

# Finding a home for Torrontés

Does Argentina's 'other grape' Torrontés suffer from 'Pinot envy' of stellar white varieties such as the 'reliably dull' Pinot Grigio, and does it have the mettle to stand up to spicy food as well as engage consumers? **Gemma McKenna reports**



Photography: Rob Lawson

## WHAT WAS ON THE MENU?

- King prawn marinated with chilli and yogurt, cooked in a clay oven, and organic salmon with mustard and dill
- Old Delhi-style chicken
- Yellow chicken marinated in yogurt, ginger, garlic and turmeric
- Tandoori chicken breast with cracked pepper and thyme
- Stir-fried broccoli.

That was the question facing a group of the trade's finest, who gathered at London's Cinnamon Kitchen, in Devonshire Square, to see how Argentina's Torrontés grape variety would fare against punchy flavours of tandoori and Old Delhi-style chicken, or salmon with mustard and dill. The answer was pretty well, actually.

Wine of Argentina's Andrew Maidment admitted it was still early days for Argentina's "increasingly important" Torrontés variety, which makes up just 6% of Argentinian wine sold in the UK. But Maidment is keen to figure out what the trade's appetite for the variety is and what potential it has in the UK market. "Anecdotally, buyers in the UK on and off-trade love it, but we want to look at its potential a bit more scientifically," he told the group.

It therefore commissioned Wine Intelligence to conduct a consumer blind tasting project putting Torrontés up against other bestselling white wine grape varieties (see results, p32).

Wine Intelligence's research was positive in that it showed Torrontés outperforming top international grapes on occasion, but it fell down when it came to consistency, because its distinctive qualities aren't always in evidence. Bibendum's Joe Fattorini said while Torrontés can sometimes be "very good", at other times it disappoints, contrasting with the "reliably dull" Pinot Grigio, he can see "why it fails to get a purchase".

Waitrose's Nick Room said "it's got a long way to go" to get noticed. "Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc have got so much history" with consumers, he added. "The styles [of Torrontés] are all over the place, and unless you've got good clues it is hard to sell, but it's got great potential," he said.

Harvey Nichols' Ivan Dixon believes people who "like it will go back to it, otherwise they'll be turned off", while

Colin Nicholson of Hennings Wine said it was "getting them to buy in the first place", which presented the greatest challenge. "Sauvignon Blanc is easy, people know and trust the name," he said.

Torrontés elicits a passionate response in consumers, according to La Riojana's Walter Carol. "It's either, 'I love it, it's my favourite', or 'no, I absolutely don't like it'. We can live with the 50% that love it," he said.

## Lessons from Malbec

Carol believes the variety has strong potential, and that there are lessons to be learned from Argentina's emblematic grape Malbec's success in the US market. "After 10 years, no one knew it, but once people knew about it, two years later it was among the top 10 varieties." He said he was confident this could be replicated with Torrontés in the UK. "Once it's known it will explode," he said.

Fattorini warned against Argentina looking solely to the US for lessons to apply to the UK market. "The UK palate is very different, as is the culture and understanding of 'el mundo latino' - the US is naturally very open to South America. We don't have that; not even remotely." But Carol insisted the comparison with other countries, not just the US, offered valuable insight.

## What about ageing?

The panel believed Torrontés was best served young, without ageing, in order to best "showcase its USPs", according to Dixon. In the panel's blind tasting of the same Torrontés wines used in the Wine Intelligence study, two of the same wines, one from 2010 and one from 2011, were tasted together. But panellists felt the 2010 was already coming across as a little "tired". Room said the wines provided the "zing" consumers were really looking for, while

**Above: discussions get under way at the Cinnamon Kitchen in London's Devonshire Square**

Dixon felt a sommelier could easily push the wines with the food, and "consumers would like it a lot". Anne Forrest from Direct Wines felt the citrus and zesty notes worked well with the salmon.

Carol said La Riojana decided "not to touch oak" as Torrontés' personality is very strong. "The idea is to sell the fruit," he added.

"The consumer is looking for something which gives a wine standout appeal," said Maidment, adding Torrontés should play to its strengths, not "dumb itself down".

