

MALBEC

The Global Phenomenon

OUR EDITORS' GUIDE TO TOP PRODUCERS OF THIS DARK, BROODING ALTERNATIVE TO CABERNET AND MERLOT.

Cue the big, brash opening chords of Paul Simon's song from his Graceland album, "You Can Call Me Al." Now turn your thoughts to Malbec, one of winedom's more bruising, sun-loving grapes. You can call it Côt or Auxerrois if you are in the southern French region of Cahors, and elsewhere by dozens of lesser-known names, including Pressac, Quercy and even Pied Noir (Black Foot). What you should never call Malbec, however, is restrained or dainty. That, it is not.

Like so many grape varieties now thriving around the world, intensely purple Malbec has its roots in France, where legend says it was brought centuries ago by a Hungarian peasant with a similar surname. Today it remains one of the six approved red grapes in the Bordeaux AOC, and in Cahors it accounts for almost all of what is planted in the region.

But it is in Argentina, where Malbec was introduced in 1868 by a French agronomist named Michel Pouget, that the grape has truly come into its own. With about 70,000 acres of Malbec planted throughout the country, Argentina ranks as the undisputed global leader when it comes to varietal Malbec and Malbec blends. Chile also has a critical mass of Malbec, with about 15,000 acres of the grape but only a handful of wines that do the variety proud. France showcases about 12,000 acres of Malbec (about 10,000 of that in Cahors), while other countries and wine regions with more than a smattering of Malbec include Australia, California, Southern Oregon, Washington and even Italy.

Thin-skinned, prone to damage from rot, frost or hail and generally desperate for heat and dryness, Malbec requires ample sun to ripen properly. Hence its diminished role over the years in cooler-climate, rain-prone Bordeaux and its rise to prominence in sun-drenched places like Argentina, Chile, Australia, California and Eastern Washington.

Stylistically, Malbec reflects its terroir like a mirror. In Cahors, for example, it can result in taut-structured wines with biting tannins—a direct response to continental Europe's more northerly locale. Conversely, in sunny Argentina and Chile the wines tend to be high in alcohol (14 to 15.5 percent), rich and jammy, and, if exposed to too much sun, stewy or mushy.

Age of the vines is another key factor when it comes to the style and overall quality of Malbec wines. Young vines, which dominate in the New World, will yield more simple and candied wines with a reddish-ruby color and bubble-gum aromas. But in Argentina, phylloxera has never appeared and vineyards



PHOTO: JON VAN GORDER



TOP PRODUCERS OF MALBEC IN ARGENTINA

MENDOZA	Finca Sopenia	Tikal
Achaval-Ferrer	Kaiken	Trapiche
Alta Vista	Luca	Trivento
Altos Las Hormigas	Luigi Bosca	Valentin Bianchi
Andeluna	Lurton	Zuccardi
Benegas	Mendel	
BenMarco	Monte Cinco	SALTA
Carlos Pulenta	Monteviejo	Colomé
Catena Zapata	Norton	Michel Torino
Chakana	O. Fournier	Yacochuya
Cheval des Andes	Pascual Toso	
Cobos	Renacer	PATAGONIA
Clos de los Siete	Ruca Malen	Bodega Noemía
Cuvelier Los Andes	Salentein	Bodega NQN
Enrique Foster	Septima	Familia Schroeder
Fabre Montmayou	Susana Balbo	Fin del Mundo
Felipe Rutini	Terrazas de Los Andes	

—M.S.

were shipped to the United States, compared to about 775,000 cases in 2006. Overall, varietal Malbec accounts for about 45 percent of all Argentine wine coming to the U.S. It also accounts for an overwhelming percentage of Argentina's high-

est-rated wines. Since *Wine Enthusiast Magazine* began its in-house tasting program in 1999, we have rated 119 Malbecs at 90 points (excellent) or above. Our highest-rated Malbecs to date recently appeared in the August 2008 issue: Catena's 2004 Argentino from the Uco Valley subzone of Mendoza scored 94 points, as did O. Fournier's 2004 A Cru.

With respect to pricing, Malbecs derived from high-altitude, low-yield vineyards can top \$100 a bottle (Argentino goes for \$120). On the value side, there are many good to excellent Malbecs that range from about \$12 to \$20.

With approximately 70,000 acres of Malbec stretching from Salta in the north to Patagonia in the south, Argentina's commitment to Malbec is palpable. And nowhere does Malbec fare better and more consistently than in central Mendoza, the heart of Argentina's wine industry.

About 80 percent of all wine produced in Argentina hails from Mendoza, which sits about 700 miles west of Buenos Aires, at the eastern base of the Andes. In districts such as Luján de Cuyo, Perdriel, Agrelo, Vistalba, San Rafael and more recently the Valle de Uco, the combination of healthy old vines, a dry climate, ample water from the Andes, committed wineries and talented winemakers has elevated Argentinean Malbec to world-class status.

The bottom line: There's no shortage of quantity or quality when it comes to Argentinean Malbec. —M.S.

