MORE THAN MALBEC: ARGENTINA'S EXPERIENTIAL EVOLUTION



Our tastings show that Argentina is no longer only a malbec country.

Bring on the asado. Dip the chorizo in the chimichurri sauce. Take a bite of an empanada. And then have a swig of what the best Argentine wines have to offer to the world of wine and gastronomy today. We found 100s of terrific wines in this report to take you to a uniquely Argentine wine experience and back.

This year we rated around 1,800 wines and it was one of our best tastings yet for this South American vinous powerhouse. With some of the finest terroirs being discovered, blessed by a few consecutively invigorating vintages, Argentina showed wall-to-wall excellence this year with its fast-advancing winemaking and terrific value that few countries can emulate. Not many countries have trodden this far down the path of great wine in such a short time.

Last year, our Wine of the Year was awarded to a 100-pointer from Rio Negro of Patagonia, the Chacra Patagonia Treinta y Dos 2018, not even a malbec, but a pinot noir. We realize this must have meant a lot for Patagonia and Argentina, yet the message was crystal clear: Argentina is ready to blow you away with great wines that are off the charts, and they are not just malbecs or the various malbec blends that deserve buying, drinking and collecting.

We are sad about not being able to go to Argentina this year because of the pandemic, so we tasted everything in our office in Hong Kong. In addition, we did few dozen Zoom calls with the winemakers/owners behind some of these great bottles. It was an awesome experience.

Argentina has been blessed with four successful vintages – 2017, 2018 2019 and 2020.We feel that the country has reached a new summit that illustrates an incredible precision in winemaking with hundreds of outstanding quality wines at great prices and dozens of fantastic vineyard-specific wines that can compete with the best in the world. These wines are among the finest to date from Argentina, showing a breakaway from the manipulated recipe winemaking for which Argentina was known in the past. Jammy wines are dying out. Long live vibrancy, balance and flavor with precise winemaking that reveals place with nuance!



Associate editor Zekun Shuai and James Suckling enjoy a tasting trip to Argentina in 2020.

Top malbecs underscore equilibrium and refinement

Among nearly 1,800 wines reviewed for this report, 105 were scored 95 and above, representing 5.9 percent of the wines reviewed. Although no wine scored 100 points this year, our top wines from the country feature six malbecs and one chardonnay that scored 99 points. They come from prominent producers like Catena Zapata, Viña Cobos, Zuccardi and Susana Balbo. They have one thing in common: consistency of quality and their ability to deliver excellent to great wines at almost every price point.

No wines better illustrated how drinkability has enhanced top Argentine malbecs' quality and how terroir plays a role in the nuances among different single-parcel bottlings than the highly collectible bottles from Catena Zapata, in the prestigious Adrianna Vineyard in Uco's Gualtallary. Catena Zapata Malbec Mendoza Adrianna Vineyard Fortuna Terrae 2019, from a five-hectare parcel of deep loam soils rich in limestone with an overlay of white stones, shows the fragrant, tactile allures from malbec, which is full, tense, seamless but not chunky. Equally textured, Catena Zapata Malbec Mendoza Adrianna Vineyard Mundus Bacillus Terrae 2019 is a different story from the 1,400-meter calcareous soil rich in marine deposits and microorganism, which probably explains the savory, mossy and ethereal characters in the wine. The whole cluster fermentation also enhanced these wines' floral, herbal, and peppery character, rendering a very intellectual aspect to the experience.

"For the last three years, we have reduced maceration and increased whole cluster fermentation," said Alejandro Vigil, the talented and insightful head winemaker behind Catena Zapata, who also runs his project El Enemigo with Adrianna Catena of Catena family. His approach to malbec renders a pinot-like sensibility and texture to malbec.

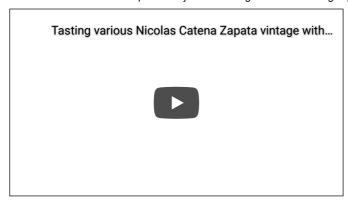
But this doesn't mean the wines lack intensity. While the top Argentine malbecs show incredible balance, class, and harmony, their structure and concentration dialed into the center-palate fruit will keep the wine youthful for a long time. It is the natural, concentrated flavor in the grape that unties the winemakers' hands so they can keep polishing, seeking finesse and layers while punctuating texture, freshness and drinkability, but rarely heftiness.

