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Step aside, Malbec: Lemon magnate named ambassador to U.S.



Desirable second-floor office space at the Argentine Embassy in Dupont Circle will not stay empty for long. Last Thursday, President Mauricio Macri named businessman Fernando Oris de

Roa as his new ambassador to the United States. Mr. de Roa was a surprise choice; he is not well known in the United States, nor in Argentine diplomatic circles. (Looking for clues about the ambassador-designate, many have turned to a six-year old [Endeavor lecture](#), which now has over 2,000 views.)

Mr. Macri's first ambassador, Martín Lousteau, was also an unconventional choice. He had run against Mr. Macri's former chief of staff, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, in the race to succeed Mr. Macri as Buenos Aires mayor, and once served in Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's cabinet. His ambassadorship ended abruptly, in the lead-up to Mr. Macri's April White House visit, after Mr. Lousteau returned to Buenos Aires to run for a Lower House seat in the October midterms. His party finished a distant third, but he still won a seat in congress. His seat in Washington, however, has remained empty for six months. (The Palacio Bosch is also vacant. President Trump asked all politically appointed ambassadors to leave their posts by his January inauguration, and he never nominated a replacement for Noah Mamet.)

Analysts explained Mr. Lousteau's appointment as an effort by Mr. Macri to remove a rival from the playing field. That is not the case with Mr. de Roa – an ally whose appointment was announced in a tweet by Argentine kingmaker Marcos Peña, Mr. Macri's chief of staff. Rather, it appears Mr. Macri sought a more ideologically aligned figure. Mr. de Roa has worked for Mr. Rodríguez Larreta, in the city government as investment secretary, and the mayor reportedly [recommended him](#) to Mr. Macri.

The assignment would be a challenge for anyone without diplomatic training. But Mr. de Roa appears well positioned to address the most sensitive issues in the sometimes rocky bilateral relationship: trade disputes over farm exports, such as biodiesel. Mr. de Roa has spent 47 years in the agriculture and mining sectors. He began his career at Continental Grain – a Belgium multinational – for which he worked in the United States, Europe, Brazil and Argentina for 23 years. Before he left the trading company, he was responsible for all of its Latin America operations.

In particular, Mr. de Roa has experience in Argentina's lemon industry, which has been fighting tooth and nail for years for access to the U.S. market. (The issue came up during Mr. Macri's White House [visit](#): "I know about all the lemons. And believe it or not, the lemon business is a big, big business," Mr. Trump said at a joint press conference. "One of the reasons he's here is about lemons. And I'll tell him about North Korea, and he'll tell me about lemons.") In 1993, Mr. de Roa led the purchase of Tucumán-based lemon producer S.A. San Miguel. According to a Bloomberg profile, he transformed the company into the world's most profitable lemon and lemon products business. He has also served, from 2003 to 2011, as [CEO](#) of the fruit company Avex S.A., and later as [vice president](#) of Rio Negro-based Expofrut S.A. (Mr. de Roa also has mining interests, including in gold and lithium.)

Mr. de Roa, 65, who has three children and ten grandchildren, has experience in the United States. He received a Master's in public administration from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in the early 2000s. His business background might also help him navigate a U.S. administration led by billionaires, including the president, his education and commerce secretaries and his director of the Small Business Administration.

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