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Jancis Robinson

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## Despatch from the top of the wine world

Many months ago a young couple from the Bordeaux wine business, Christophe Derouet and Delphine Moussay-Derouet contacted me to say they were off round the world of wine. The home page for this enviably exciting vinous Jules Verne-ish odyssey is [www.homepage.mac.com/wineworldtour](http://www.homepage.mac.com/wineworldtour). Here is the first despatch they have sent us, written after visiting La Concepción wine operation in Bolivia which claims to be the highest in the world. I dare say [Donald Hess](#) over the border in Argentina would disagree but here is their account, written in very much better English than I could possibly muster in French. As you can see, they have been enjoying winter sunshine in the Andes.



### ***La Concepción - wines of altitude***

*What can be motivating and exciting enough for a vintner to decide to make wine in Bolivia, near the border with Chile and Argentina? A love story? Religious vision? Passion?*

*You are almost there, for the quest of Don Francisco and Sergio Prudencio, owners and winemakers of the vineyard La Concepción in the Tarija valley, is to change the definition of the world wine areas by establishing a new 'terroir' for the creation of a fine wine of international quality.*

*In some ways, La Concepción is a dream in progress; a veritable revolution in the wine world. The geography and topography of the place speak for themselves. Its vines, like these of the three other large wineries of the Tarija region, are located between the 20th and 23rd southern parallels (latitude). The parcels of land are therefore far away from the two likeliest best earth lanes for wine growing, which are situated between the 30th and 50th latitudes of the two hemispheres.*

*While most of the world vines usually do not grow at over 1,000 meters above sea level, the rows of this estate extend from 1,600 to 2,800 meters. In order to qualify the wines, in 1994 La Concepción created the concept of 'Vinos de Altura' (Wines of Altitude), to characterise the outstanding wines produced from the vineyard.*

*Although their winery is the highest known vineyard on the planet, our two counterparts remain easy going and friendly. Both seem to accomplish their work with the utmost humility, due in part to experience and in part to the fact that they have had to deal with hope, doubts and difficulties in the past years. They have come to terms with the fact that everything to do with winemaking can be jeopardised at any moment and therefore remain prudent. Sergio's surname was a clear sign of destiny...*

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*Despite the huge challenges which they face, they go about their job with true ambition. In their opinion, viticulture plays a very special role in agriculture, as its ultimate goal is not working the land to feed people, but to create a wine, which brings a smile to the face! The mission of these two hedonists – who are of a vibrant and demanding temperament – is to create one of the greatest pleasures of life and above all to share it with others.*

*The progress achieved at La Concepción has generated a lot of admiration. To accomplish this goal, they have learnt to be patient and to give time to time, throughout vintages. The 2 vintners introduce themselves as genuine people of the land: they share a particular complicity with the soil and the vines. They 'listen' to the vineyard and are constantly looking for sources of improvement and innovation. Choosing new parcels of land and selecting better adapted grape varieties and clones is part of their daily life. They are artists who get their inspiration from the surrounding nature and make a point of expressing and bettering it through the wines they make.*

*Meeting them has confirmed to us that, where possible, it is invaluable to travel to an estate in order to understand its philosophy. For those who want to appreciate the characteristics of a wine and take into account its unique peculiarities, the walls of an office or a living room are limitations to proper wine tasting. We are aware that having had the opportunity to meet the vintners in person and in situ has been a real privilege.*

*More than ever, this visit has re-affirmed one of the founding ideas of our tour of the wine regions of the world : that a wine is better tasted in its own environment. Ignoring this would be the same as trying to create a comic script, using the Andes and Machu-Pichu as a backdrop, without ever having been to Peru. Only Hergé's genius could cope with such a challenge: he created his Tintin and the Sun Temple without even going to the Incas' hidden city! Unless the talent and the creativity of the author were inspired by a very well documented and illustrated report, which in Hergé's case, apparently was the National Geographic Magazine.*

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*Throughout our trip, we have come into contact with vintners, like those here at La Concepción, from all over the globe and the exchange of ideas has encouraged us to think differently on subjects as varied as: the past of a vineyard; the influence of natural conditions on vines; the development of technological progress, the unification and globalisation of taste, but also, the potential for wine tourism in a region, the development of export markets and the importance of understanding the end consumer.*

*The people we have met have also changed preconceived ideas we had before we left. "We feel that we have received three different and opposing educations: one from our parents, one from our teachers and finally one from the world. What we have learnt through the latter reversed all the ideas of the former", said Montesquieu and this quotation effortlessly expresses our feelings.*

*It is the vintners themselves who have given us all the knowledge and advice we now possess. By allowing us to learn faster about wine making, and to learn, moreover, in a truer fashion, they are at the heart of our voyage of discovery. They have turned our Wine World Tour into a genuine wine school.*

*Don Francisco and Sergio Prudencio have also enabled us to understand the history of the Tarija people. As in all world wine regions, there is no lack of great men. At the end of the XVth century, the Spanish and Portugese pilgrims created the Bolivian viticulture. Augustinian monks and Jesuit priests chose to settle in this beautiful place to plant the first vines in the country. The intuition which led the Ancients to select this valley was spot on as today's scientific knowledge can prove. This border region between Argentina and Bolivia takes advantage of pure water, which comes from the Andes, and of a good, natural capacity for drainage. It also enjoys the year-round sunshine and a broad temperature range between night and day.*

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*Thanks to these outstanding conditions, this region has been producing quality wines for the past ten years, most of which are still relatively unknown on the international scene. La Concepción's flagship wine, Cepas de Altura, is at the top of these wines. The major advantage of this cuvée is its freshness: a characteristic of both the wine and the temperatures on the altiplano.*

*It is important to understand that the goal of viticulture of high altitude is to create a unique position in the wine world comparable to that of their nearest neighbours, Chile and Argentina. Its raison d'être is therefore to find a niche between these two new-world wine giants. This appealing notion has inspired many competitors and was adopted by several Chilean and Argentinian estates, which went about copying the idea in a less justified way but with more financial power...*

*With no big communication budget, La Concepción takes great care in following a clear and exemplary code of conduct to enhance the vineyard and to make wine. As vintages go by, this estate shows itself as a great defender of balance. It is in favour of harmony between alcoholic degrees and acidity.*

*It is difficult to believe that such latitude and altitude can make such great wines as the definition of a fine wine for La Concepción, takes into account neither concentration nor extraction. Here, the summits to reach are not those of colours and tannins as their wines express elegance, instead of density and power.*

*Of course, the Cepas de Altura wine gets its attributes from its vines. Instead of long speeches, Don Francisco and Sergio Prudencio allowed us to appreciate their 1994: an "old" vintage for the New World! What a great idea to show a 'terroir' by the ageing capacity of its wines! The complexity of the Cabernet we tasted and the softness of its tannins have convinced the amateurs that we are, that this wine has a great life span and that there are great wines at La Concepción waiting to be discovered.*