It's the same at Paul Hobbs's Viña Cobos. The famous global enologist from California co-owns Cobos and it is one of these wineries where winemaker Andres Vignoni did not dwell on the impressively hedonistic richness of their wines and completed it with some intellectual elements. Viña Cobos Malbec Los Arboles Valle de Uco Chañares Estate 2018 and Viña Cobos Malbec Mendoza Cobos 2018 are among the best Argentina offered in 2018, considered a "strong" year by Andres and his peers.

"What we underline is that while we have the concentration and definition of the wine, we try to keep the acidity and the lift. So, we are trying to make a little linear wine, not overpowering wines, and at the same time, with layers and length, making them more approachable with a focus on finesse. We are trying to make world-class wines," said Vignoni.



James takes a Zoom call with the maker of the 2020 Wine of the Year to taste the wine and discuss how Bodega Chacra expresses its terroir in Argentina Patagonia region so well.



Watch James and Laura Catena, managing director of Catena Zapata, discuss the new release from the 2017 vintage, which struck James as the best they've ever made.

"Now, we pay more attention to bunch distribution. We pick a little bit earlier, and we started picking the red during the night as well. In the cellar, we started coming back to how this philosophy of the Bourgogne approach can reach malbec, that the extraction was a little bit softer, but maceration was a little bit longer. Also, the toast of our French oak decreased a little bit, too."

Of course, vintages have framed what winemakers can do and what they'd better not do. After a series of wet and challenging vintages, winemakers finally were able to take a breath as Argentina has embraced four consecutively successful vintages: 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, and made some of the most soulful and balanced wines we have tasted from the country. But many believe the wet vintages offered a good lesson. After all, Mendoza is not known for its damp climate.

"Remember 2014, 2015, and 2016 were complicated, but they didn't kill us and taught us a lot. 2017, 2018 and 2019 were fantastic vintages. 2020 is shaping up to be another fantastic vintage, too," said Santiago Achaval of Matervini, who founded the winery in 2010 after his success with the prestigious Bodega Achaval Ferrer.

Catena Zapata's Laura Catena points out that in the very cool parts of Uco, it is like farming malbec in Burgundy, which is why the very warm 2017 could turn the tables.

"Being in some warmer places could be nice when coupled with low yields, which means, in good places, 2017 was fantastic, but in bad places, it was too hot, and the frost was a problem. So, 2017 was a vintage that consistent producers made outstanding wines, but the average was not as good, which was similar to 2016, but for a different reason because of the rain," commented Laura.

"2016 and 2017 were the two smallest crops in 50 years, one after the other, 2016 was cold and wet, 2017 was warm and dry," said Sebastian Zuccardi of Zuccardi winery. "2013, 2018, and 2019 are classic, cool harvests; 2017, 2020 are warmer harvests; 2014, 2015, and 2016 are wetter vintages."

Winemakers always speak very highly of the 2019 vintage. "My rank of preference would be 2019, 2018, and then 2020. 2019 shows more equilibrium, which might be slightly better than 2018, a year with many concentrated wines. 2020 was good, but it was a hot vintage," said Trapiche's head winemaker Daniel Pi.

It was also interesting to see how 2017s are richer and denser than the 2018s and 2019s, not only because it was a riper year with a smaller crop, but also it looks like a transitional year for many wineries from the remnants of old-school, monolithic and concentrated wines to a more balanced and transparent style, as many winemakers we spoke with declared that they want to make some linear wines.

There is a general trend of top Argentinian wines turning to a fresher, more medium-bodied, linear mode, punctuating refinement and equilibrium. The best also delivered a seamless tension and texture, almost as tender and tightened as baby skin. It is a restrained swing back to more intellectual, even academic aesthetics rather than looking purely for rich, brooding and hedonistic qualities. And people are starting to be aware that they might need to harvest earlier to shy away from over-ripeness so they could find some freshness and crunchiness in the wine.



Añade un comentario...

Burgundy grapes shine through

While there is a Burgundy approach to recalibrate on the finest malbecs seeking texture, layers, and transparency, Burgundy grapes, however, in Argentina are seriously taking hold too.

