

ARGENTINA BEYOND MALBEC

An extensive tasting of the varied wines produced by this South American powerhouse reveals the country is no one-trick pony.

Nearly everything you hear or read these days on Argentinean wine revolves around the Malbec grape and how the French import has, in less than a decade, propelled this South American country onto the global stage of wine-producing nations.

For the Argentinean wine industry, Malbec's widespread popularity is a rags-to-riches story, one that's been told by the wine press and retailers for the last several years.

Malbec was brought to Argentina from France in the mid-19th century. Over time, it was planted in the country's seven wine regions, the most prominent of which is Mendoza. But for over a century, Malbec was just another red grape capable of quenching the thirst of a committed wine-drinking nation.



BY
MICHAEL
SCHACHNER
•
PHOTOS
JON VAN
GORDER



However, in the 1990s, spurred by the pioneering vision of Nicolás Catena of Bodega Catena Zapata, wineries began to embrace Malbec. They cut yields, planted at higher elevations to improve balance and acidity, began fermenting in stainless steel or small bins and started using better barrels for aging. This resulted in a new wave of bold, plush, fruity wines with clean character and international appeal.

Then, in 2001, just as the modern Malbec movement was taking shape, Argentina fell into a severe economic crisis highlighted by a devaluation of the peso. Argentines, battered by inflation, had difficulty affording wine, especially good wine. The same wine, however, was much cheaper for other countries to import.

Understanding that its target market had changed almost overnight, Argentina's wine industry began exporting with vigor. Malbec became the friendly, delicious red wine that consumers around the world fell in love with.

Since the latter part of the last decade, Malbec has been on fire. In the United States alone, annual growth in Malbec sales over the past five years has been as much as 40%, and it's not tailing off by much.

But what about other varietal wines? Is Argentina only about Malbec?

Malbec is the undisputed king of the castle and the driving force behind Argentina's wine industry. But Argentina, where wine has been made since the days of the conquistadors, produces other high-quality and good-value wines.

In recent blind tastings, examples of Cabernet Sauvignon, Bonarda, Merlot, Syrah, Tempranillo and even Pinot Noir scored highly.

Among white varieties, Torrontés—an aromatic white grape that many Argentinian wineries would like to have some of the success that Malbec enjoys—Chardonnay, Viognier and the occasional Sauvignon Blanc and blend also scored well. A handful of these wines rated very good to excellent. But overall, Argentina's hot, dry climate does not seem conducive to making world-class white wines with fresh, cutting acidity.

Here are snapshots of seven categories, spotlighting a top performer and a top value in each.

Bonarda

Before Malbec erupted onto the scene, Bonarda was Argentina's workhorse red variety. To some degree, it still is (more than 46,000 acres are planted throughout the country), filling Tetra Paks and beefing up basic red blends. But some Mendoza wineries are making good varietal Bonarda by following the same harvesting and winemaking methods applied to Malbec or Cabernet Sauvignon. If there's an issue with Bonarda, it's that it can be prone to rubbery aromas and limited complexity.

TOP SHELF:

89 Zuccardi 2010 Emma (Mendoza). This small-lot Bonarda (600 cases) is one of Argentina's better examples of the variety. Ripe but bushy smelling, with chocolate and vanilla aromas blending with blackberry and herbs. Feels fresh and juicy, with boysenberry, blackberry and chocolate flavors. Wine-sellers Ltd.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$32

TOP VALUE:

87 Nieto Senetiner 2010 Reserva Bonarda (Mendoza). Smoky and dark from the start, with char and earth aromas to go with blackberry. The palate delivers power and good texture, with bold blackberry and peppery flavors. Turns more rubbery as it opens, but holds onto its plum and chocolate virtues. Winebow.

abv: 13.5%

Price: \$15

Cabernet Sauvignon

Cabernet is the third most widely planted wine grape throughout Argentina, trailing only Malbec and Bonarda. Until recently, Argentina's varietal Cabs were fairly generic in style and undistinguished. But wineries, including Catena Zapata, Doña Paula, Mendel, Terrazas de Los Andes and Dominio del Plata (Susana Balbo), as well as winemakers like the American Paul Hobbs, a partner in Viña Cobos and consultant for Pascual Toso, are making good to excellent Cabernet in the moderate and high price ranges.