Fattorini said if he were a brand owner, he would invest in "getting the wine out there" in the on-trade, and encouraging trialling based on the variety's "distinctive qualities". "There's a sense of Pinot envy in huge parts of Argentina - it's looking for a signature white," which he's not sure is necessary in the first place. He said the "aromatic eau de cologne notes - like Abercrombie & Fitch's Fierce", gave some of its wines standout. He was unimpressed by the "slightly boring - and reminiscent of Pinot Grigio - flat, dull style of Torrontés", which he thought would appeal to fans of the Italian grape. "Pinot Grigio is a phenomenon rather than a variety," he said, before adding that he hoped Torrontés didn't follow in its footsteps and become "reliably dull".

He called for a strong Torrontés brand to take the lead, to call itself something like "Piroppo" (a flirty compliment in Argentina), that could "sell on its own flirty, flighty, slightly dangerous, but terribly sexy Argentinian look", and which would have the money to pump into trialling on Friday nights.

Pricing is, of course, an issue, and Maidment pointed out that Torrontés performs especially well at the £5 to £7.99 bracket. As Nicholson said, "not many wines at that price point have this sort of personality". In fact, as

Maidment highlighted, one of the wines was £2 cheaper than anything else and was judged by consumers to be the most expensive of all those tried, which ranged from £5 to £12.99. Maidment said the wines "massively over-delivered at the lower end of the price scale".

Fattorini was concerned Argentina's pricing was far from stable. Aside from inflation, the mountainous terrain requires hand-harvesting and this puts pressure on prices, which are doubling every two years, he said. But Carol said that while Argentina has inflation, other countries have currency troubles, "at the end of the day, we still compete", he added.

Room said the UK's high duty rates meant particular difficulties here. "If prices shot up people would disappear", adding that he would not like to see quality diminished because of price sensitivity.

## Blending appeal

One of the wines on offer was a Chardonnay blend, which Room felt "muted the flavour" of the Argentinian grape. Day agreed, saying that the addition of Chardonnay meant you "lose the aroma" - "the thing that we have in our favour with Torrontés is the aromatics and fragrance". But he admitted blending with more well-known international varieties could encourage drinkers to try something new. "How many consumers would pick up Torrontés on its own?," he asked. Dixon thought it was "strong enough" to take a blend, and added that blending with Pinot Grigio or Chardonnay gave Torrontés "more commercial appeal".

Direct Wines' Forrest didn't believe hand-selling was the only way to move Torrontés. She said: "It's got to be great quality at a good price point, with a good story." She said Direct Wines has had a lot of success with mixed cases, such as Pinot Grigio & Friends, which includes ▶

## A WORD FROM THE WISE ...

Cinnamon Kitchen sommelier Fabio Toro said he would love to sell Torrontés at the restaurant. He said it matches well with Indian food, and was along the lines of Gewürztraminer, Muscat and Alsatian varieties like Pinot Gris, Riesling and Kabinett. Customers normally go for Sauvignon Blanc, but Toro said: "My mission is to change their mind or make them discover something else." Since they "don't know the food", they tend to seek out something familiar in the wine, he added.

It's so fantastic to have another grape variety to pair with spicy food

**Joe Fattorini,** northern sales director, Bibendum

**Colin Nicholson,** retail manager, Hennings Wine

**Nick Day,** sales director UK and Europe, La Riojana

**Walter Carol,** export manager, La Riojana

**Nick Room,** wine buyer, Waitrose

**Anne Forrest,** wine buyer, Direct Wines

**Natasha Rastegar,** analyst, Wine Intelligence

**Ivan Dixon,** wine and spirits buyer, Harvey Nichols

**Andrew Maidment,** Europe manager, Wines of Argentina





three single varieties and three with a blend – where Torrontés fits in. “But it’s tricky – you don’t sell off the name. It’s got to have the credentials, images, medals or recommendation from a top journalist,” she said.

Room believed Torrontés organic and Fairtrade connections were helpful in attracting consumers with an ethical stance, but said it needed a brand champion to invest some marketing budget. “The future is £7ish,” he added. Forrest was also clear that, “pricing needs to be super-competitive”.