Catena Zapata Chardonnay Mendoza Adrianna Vineyard White Bones 2019, repeatedly, is the epitome of Argentina's best chardonnays from a 2.5-hectare block at 1450 meters with its focused perfumes underlined by beautiful ripeness and complexity built on a taut, minerally transparent texture that extends with an almost endless finish, something probably only the top Grand Cru Chablis aim to achieve. As with other single-parcel bottlings from the revered Adrianna Vineyard, only 6,000 bottles were made from this small parcel rich in calcareous deposits of limestone and marine fossils. It now ranks with the best chardonnays in the world including the best of Burgundy.

However, Rome was not built in one day. As winemaker Alejandro Vigil said, it is crucial to research the terroirs, and for chardonnay, it has been 25 years ever since they started finding the best parcel for the grape.

"It took us some 20 years to figure out about pinot noir, too, which is much longer than malbec," said Laura Catena, who also made some beautiful pinot noirs from Mendoza with her Domaine Nico. "The fact that pinot noir reflects places so clearly in Mendoza is amazing."

Burgundy grapes in Argentina are genuinely the rising stars when the best terroirs are allocated. Some top producers like Chacra, Domaine Nico, El Enemigo, Bemberg, Matias Riccitelli, and Vina Cobos make the best out of the bunch from either Mendoza or Patagonia, sending out the message that pinot noir and chardonnay are serious contenders for the top ranks of Argentine wine, making great wines with unique characters. Many of the pinot noirs from Rio Negro show ethereal nuances and refinement, while Mendoza insinuates inner richness through layers, elegance, and immense drinkability. (Also see our recent curated selection of 11 Great Value Argentine pinot noirs under \$40)

"We are not copying anyone. Instead, we are inspired by other people, like Burgundy, and we created something completely new, which is why it's unique," said Piero Incisa della Rocchetta of Chacra in Rio Negro of Patagonia, an appellation now regarded as one of the most desired lands for pinot noir in Argentina, and the possibility for other grapes.

Chacra makes some of the most intellectually appealing and thought-provoking pinot noirs throughout Argentina. And they have a unique character and vibe. Perhaps it's the incredible ecosystem Incisa della Rocchetta has created in his small patch in Patagonia. We have been there and the biodynamically farmed land has a unique energy and pureness just like the wines. You can feel it walking in the vineyards.

That might have something to do with their whole-cluster fermentation in their broad and thick-walled cement vessels and regime of used oak barrels, and above all, biodynamic farming works well for their ungrafted old vines, without which Incisa della Rocchetta believes the wines might not have such purity, transparency, energy, and crunchiness. His collaborative project on chardonnay with Burgundy winemaker Jean-Marc Roulot is equally remarkable and intellectual, producing wine with natural purity, texture, class, and verve. This is the real deal for artisanal, handmade chardonnay.

"I also think as we pick earlier, which could be a bit dangerous as you might have some green or tannic wine, but for us, the climatic conditions are helpful as the sunlight is very intense. Our vineyard is old and most importantly ungrafted, which is why I think picking early does not give us a hard and green wine, but instead, captures the energy that it is still pushing up the sap," said Incisa della Rocchetta, before reiterating that nothing he said was utterly true but more of a collection of observations and experience – possibly the only truth in winemaking.



Las Compuertas was the first region in Argentina to be officially recognized as an appellation in 1993.

ZUCCARDI MALBEC VALLE DE UCO PARAJE ALTAMIRA FINCA PIEDRA INFINITA 2018

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2018 Score 99

Aromas of crushed fruit with mushrooms, dried flowers, ash, charcoal, iodine and bark, following through to a full-bodied palate with superb depth of fruit and layers of polished, fine tannins. Extremely long and seamless. A beauty by all accounts. Complex. Juicy. Supple. Better after 2023, when it will give you all it has stored up in goodness, character and uniqueness.

CATENA ZAPATA MALBEC MENDOZA ADRIANNA VINEYARD RIVER STONES 2019

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2019 Score 98

So bright and aromatic with flowers and blackberries, as well as some black olives. Full-bodied with lots of tannins, yet they are so fine and integrated and spread across the palate. This is all whole-cluster fermentation and 18 months in large oak casks. Needs about four or five years to come together.