Cabernet is also proving to be a fine component of blended wines when matched with Malbec and either Merlot or Syrah.

"For Mendoza, it's about the altitude," says Hervé Birnie-Scott, estate director and chief winemaker with Terrazas de los Andes. "[An elevation of] 900 meters to 1,050 meters [2,952 to 3,444 feet] is ideal. The wines express fresh red fruits, spices and some minor green character. At lower levels, you lose freshness, and the grapes can cook in warmer years."

TOP SHELF:

89 Marchiori & Barraud 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (Mendoza). Concentrated and ripe, with prune, blackberry, coconut and other dense aromas. Feels jammy, with meaty tannins and flavors of blackberry, raisin, cassis and chocolate. The Artisan Collection.
abv: 14.8% Price: \$26

TOP VALUE:

89 Maipe 2010 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Mendoza). A smooth Cab with cola,

vanilla, black cherry and sweet berry aromas. Shows body and build, with wild berry flavors bolstered by ample oak yielding related spice and chocolate. Dark, spicy and showing a hint of herbs on the finish. Kyselá Père et Fils.
abv: 14% Price: \$16

Syrah

Syrah is one of the more prolific red grapes in the wine world; it will grow in almost any place it's planted. In the case of Laura Cateña's Luca Laborde Double Select, grapes are grown on overhead *parrals* (a pergola-like system) in a vineyard planted in 1972 with cuttings from Côte-Rôtie in France's Rhône Valley. The Laborde vineyard sits at 3,500 feet above sea level, so the nights are cool, creating fresh aromas and good acidity in the fruit. Syrah is also emerging as a key component in many top Argentinean blends.

TOP SHELF:

90 Luca 2010 Laborde Double Select Syrah (Uco Valley). Pretty aromatics include balsam wood, blackberry and blueberry. The palate is lush but structured, with bullish berry, chocolate and

creamy oak flavors. Minty, spicy, toasty and long on the finish. Vine Connections.

abv: 13.9% Price: \$25

TOP VALUE:

87 Trapiche 2009 Oak Cask Syrah (Mendoza). Intense for a \$10 varietal, with charred aromas on top of ripe berry fruit. The palate is thick and full, with clamping tannins and flavors of lemony oak, plum and blackberry. Vanilla and mocha notes work the finish. Frederick Wildman & Sons, Ltd. **Best Buy.**
abv: 14% Price: \$10

Miscellaneous Reds

Five years ago, there was barely an Argentinean Pinot Noir worth drinking, let alone buying. Today, the only Argentinean Pinots to rate highly have come from a pair of ancient vineyards in the Río Negro Valley in Patagonia.

The winery making these offerings is Bodega Chacra, founded by Piero Incisa della Rochetta, an Italian *bon vivant* whose family owns Sassicaia in Tuscany. Incisa's wines are elegant, sturdy, firm in acidity and floral. They are not blockbusters made in a New World style, and vintage variation is severe.

As for Tempranillo, there are enough Argentinean grape farmers with Spanish roots to keep this Iberian variety going. José Manuel Ortega, chairman of O. Fournier, says the vineyards used for his Urban Uco Tempranillo sit at 3,600 feet or higher, and most were planted at least 50 years ago.

"Tempranillo from the Uco Valley can be compared to a mixture of Toro and Ribera del Duero in Spain," says Ortega. "But I think Uco provides an extra level of flavor intensity and exceptional color," not that Toro or Ribera have ever lacked color or intensity.

TOP SHELF:

91 Bodega Chacra 2009 Cincuenta y Cinco Pinot Noir (Río Negro). A smooth operator with aromas of cotton candy, caramel and baked plum. The palate is exceedingly lush yet refined, while the flavor profile entails roasted berry fruit and herbs. Finishes with easy notes of caramel and toast. Kobrand.
abv: 14.5% Price: \$120

TOP VALUE:

89 O. Fournier 2010 Urban Uco Tempranillo (Uco Valley). A huge success, given the price. Smooth on the bouquet, with generous berry aromas. Ripe and balanced, with bright berry and chocolaty flavors. Solid on the finish, with lasting plum and berry notes. Fine Estates from Spain. **Best Buy.**
abv: 14% Price: \$11

