

MALBEC, THE ICON WINE OF ARGENTINA

The red grape Malbec, the variety most associated with Argentina, is rapidly gaining in both profile and popularity. But what's the lure of this dark variety? And why does it do so well in Argentina? Daniel López Roca has some answers.

Argentina, although considered a New World wine country, has a solid winemaking past, which began during the Spanish empire. The story goes that at the end of 1556, Father Juan Cidrón came from Chile to Santiago del Estero Province, in the central north region of the country. He brought grape stocks, becoming Argentina's first grape grower. Missionaries planted vines in the provinces of San Juan and Mendoza and used them to make wine for their masses.

The complex varietal history of Argentina started in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1854 an agricultural school called Quinta Normal de Agricultura began in Mendoza, founded to create agricultural technicians and develop new techniques. A French professor and agronomist who lived in Chile, Michel Aime Pouquet, became its director. In 1868, by order of Mendoza's visionary governor Tiburcio Benegas, he brought several varieties like Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay from France. In 1883, the governor planted 250 hectares of first class vineyards in Mendoza and constructed a model winery called El Trapiche. The other pioneer was Eugenio Bustos, who by 1880 had more than 1000 hectares planted in La Consulta. A grandson of Tiburcio Benegas, Federico Benegas Lynch, has his own winery and old vineyards in Mendoza. As European immigrants arrived, they planted the varieties from their native countries. In 1884, large scale irrigation projects were developed and the Mendoza Rive reservoir was put into operation, in Luján of Cuyo. In 1885 the railroad arrived, boosting Cuyo's economy.

During these early years, grape growers blended different varieties under the generic name 'French grapes'. As varieties became known for their better quality, they were individualised and winemakers came to prefer Malbec.

A grape finds its home

The first Malbec grapes were planted in Argentina according to an ancient European tradition: six plants of Malbec to one of white Semillon. In this way a blend was created that, according to the old grape growers, balanced the great concentrated colour of Malbec and softened the noticeably harsh tannins.

But Malbec expressed itself differently in Argentina than it had in its native France. Argentina's dry climate, its pure waters of melted snow, its lack of rain and the altitudes of 600 to 1000 metres

above sea level help to produce healthy and generous clusters. Malbec found in Argentina its ideal terroir, permitting full expression of its better qualities and often surpassing its European relatives.

Malbec had been declining in popularity in France, the last kick being the disastrous frosts of 1956. The variety was almost wiped out and the vineyards re-planted with other, more fashionable varieties. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, Malbec was the most widely planted grape in Argentina.

In the 1970s Argentina had more than 50,000 hectares of pre-Phylloxera Malbec, distributed mainly in the regions of La Consulta, Luján de Cuyo and Medrano province of Mendoza. But in the 1980s, Argentina's grape producers, seeking better yields for the whites consumed in those years, started a vine pull. This left only 4,000 hectares of Malbec in production. High quality vineyards, many with old vines, were destroyed, to be replanted with high yield, but poor quality varieties, like Cereza Grande.

Fortunately, all this began to change in the 1990s. With the drastic fall of table wine consumption and increases in 'vino fino', plantations of Malbec surged. At the moment, the cultivated surface of this variety is the biggest in the world: 22,462 hectares, producing wonderful rich, complex, inky wines with smooth tannins and full ripeness. This is quite different from what the French knew as Malbec.

The ecosystem of Mendoza is paradise for Malbec. The variety is also planted in Patagonia, mainly in the promising terroir of the Alto Valle of the Río Negro and the new region of San Patricio del



Chañar in Neuquen. The deep clay and stone soils, with their excellent drainage, are particularly suitable for this varietal, as is the sunny climate, since it favours the development of robust tannins and intense colour.

Today Malbec is cultivated in all wine regions, throughout the Andes. In the northwest province of Salta, which sits between 1,750 to 2,300 metres above sea level, Malbec is grown at Cafayate, Yacochuya, La Viña and San Carlos, where it yields a peppery character. Unique expressions of Malbec are also found at Chilecito, in La Rioja province, and the valleys of Tulum, Ullum, Zonda and El Pedernal, in San Juan.

