



ARGENTINA: MORE THAN MALBEC

COULD RED-WINE LIGHTNING STRIKE AGAIN IN SOUTH AMERICA?

BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW

American wine drinkers adore Argentinian Malbec. We love it so much that we tend to think that any red from Argentina is Malbec, even when it's not. If Argentina—between its multi-faceted climates, terroirs and great wine minds—can ignite interest in one formerly off-the-radar grape, why can't it do so with others?

Maybe it already does. Though the star export is the most widely planted variety, Malbec constitutes only 20% of Argentina's vineyards. Plenty of surface area is devoted to others. The catch is that with Americans swooning over Malbec, that's where the export effort has gone.

Argentina is the world's fifth largest wine producer; 68.5% of the country's 2014 export volume to the U.S. was Malbec. Considering that 70% of Argentina's production is red, options abound.

There is plenty of Cabernet Sauvignon, but in my view few examples truly excel. Mastery of this grape—at all levels of the quality spectrum—is still in progress.

Considering that basically everyone in the world planting a vine plants Cabernet, this is not a bad thing. Better to focus on the unique, and Argentina has plenty of that.

BLEND S

When boisterous, muscle-bound wines are desired, the best Malbec alternative is a red blend. These command more money on the shelf, and they are very often more complex and interesting. More than one winemaker I spoke with while in Argentina in February cited his/her marquee blend as the most exciting wine. Components include all sorts of bits alongside Malbec, including Cabernet

ABOVE: When American wine lovers hear "Argentina," most think of scenes towering Andes and delicious Malbec—as captured in this scene from Trapiche. But viticulture there is remarkably diverse and improving with every vintage; Chacra Pinot Noir from cool, remote Patagonia is a perfect example.

Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah and Tempranillo, among others. Here, in fact, Cabernet Sauvignon—often with a dollop of Malbec—can excel. Almost every bodega has a shining star in this category, but some that impress me the most—and consistently year after year—come from the cellars of Achaval Ferrer, Cobos, Nicolás Catena Zapata and Norton.

CABERNET FRANC

Regarding varietal wines, my two top votes go to Cabernet Franc and Bonarda. Cabernet Francs are crafted in a bigger, Napa-esque style. They are bold and oaked, but they manage to maintain their

woody varietal character. Like many of the country's more forward-thinking wines, they are less oaky and less heavy than big reds made even three or four years ago. Cabernet Franc producers I admire include Pulenta Estate at the absolute top, along with Andeluna, Bodega del Desierto, Bressia, Mascota, Melipal and Riglos.

BONARDA

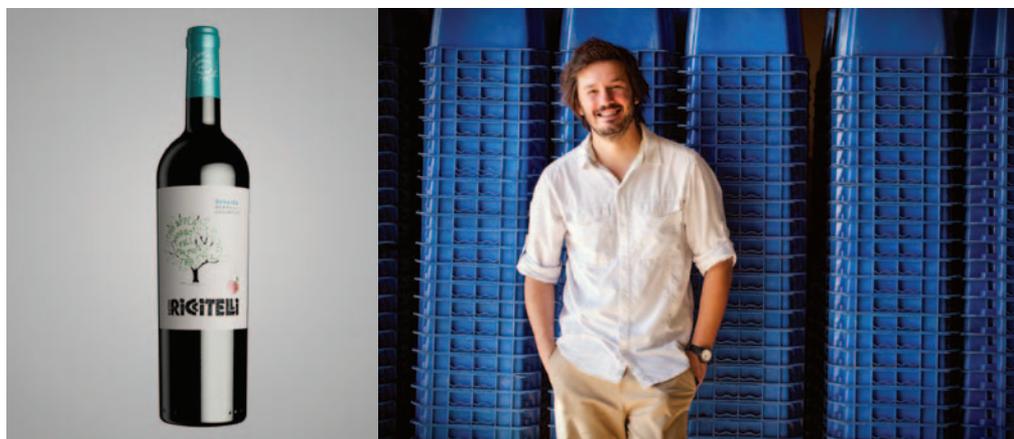
Another variety with enormous potential is Bonarda, and I am becoming a bigger fan with each passing vintage. This native northern Italian variety comes in two forms from south of the equator. One is boldly Argentinian—almost indistinguishable from the country's other muscular reds—and the other is much more European, with bright acidity and little to no new oak. Altos Las Hormigas, Nieto Senetiner, Riccitelli, Trapiche and Zuccardi make tasty examples, more in the latter style than the former. Impressively, most of these wines retail under \$25.