For Dixon, Torrontés is more popular in the Harvey Nichols restaurants than off the shelf. “There’s more engagement and interaction, it sells especially well if we have a dish it pairs with,” he said.

But Fattorini wasn’t convinced, given only 5% of the restaurants Bibendum works with list Torrontés. He said the on-trade faced a “double hurdle” as buyers are often not as knowledgeable as off-trade counterparts, and go for the safe option. He said this is especially true if sales people are less confident describing the variety and less sure of pull-through. “You have to take sales people on a journey and they in turn have to take their customer – preferably from the safety of a Wallace Arnold bus”.

Does Argentina’s future lie with Torrontés or has the country got more to offer? Everyone was excited about Bonarda – whose pricing makes it more suitable for entry level than Malbec, as well as Pinots from Patagonia, while Carol pointed out Moscato frizzante has really taken off in the US. Fattorini said the “straightforward” Cabernets and Chardonnays were very consumer friendly, too.

### What’s next?

A possible Torrontés campaign from Wines of Argentina could be in the offing – “people don’t know about Torrontés”, said Maidment. “But we know they like it if they try it.” He said research confirmed it will stand up against major varieties. “The next stage is identifying what the message will be,” he said.

Forrest was confident “people want something different”. While Direct Wines’ biggest seller is Pinot Grigio, this is followed by the less well-known Friuli, showing there is still room for the underdogs.

Fattorini had the last word – he said promoting Torrontés would require a specially tailored approach, as it will not be favoured by the everyman, unlike its compatriot Malbec. “There is a challenge, as Torrontés is very different. I remember seeing that Janice Battersby’s bloke in Corrie only drank Argentinian Malbec, and that was a real success story. This is not the same. It will be a hand-sell.” ■

**From left:**  
**Walter**  
**Carol, Joe**  
**Fattorini,**  
**Anne**  
**Forrest**  
**and Colin**  
**Nicholson**

## TORRONTÉS STANDS UP TO CONSUMER TEST

Although it is hardly recognised as a grape variety in the UK, consumers would be more than happy to buy a Torrontés wine once they had tried it, according to results of a blind-tasting project carried out by Wine Intelligence on behalf of Wines of Argentina.

It took three different regional styles of Torrontés, including a blend, and blind tasted them with 160 consumers, against an Italian Pinot Grigio, an Australian Chardonnay and a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc at two different price points, £5-£7.99 and £8-£10.

Consumers were asked to pick out their favourite wines based on seven key criteria, including smell, taste and their likelihood to buy or recommend the wine. They were also asked to guess the grape and price, and recommend a food pairing for it.

In the lower-priced category, two of the Torrontés were in the top two with a Torrontés/Chardonnay 2011 blend from La Rioja voted the overall winner, followed by a single varietal La Rioja 2011 Torrontés.

Wine Intelligence found the winning Torrontés blend was particularly liked for its aromas (second overall) and taste profile scoring, where it came first out of the six wines tasted.

At the higher price point the New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc took top billing, with the Torrontés 2009 from Salta in second place and the Torrontés 2010 from La Rioja coming in fourth.

The second placed Salta Torrontés was just edged out by the New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc in the aroma and taste tests, but scored the best overall of the Torrontés wines when it came to test.

The research, however, did back up trade findings that Torrontés is a grape that polarises people. One Torrontés wine from Mendoza, for example, in the higher-priced category, was picked out by more people as their favourite overall wine, but a high number of people also marked it as their least favourite wine.

The findings show that for those who like strong aromas, zesty, fruit-flavoured styles, Torrontés offers a higher perceived quality wine than a Pinot Grigio, particularly in the lower price point blind tasting. Almost a quarter (24%) of consumers surveyed said they would pay more than £7.99 for the Chardonnay/Torrontés blend in the lower-priced category with 21% saying they would do the same for the other La Rioja Torrontés.

Only 19% of off-trade and 18% of on-trade had heard of Torrontés, compared with 93% recognition in the off-trade and 91% in the on-trade for Pinot Grigio.

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