CHACRA PINOT NOIR PATAGONIA CINCUENTA Y CINCO 2020

Country Argentina **Region** Patagonia **Vintage** 2020 Score 98

Extremely perfumed and beautiful with ripe strawberries and citrus fruit, as well as aromatic flowers. Full-bodied with plenty of fruit and creamy, chewy tannins that are polished and very impressive. Long and linear. One of the best of this bottling. Drink after 2023, but already a

gorgeous bottle.

CHACRA PINOT NOIR PATAGONIA TREINTA Y DOS 2019

Country Argentina
Region Patagonia
Vintage 2019

Score

98

Extremely perfumed with rose-petal, violet, rose-stem and sweet-strawberry aromas that follow through to a full-bodied palate with tight, juicy tannins that are strong and intense. A very structured, young, top pinot from here. Needs three to four years to soften. Try after 2024.

MATERVINI MALBEC MENDOZA EL CHALLAO-LAS HERAS PIEDRAS VIEJAS 2019

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2019 Score

98

Deep-purple color and beautiful concentration with super depth of fruit. Linear and compressed palate of fine tannins with blackberry and raspberry flavors. Black licorice, too. Cloves. It's tight and layered and every so compressed. Mineral and lightly salted character in the aftertaste. Solid tannins but fine-grained. Better after 2025, but already very impressive.

TERRAZAS DE LOS ANDES MALBEC LOS CHACAYES VALLE DE UCO LICAN PARCEL N 12S 2018

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2018 Score

98

Bramble fruit, blackcurrants, cassis, pine needles, wild herbs, anise, tar and tobacco on the nose. It's full-bodied with firm, finely knit tannins framing tight, powerful layers of forest fruit and herbs. Long and brimming with energy. Try from 2024.

BODEGA MENDEL MALBEC LUJÁN DE CUYO SINGLE VINEYARD 2019

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2019 Score 97

Blueberry, blackberry and lavender with some cocoa and sandalwood. It's medium-to full-bodied with firm tannins and a juicy finish. Very linear and solid with chewy, polished tannins that grow across the palate. Long and persistent. Needs at least three or four years to soften. Drink after 2023.

CATENA ZAPATA CHARDONNAY MENDOZA ADRIANNA VINEYARD WHITE STONES 2019

Country Argentina
Region Mendoza
Vintage 2019

Score 97

A very fresh, bright white with sliced apple, pear and light cream. Full-bodied with a very pretty texture. Mineral, chalk and lightly salty mineral undertones. Intense finish. Really takes off. Drink now or hold.

CATENA ZAPATA MALBEC MENDOZA ADRIANNA VINEYARD MUNDUS BACILLUS TERRAE 2019

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2019 Score 97

Lots of black fruit with black truffles and dried flowers. Moss and earth, too. Full-bodied and earthy on the palate with blackberry and black earth. Firm, tight finish with juicy fruit at the end. Needs three or four years to open. Drink after 2024.

CHACRA CHARDONNAY PATAGONIA 2020

Country Argentina
Region Patagonia
Vintage 2020

Score 97

There's real direction and clarity to this white with sliced dried apples, crushed stones and minerals on the nose, as well as hints of biscuit and praline. Some honeysuckle and lemon-grass undertones, too. It's full-bodied, yet very tight and lively with a line of fresh acidity running through the palate, providing energy and depth. From the owner of Chacra and Burgundy's Jean-Marc Roulot. Drinkable now, but much better in three to four years. Try after 2023.

EL ENEMIGO MENDOZA GRAN ENEMIGO 2017

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2017 Score 97

blackberry, bitter chocolate, violets, tar and tobacco. Ultra fine tannins, interwoven with silky and seamless layers of dark berries. So elegant and fine. Long. Serious and focused with fantastic depth and structure. Drink or hold.

A refined, medium-to full-bodied red with aromas of

EL ENEMIGO MENDOZA GRAN ENEMIGO GUALTALLARY SINGLE VINEYARD 2017

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2017

Score 97

Pretty aromas of plum, blueberry, rose hip, lavender, sandalwood and oyster shell. It's medium-to full-bodied with silky, seamless tannins. So pure and elegant with gorgeous layers of cool blue fruit. Saline and coffee notes, too. Long and evolving. Drink or hold.

