



Malbec ripening on the vine at Nieto Senetiner in Luján de Cuyo, within the Mendoza region. Below: harvest at Altos Las Hornigas, which produces four separate Malbecs.

Malbec on the Move: But In Which Direction?

Having Gained Household-Name Status, Argentina's Signature Red Aims to Keep Momentum

BY CHRISTY CANTERBURY MW

Malbec is much-loved. It's easy to see—and taste—why. Five years ago, I described it as the next Merlot. After all, Malbec has a plump mid-palate and chunky, generous red plum and berry flavors like Merlot. Varietal Malbec wines are medium- to full-bodied and they often sport some chewy viscosity. All of these factors deliver immediate satisfaction to most consumers.

Like the Kiwis with Sauvignon Blanc, the Argentinians have—in less than 20 years—created a new, classic wine style. There is no question that Argentina has over-delivered on in this category. A January 2013 Wine Opinions report shows that consumers rated 90% of under-\$20 Argentinian reds (note this includes all reds, not just Malbec) as “good” or “outstanding”. Of course, Daniel Taytslin, a wine and spirits consultant at Manhattan's Astor Wines and Spirits, says “Argentinian red” is synonymous with “Malbec” for nine out of ten customers.

With such a high quality-to-price ratio, however, the question arises as to how much Americans are willing to pay for a bottle of Malbec. Is it possible that Argentinians might follow the footsteps of their other Southern Hemisphere brethren...the Aussies with their Shiraz?

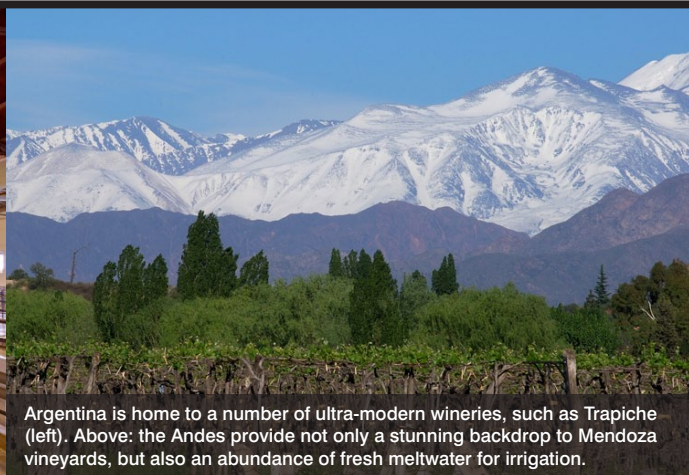
Were Argentinian Malbec to go the way of the “just a Tuesday night pizza wine,” the country's producers could be in serious trouble. According to Wines of Argentina, in 2011 Malbec represented 34% of black grape plantings. Bonarda trails well behind at 18%, fol-

lowed by Cabernet Sauvignon at 17%. Argentina's signature white grape, Torrontes, accounts for 24% of total vineyard surface area. But, Torrontes, for now at least, doesn't have the complexity to draw much attention, let alone name recognition.

Stuck in Place?

Besides there being little apparent movement of Malbec drinkers toward other Argentine wines, there does not appear to be a natural tendency for these consumers to migrate upward in price.





Argentina is home to a number of ultra-modern wineries, such as Trapiche (left). Above: the Andes provide not only a stunning backdrop to Mendoza vineyards, but also an abundance of fresh meltwater for irrigation.

Astor's Taytlin says, "Extremely rare is the customer who wants to splurge on a bottle of Malbec specifically. Over the past six months, I could count them on one hand." Still, Taytlin makes the case that it's not a lack of willingness to spend more on wine. It's that because so much good juice is delivered in the \$10 range, consumers feel they don't need to pay more. He also mentioned that people know Malbec well enough that when they want something "interesting" they're looking into different territories.

So, has Argentinian Malbec become a one-hit, budget-friendly wonder? It seems so, but it depends with whom you speak. Adam LaPierre MW, the national sales manager of the fine wine division at Frederick Wildman and Sons, thinks the big brand domination of \$8-15 range could mean it is growing a bit stale. However, Malbec is on fire off-premise in the \$3-\$8 and \$15+ ranges. He posits that the variety is accepted so widely now that larger companies are creating even greater-value propositions. I can't help but wonder if the entry of even lower-priced Malbecs will stretch the quality of the \$8-15 category. Or, will better fruit be transitioning down the chain if movement continues to be slower in the higher-priced categories?

Malbec Dining Out

On-premise, a few things seem to be happening. Jason Mabile, director of key accounts in the New York metro area at Lauber Imports, reports that for by-the-

Mendoza: Think Big

Clearly the most important wine-making province of Argentina, Mendoza is huge, covering more than 395,000 acres of vineyards and yielding more than 80% of Argentina's wine.

There are actually five large oases within Mendoza: North, East, Center, South and Uco Valley (Valle de Uco); and while each is further divided into many subregions, producers have wisely chosen to favor the general region, Mendoza, for labeling. In turn, Mendoza has gained household-name status—right alongside Malbec—among American red wine fans.

Scarce rainfall and pure meltwater irrigation make the difference for Mendoza, as they allow growers to regulate vine and grape growth, as well as sugar and tannin concentration.



glass lists 95% of restaurant wine buyers want a Malbec for wholesale bottle price of \$8 or less. Those 5% who could trade up, for example the Michelin-starred restaurants, simply ignore the variety. That posture seems not unlike the one often taken toward Pinot Grigio. However, this could be New York snobbery at work. LaPierre has been excited to watch many independent and national restaurant chains pick up lesser-known producers without hesitation as the variety is so widely accepted.

Whatever your position on Argentinian Malbec, the category is at a pivotal point. If you support it, do so now! Here is a sampling of a few personal favorites to discover or revisit:

\$3-\$8 SRP

- Terrazas de los Andes
- Trapiche "Astica"

\$8-\$15

- Don Cristóbal "1942"
- Gouguenheim "Estaciones del Valle"

\$15-\$20

- Altos Las Hormigas Reserva
- Valle las Acequias (Bodega Correás) "Roble"

\$20-\$30

- Domnio del Plata (Susana Balbo) "Signature"
- Tikal Amorio (Ernesto Catena)

\$30+

- Coboa Bramare Machiori Vineyard
- Nieto Senetiner Cadus Single Vineyard