

Casablanca Valley / Valparaíso

Mendoza

Great Wine Capitals Knowledge Exchange 2026

Chelsea Abramoff

Executive Summary

Wine tourism thrives when regions combine exceptional wines with compelling storytelling and a clear identity. My bursary travels to Casablanca/Valparaíso in Chile and Mendoza in Argentina revealed how Great Wine Capitals (GWCs) succeed by understanding their target markets, investing in their teams, and uniting around clear storytelling. Both regions attract millions of visitors annually, sustaining local economies and reinforcing their global reputations. Casablanca emphasizes grand yet relaxed experiences with cool-climate varietals and coastal artistic culture, while Mendoza showcases bold reds, the dramatic Andes landscapes, and meat-focused gastronomy. Despite differences, both regions excel at storytelling and offering guests memorable experiences that connect wine to a strong sense of place. In contrast, Hawke's Bay risks diluting its identity by trying to be everything at once. To strengthen its wine tourism, Hawke's Bay must define a focused identity, invest in training staff as storytellers, and foster collaboration across and within wineries. While South American regions could learn from New Zealand's casual tasting culture, Hawke's Bay can learn from their clarity, unity, and investment in visitor experiences. Ultimately, wine tourism is about more than wine; it is about passion, place, and people. By sharpening its identity and storytelling, Hawke's Bay can secure its place among the world's Great Wine Capitals.

Introduction

A Great Wine Capital must first offer great wine, but its success depends equally on tourism. Wine lovers seek immersive, special experiences that combine travel, culture, and hospitality. My bursary travels to Chile's Casablanca/Valparaíso and Argentina's Mendoza highlighted how wine tourism sustains local economies and how regions succeed by knowing their markets, telling their stories, and investing in their people.



Thesis

To thrive as a wine tourism destination, a region must:

- Understand its key markets and consumers.
- Develop a clear, unified identity.
- Train and empower staff to tell the wine story effectively.

Wineries Visited

In Casablanca, I visited six wineries ranging from family-owned (Bodegas Re, Villard) to large-scale (Casa del Bosque, Veramonte). Experiences varied from bespoke tours to expensive, standardized tastings. In Mendoza, visits

included Zuccardi, Casa de Uco, Trapiche, Alandes, and Huentela. Here, tourism was more developed, with polished presentations and high-end hospitality, though smaller wineries offered more personal experiences.

Host Responsibility & Sustainability

Host responsibility was inconsistent. Large pours, limited spittoons, and minimal education about alcohol consumption were common. Food accompaniments were universal, ranging from cheese and bread to full pairings. Sustainability was mentioned mostly in vineyard practices (organic, biodynamic transitions), but rarely integrated into tourism experiences.



Winery Relationships with GWC

Awareness of the GWC network varied. Some wineries proudly displayed awards, while others barely acknowledged the affiliation. Tensions existed between large commercial wineries and smaller family-run operations, reflecting differing priorities in tourism and wine quality.

Organization via GWC

Support from GWC contacts was limited. In Chile, communication was delayed and unhelpful, with local contacts providing little assistance. In Mendoza, initial communication was better but follow-up was lacking. Ultimately, personal contacts and local sommeliers proved more valuable in arranging meaningful visits. For the Knowledge Exchange program to succeed, stronger support structures are needed both locally and internationally.

Defining Factors of Each Region

Casablanca emphasizes cool-climate whites and light reds, seafood pairings, and a relaxed coastal vibe. Innovative venues like Casas del Bosque's casual pizza bar and Wine Box Hotel highlight creativity and accessibility. Mendoza, by contrast, focuses on bold reds (Malbec, Cabernet Franc), paired with steak and rich Dulce de Leche, set against the Andes backdrop. Tourism is highly developed, with polished winery hotels and upscale dining.

Storytelling: The Key to Success

Both regions excel at storytelling. Casablanca wineries highlight family histories with photo walls and bespoke tours, while Mendoza leverages its global reputation and dramatic landscapes. Experiences ranged from Zuccardi's polished but impersonal tours to Alandes' intimate conversations with winemakers. Memorable pairings, such as white blends with steak, reinforced the power of storytelling to create lasting impressions.

Regional Taglines

Casablanca markets itself as a place of tradition, landscapes, and ocean views, appealing to creatives and casual visitors. Mendoza's tagline, "land of sun and wine," captures its essence in ten words, reinforced by local crafts and cultural symbols. Both regions succeed by owning their identities and communicating them clearly.

Hawke's Bay's Identity

Hawke's Bay's current description—"New Zealand's food and wine country"—is too broad and risks dilution. Unlike Casablanca and Mendoza, which focus on unique strengths, Hawke's Bay attempts to highlight diversity, Art Deco, Māori culture, gastronomy, and history simultaneously. Without a clear, concise identity, it struggles to stand out globally.

Lessons for Hawke's Bay

Hawke's Bay can learn three key lessons:

1. **Define a clear identity** that captures its unique essence.
2. **Invest in staff training** so hosts become storytellers, not just servers.
3. **Foster collaboration** across wineries, ensuring unity between large and small producers, and work within wineries to have the customer experience supported by operations.

Conversely, South American regions could learn from Hawke's Bay's casual tasting culture, where walk-ins and simple platters are common. This accessibility contrasts with the expensive, reservation-only model prevalent in Chile and Argentina.

Conclusion

Casablanca and Mendoza demonstrate why they are Great Wine Capitals: clear identities, strong storytelling, and investment in people. Hawke's Bay has equal potential but must sharpen its focus and unify its message. Wine tourism is ultimately about passion, place, and people. By embracing these lessons, Hawke's Bay can secure its place among the world's leading wine destinations.