TANNAT

Like Malbec, Tannat hails from the southwestern corner of France, and responds well to the warm Argentinian climate. It gives rounder tannins and more generously fruited wines compared to French versions, which tend to need blending with other grapes. El Porvenir de Cafayate, Michel Torino, Colomé and San Pedro de Yacochya are all fine examples.

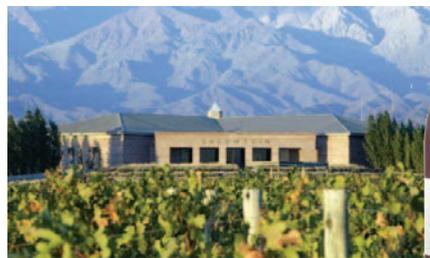
Petit Verdot's love of basking in the sunshine makes it a good candidate for success here. This late ripening variety—often simply called Verdot—wants for nothing in

BELOW: In 2008, celebrating their 125th anniversary, Trapiche opened the doors on a brand new winery; meanwhile, bio-dynamic principles are being used in the vineyard, and the varietal portfolio is the largest in South America.



ABOVE: Matías Riccitelli is a second-generation winemaker who launched his own label, and already is excelling with Bonarda.

BELOW: Salentein, like many wineries in Mendoza, makes multiple Malbecs, but they grow Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Pinot Noir, Tempranillo and Cabernet Franc.



the arid, ozone-hole-speckled skies of Argentina. Finca Decero and Trapiche make bottlings that become more compelling with each release.

PINOT NOIR

Moving back into “noble” variety territory, I approach Argentinian Pinots with caution. Frankly, Argentinian Pinot Noirs tend to taste stressed out. I suspect this is a combination of the mostly young vines and the incessant winds found as one proceeds south to the “end of the earth.”

Pinot Noir is delicate and no vine takes well to the drying effects of constant winds. These bottlings mostly do not possess Pinot Noir's typically caressing tannins, and they seem to brown immediately, too. Still, these Pinots are less vintage-dependant than most as the years here are fairly regular.

The absolute primo Pinots hail from Bodega Chacra, and other highly drinkable wines come from the cellars of Fa-

milia Schroeder, Humberto Canale, Manos Negras, Salentein and Zorzal. While I remain skeptical about the potential of this variety here, as a devout Pinot Noir drinker, I'm staying tuned.

SPARKLING & WHITE

Argentina is working diligently on its bubbles—perhaps nodding to its Italian lineage. For the time being, most remain casual sippers. Whites show less bandwidth than reds with regard to style diversity and price point, but that's not to say there isn't action. Torrontés is the country's most widely planted white.

So far, Torrontés producers have focused on aromatic purity. Yet over the last five years, its character has grown—due in part to maturing vines as well as to greater respect in winemaking. For example, Susana Balbo now uses oak in one of her cuvées, looking to push boundaries and create a new mindset for this resolutely Argentinian variety.

My current white favorites involve a much-respected, old school variety that receives little attention today: Semillon. Mendel in Mendoza and Humberto Canale in Rio Negro are two top sippers. Semillon is also blended with Sauvignon Blanc in a classic Bordeaux style, yet more accessibly styled.

I've heard good things about a handful of terrific Rieslings (I've not yet seen them in the U.S.) as well as a new Sauvignon Blanc from the plains near Buenos Aires. It is easy to enjoy the established wines—Malbecs—of Argentina, but it is more exciting to uncover new gems. ■