94 Catena Zapata 2004 Argentino (Uco Valley); \$120. Argentino is a Malbec made from two vineyards: Adrianna in Tupungato and Nicasia in Vista Flores/Altamira. Aged for two years in new oak, it's a dark, vibrant masculine wine with excellent depth of flavor, seductive berry

BOTTLE PHOTO: JON VAN GORBER



Above: Bodega Catena Zapata, maker of world-class Argentinean Malbec. Right: Chile's oldest and best Malbec comes from Viu Manent.

flavors, and lots of length. It hits with force but also finesse, and it shows the extracted richness that comes from small-lot open-bin fermentation. Imported by Billington Imports. **Editors' Choice.** —M.S. (8/08)

94 O. Fournier 2004 Alfa Cru (Uco Valley); \$45. Talk about a deep, luscious wine. The bouquet emits a magnetic blend of chocolate cake, fine leather and berry marmalade, while the midsection is downright delicious but also very pure and natural despite the wine seeing 20 months of new oak. ACru catches and holds every note, and it should age well for another 5 to 8 years. Imported by Jorge Ordonez Selections. **Editors' Choice.** —M.S. (8/08)

93 J & F Lurton 2004 Chacayes (Uco Valley); \$80. A big, floral, fruity wine with all the hallmarks of excellence. The fruit is exacting, ripe and healthy, the tannins are firm, and the acidity is just right. It avoids all pitfalls as it transitions well from nose to palate to finish. Lots of fruit to ponder, then coffee, spice and chocolate at the end. Imported by Ex-Cellars. —M.S. (8/08)

92 Achaval-Ferrer 2006 Finca Altamira Malbec (Uco Valley); \$112. One of the most untouched, terroir-driven Malbecs made in Argentina is Achaval-Ferrer's Altamira. It's harvested about three weeks earlier than most high-end fruit, resulting in core raspberry flavors and a certain redness of character. The wine is unfinned and cloudy but still very clear on the palate, with length, power and class. Best from 2009–2012. Imported by T.G.I.C. Importers. —M.S. (8/08)

92 Monte Cinco 2005 Oak Malbec (Lujan de Cuyo); \$42. Sweet, ripe, smooth and serious: this is top-shelf Malbec the way it should be. The bouquet is deep and brawny, with very ripe but balanced berry and toast aromas. Plum, blackberry and chocolate flavors are expansive and head straight to a fine finish that's lengthy and rock solid. Best now into 2010. Imported by De Rose Wine. **Editors' Choice.** —M.S. (8/08)

92 Trapiche 2005 Viña Fausto Orellana Single Vineyard Malbec (Mendoza); \$47. Our favorite of the Trapiche 2005 single-vineyard Malbecs is this one from Fausto Orellana. Winemaker Daniel Pi has made a brawny but savory wine with structure, core acidity and bold flavors. The palate is chunky and expansive, but also smooth and well directed. Some unabsorbed oak, tannins and more indicate that this bruiser is here to stay. Best from 2009 through 2014. Imported by Frederick Wildman & Sons. **Cellar Selection.** —M.S.

Chile

Chile may have more Malbec in the ground (about 15,000 acres) than any other country besides neighboring Argentina, but much of it is used for bulk wine and blending. As a variety, it is a rarity that does best in the country's warmest zones, especially the Colchagua, Curicó and Maule valleys. Year in and year out, the top producer of Malbec is Viu Manent, whose San

Carlos Estate in Colchagua is one of the oldest and best Malbec vineyards in the country. It is this vineyard that produces the grapes for the highly rated Viu 1 and San Carlos Single Vineyard Malbec. Other Chilean wineries that have over the years tried their hand with Malbec and succeeded include Odfjell, Montes and Valdivieso. —M.S.



93 Viu Manent 2005 Viu 1 (Colchagua Valley); \$65. What a lush and spectacular New World Malbec. Buttery aromas of coconut and black fruits mix with herbs, mineral and char to create a near-perfect bouquet. The palate is saturated and balanced by great natural acidity, which frames the blackberry and herb flavors in excellent light. Meaty, textured, fruity and balanced. What more could you want? Drink now–2010. Imported by Baystate Wine Co. **Editors' Choice.** —M.S. (7/08)

France

Cahors, the producers in this quiet corner of southwest France like to remind you, has been growing Malbec for the past 2,000 years. "Since

planted during the first quarter of the 20th century still thrive; thus, when grapes are harvested late—and more importantly, healthy—masculinity, complexity, intensity and depth of flavor and character can be achieved. Chile also has a few old-vines vineyards that produce complex and downright delicious Malbec.

In terms of worldwide notoriety, Malbec has in recent years risen beyond novelty status, largely on the heels of its accomplishments in Argentina. And while still not on a par with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah or Pinot Noir in terms of popularity, Malbec is widely known today as a potentially rewarding wine with deep color, rich black-fruit flavors, medium-to-solid tannins and reasonable midterm ageability. The best wines are usually liberally oaked, mostly because the grape can take it. And with grilled meats, hearty cheeses and even chocolate, Malbec has earned its place at the table.

Following are up-to-date profiles of Malbec's status around the world. —Michael Schachner

Argentina

By all accounts, Malbec is Argentina's signature grape as well as the horse that has been pulling the country's wine cart for decades. But in recent years, Argentine Malbec has exploded onto the scene, especially in the United States, where a weak dollar has pushed up the price of almost all imported wines except for those from Argentina. How can that be, you ask? The reason is that the Argentine peso's value is pegged to the American dollar at roughly three pesos to one dollar. Hence, no loss or gain of value on either side.

It's been said that numbers don't lie, and in the fiscal year that just ended in June 2008, more than 1.7 million cases of Argentine Malbec