How Malbec is expressed

Malbec needs plenty of sunlight and heat. It does well in well-irrigated and well-drained soils, but may produce uneven crops in bad years. It is susceptible to rot in cool, wet conditions and is sensitive to frost. In Argentina, Malbec ripens properly every year. Argentine Malbec can be grouped into four categories: young Malbec like Trapiche, which offers floral notes such as violet, with a gentle aftertaste. There is also Malbec rosé like Alta Vista. The third category is Malbec with three or four months of wood maturation. Wines like Chakana and Norton are full bodied, with lots of red fruit characters, plus soft tannins.

Top Malbec have not less than 10 months in oak. They normally come from old vines and age well. Cadus is a good example.

Working with Malbec

One present trend is to make Malbec using grapes from different places and clones, blending the wines to give them a unique complexity. This is what Nicolas Catena is doing at his 'Maya temple' winery. They are growing seven different clones to make seven different Malbecs that can be blended at will.

The use of old vine, single vineyards is another trend, developed by Alta Vista, which presented three single vineyard Malbec from their Temis, Alizarine, and Serenade vineyards.

Bodega Weinert, owned by Bernardo Weinert, produces a fine example of an old fashioned Malbec, made in old oak vats. First made in 1977, and rarely since, the Malbec Estrella offers the best example of Malbec's ageing potential in a style that is seldom seen elsewhere.

Today, almost every winery has its own Malbec. Not all of them have achieved greatness, as some are made with excessive wood. But, as Robert Parker said, "By the year 2015, the greatness of Argentinean wines made from the Malbec grape will be understood as a given... [its] place in the pantheon of noble wines will be guaranteed". ■

CAHORS IS MALBEC, MALBEC IS CAHORS.

That is, in short, the new marketing strategy of the French appellation of Cahors. 'Cahors is Malbec' makes perfect sense, because Malbec has been at the heart of the region's identity for centuries. By law, 70% of any blend of Cahors must be Malbec. In reality, almost all Cahors contain 85-100% Malbec. Cahors intend to remain the birth place and capital of Malbec, and the reference in terms of quality, with Malbec from Cahors being strongly marked by the region's soil and climate. Although only 4,000 of the 40,000 hectares of vineyard that were planted here in the 19th century are still being cultivated, Cahors still accounts for 20% of global Malbec production. In April 2008, Cahors will organise the first international Malbec symposium. At that time, Cahors and the village of Lujan de Cuyo in Argentina will sign a friendship pact.



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1 Top export markets January to June 2007

Rank	Export market	FOB '000 \$ US	Change % ¹⁾	'000 Litres	Change %
1	United States	54.339	39.1%	28,651	100.1%
2	Canada	18.179	39.8%	10,432	-4.7%
3	United Kingdom	18.149	15.2%	9,970	16.1%
4	Brazil	15.307	31.7%	6,502	23.3%
5	Russia	14.596	106.0%	40,174	115.1%
6	Netherlands	12.620	21.6%	5,552	9.3%
7	Denmark	8.065	-6.0%	3,768	-14.8%
8	Paraguay	6.880	10.9%	11,985	-0.8%
9	Germany	5.524	-0.1%	3,731	3.6%
10	Mexico	4.926	31.3%	2,248	-10.8%
	Others	54.745	17.1%	29,037	-6.6%
	Total	213.334	27.2%	152,055	30.4%

2 Largest exporters January to June 2007

Rank	Producer	\$ US	Litres	Price ¹⁾	Brand
1	Penaflo	24.247	25,206	0.96	Trapiche
2	Esmeralda	17.701	6,177	2.87	Cantena Zapata
3	Trivento	10.984	5,928	1.85	Trivento
4	Chandon	8.968	1,815	4.94	Chandon, Terrazas
5	La Agricola	8.946	4,665	1.92	Zuccardi
6	Norton	8.822	2,239	3.94	Norton
7	BVA	6.891	3,358	2.05	Santa Ana, Michel Torino
8	Flichman	6.328	2,665	2.37	Finca Flichman
9	RPB	5.976	11,570	0.52	Baggio
10	Royal Mount	5.225	21,057	0.25	Monte Real
	Others	109.245	67,375	1.62	-
	Total	213.334	152,055	1.40	-

¹⁾ Compared to January to June 2006

¹⁾ average price per Litre