CATENA ZAPATA CABERNET SAUVIGNON MENDOZA ANGELICA ZAPATA ALTA 2017

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2017

Score 95

This is very perfumed and floral with rose-petal character to the subtle currants. Hints of spices and herbs. Fullbodied with firm, chewy tannins that are polished and intense. So flavorful, yet it remains sophisticated and beautiful. Fro, Agrelo and the center of the Uco Valley. Shows age. Drink or hold.

CATENA ZAPATA MALBEC MENDOZA ANGELICA ZAPATA ALTA 2017

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2017

Score 95

This is showing some nice age now with tight, dense fruit and fine, dusty tannins. It offers berry, chocolate and hazelnut flavors. Subtle complexity. Savory finish. From Agrelo, Gualtallary and Altamira. Drinking beautifully now.

CATENA ZAPATA MALBEC MENDOZA D.V. CATENA HISTORICO 2019

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2019

Score 95

Aromas of stewed plum, baked blueberry, mocha, coconut and concrete. It's full-bodied with firm, creamy tannins. Plush and polished with a flavorful, rounded finish. This is extremely polished and rather flamboyant. Made partially in concrete eggs. Drink or hold.

CHACRA PINOT NOIR PATAGONIA LUNITA 2020

Country Argentina Region Patagonia Vintage 2020

Score 95

Ripe strawberries with hints of citrus and dried flowers, as well as stones, following through to a full body with tight, firm tannins that make the wine rather reserved on the palate. Tannins come out at the end. Savory. Drink or hold.

CHACRA PINOT NOIR PATAGONIA SIN AZUFRE 2020

Country Argentina Region Patagonia Vintage 2020

Score 95

Aromas of freshly sliced mushrooms with blackberries. black cherries and some ripe strawberries. Medium to full body with dark fruit and chewy tannins. More structured in past vintages. Rather chewy. No sulfur added here. Drink or hold.

CUVELIER LOS ANDES VALLE DE UCO GRAND VIN 2018

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2018

Score 95

This is really classy with deep blackberry, violet and blueberry aromas and flavors. It's full-bodied and super refined with integrated tannins that spread across the palate. So polished and refined. 69% malbec, 19% cabernet sauvignon, 5% petit verdot, 4% merlot and 3% syrah. Goes on for minutes. Drink or hold.

CUVELIER LOS ANDES VALLE DE UCO GRAND VIN 2017

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza Vintage 2017

Score

A beautiful red with a solid core of blackberry, blueberry and blackcurrant. Some dark chocolate and toasted oak, 95 too. It's full-bodied, yet compact and tight. Sold and very structured. Lots of white pepper and cloves at the end. 74% malbec, 15% cabernet sauvignon, 5% merlot and 6% petit verdot. Very attractive now, but needs at least

another two or three years to soften.

CATENA ZAPATA MENDOZA D.V. CATENA MALBEC-MALBEC 2018

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2018

Score 94

Ripe-plum, blueberry, lavender, sandalwood and stone aromas. It's full-bodied with rounded tannins and a creamy, velvety texture. So smooth and supple with layers of pure blue fruit and minerals. Seamless. Drink now or hold

CHACRA CHARDONNAY PATAGONIA MAINOUÉ 2020

Country Argentina Region Patagonia Vintage 2020

Score

94

Very flinty and minerally on the nose with some aniseed and sliced green-apple aromas that follow through to a medium-to full-bodied palate with a creamy texture and pretty apple, citrus and nougat flavors. Creamy and long. Subtle and fine. From the owner of Chacra and Burgundy's Jean-Marc Roulot. Very drinkable now, but will improve.

