaths, there are no trees. Not only did I see no bell-ringing Santa Claus, I found only one Christmas display in a mall. The season was refreshingly non-commercial.

On Christmas Eve people scammed

about in the 90 degree heat, but not as panicked as Lamorindans looking for a spot in the Diablo Foods parking lot. I ate a ham and cheese sandwich and walked around my neighborhood, but by sunset everybody had vanished, because Argentines spend Christmas Eve at home, with family. At midnight, fireworks went off and folks hit the streets. The celebration lasted a half hour, and the people returned to their homes.

About the only thing to do on hot, silent Christmas Day was to visit La Recoleta Cemetery and see Eva Peron's tomb. By late afternoon, the bars reopened, and the partying resumed.

Christmas Eve at home with family was not hard to grasp. But New Year's Eve, too? That was a culture shock. The streets were deserted by mid-afternoon. A cafe cooked me a pizza to forget, I worked a Sudoku puzzle and I tried to translate the Buenos Aires newspaper into English until the sun went down.

Alone near midnight, I was so desperate that I walked to a tourist bar, one of a handful open in the city. I sat with a tall, lonesome, long-haired lady from Paraguay and we split a small bottle of champagne and between her limited English and my even more limited Spanish, we probably communicated three comprehensive thoughts in an hour. She was meeting a "friend" so we hugged and went our separate ways, equally mystified at the turn of events here.

The firecrackers and the cherry bombs



Iconic, pastel-splashed La Boca neighborhood

exploded at midnight followed by yelling and hollering in the streets, but it all died down after about 20 minutes and the family parties continued indoors through the night. New Year's Day was just as quiet, about the same as a typical day in Orinda.

So while I did not accomplish my original goal, I experienced the most radical and least commercial holiday season of my life.

And you never know. Ms. Fernandez, after she steps down next year, may track me down and meet me for lunch at Home/Made Kitchen Café in Moraga.



Typical street scene, on any night but New Year's Eve.