CHACRA MALBEC PATAGONIA ROKA 2020

Country Argentina Region Patagonia Vintage 2020

Score

94

So much purple fruit and flowers on the nose here, as well as some green-stem aromas, following through to a full body with linear tannins that make the wine tight and focused. Some black-olive and tar undertones to this. New malbec from here with a different, more refined take on malbec Better after 2022

CLOS DE LOS SIETE VALLE DE UCO BY MICHEL ROLLAND 2018

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2018

Score 94

Ripe plum, black cherry, lavender and cocoa on the nose. It's medium-to full-bodied with firm, creamy tannins. Polished and rounded with a plush, deep core of dark fruit. Lingering crushed-hazelnut notes on a long, concentrated finish. Drink or hold.

CUVELIER LOS ANDES MALBEC VALLE DE UCO GRAND MALBEC 2017

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2017

Score 94 Dark berries with violets and cloves on the nose. Fullbodied with chewy tannins and a rich, juicy palate. Lots of depth to this. Needs another year or two to soften. Try after 2022.

DOMAINE BOUSQUET GUALTALLARY VALLE DE UCO AMERI RED BLEND 2019

Score

94

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza Vintage 2019

Plum, blueberry, sage and earthy notes on the nose with some spices, too. It's full-bodied with chewy yet polished tannins. Juicy with vivid acidity and some structure. Flavorful finish with attractive length. From organically grown grapes. Vegan. Try after 2023.

DOMAINE NICO PINOT NOIR VALLE DE UCO SOEUR ET FRERES GRAND PÈRE 2019

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2019

Score 94 Aromas of dried violets, currants, sour cherries, porcini mushrooms, cocoa and lemon zest. It's full-bodied with tight, fine-grained tannins framing chewy layers of spiced, dried and ripe fruit. This needs time to open and soften. More fruit-forward than the other four bottlings this year. Try after 2024.

CATENA MALBEC LUNLUNTA OLD VINES 2019

Country Argentina Score
Region Mendoza 93
Vintage 2019

This is extremely perfumed with blackberry and blueberry aromas with some floral and cedar undertones. It's full-bodied, but shows reserve and focus, with fine tannins. Fresh and bright. Integrated and delicious. Drink or hold.

CATENA ZAPATA CABERNET MALBEC MENDOZA D.V. CATENA 2019

Country Argentina
Region Mendoza
Vintage 2019

Score 93

Black plums, blackcurrants, violets, green herbs and chocolate on the nose. It's medium-to full-bodied with firm, polished tannins and a creamy, caressing texture. Ripe and flavorful. Drink or hold.

CATENA ZAPATA CABERNET MENDOZA D.V. CATENA CABERNET HISTORICO 2019

Country Argentina Region Mendoza Vintage 2019 Score 93

Blackberry, blueberry and herbal undertones. It's mediumto full-bodied with firm tannins. Fleshy texture on the palate. Savory and balanced with a flavorful finish. Try after 2023.

CHACRA PINOT NOIR PATAGONIA BARDA 2020

Country Argentina Region Patagonia Vintage 2020 Score 93

Plenty of orange peel and pomegranate to the dark strawberry and raspberry aromas. Medium-bodied with a solid core of fruit and fine tannins, which come together nicely and energetically at the finish. Drink and enjoy.

CLOS DE LOS SIETE ARGENTINA BY MICHEL ROLLAND 2018

Country Argentina
Region Argentina
Vintage 2018

Score 93

Aromas of blueberries, lavender, crushed stones and cocoa. It's medium-to full-bodied with firm, powdery tannins carrying pretty, bright layers of blue fruit. Creamy, caressing and refined. Drink or hold.

CORAZÓN DEL SOL MALBEC LOS CHACAYES VALLE DE UCO REVANA VINEYARD GRAN RESERVA 2017

Country Argentina
Region Mendoza
Vintage 2017

Score 93

Ripe plum, blueberry, tar and mocha on the nose. It's medium-to full-bodied with velvety tannins and a fleshy, plush palate. Well rounded, polished and caressing. Delicious now. But a year or two more will bring it even more in line.

CRUZ ALTA MENDOZA CHAIRMAN'S BLEND 2017

Country Argentina **Region** Mendoza **Vintage** 2017 Score 93

Blueberry, blackberry and herbal notes. Medium-to full-bodied with firm tannins. Racy and juicy. Flavorful finish with power and length. 50% cabernet sauvignon, 20% malbec, 10% cabernet franc, 10% merlot and 10% petit verdot. Needs time to come around. Try after 2024.