ARGENTINA TRIES TO GIVE MALBEC MORE STATUS

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Malbec because it dominates the vineyards of Mendoza, the country's largest wine region. And cabernet because a top-of-the-line malbec blend seems to beg for its cachet.

"Cabernet sauvignon has always been considered classier than malbec," said Alejandro Vigil, the head winemaker at Bodegas Catena Zapata, a top Argentine producer based in a stunning Mayan-style winery in Mendoza with the high Andes in the background. "It's more noble, has more prestige and is more expensive."

He said Nicholas Catena, who founded the winery, dreamed of making a world-class cabernet starting in the 1980s. For many winemakers like him, cabernet sauvignon is the holy grail. Caro, a malbec-cabernet blend made in a collaboration between Bodegas Catena Zapata and Baron Eric de Rothschild of Château Lafite Rothschild, is one example of an Argentine Bordeaux-style wine. Another is Cheval des Andes, the fruit of the union of Terrazas de los Andes, another major name in Argentina, with Château Cheval Blanc, a premier grand cru wine from Saint-Émilion.

These Argentine Bordeaux blends deliver the tannins, dark fruit and structure typical of fine cabernet sauvignon (in this case from Argentina), along with malbec's intensity, velvet texture and reliability. Cheval des Andes and Caro offer balance and finesse. (Bodegas Caro also offers a less expensive blend and a 100 percent malbec, but Caro is its No. 1.)

In these wines, malbec plays the rich, fruity role that merlot does in many Bordeaux wines. There's also a terroir-driven earthiness in the Argentine examples; a sort of work boots with designer suit approach. Add the name of a major Bordeaux producer and you are set to sell on the world stage.

"The Cheval Blanc name is a huge endorsement," said Hervé Birnie-Scott, the technical director of Terrazas de los Andes. So is Rothschild. "People need security when they buy Argentine wine," he said.

That goes especially for the pricier ones. Most consumers, especially Americans, associate Argentina with inexpensive bottles. As Michael Evans, an owner of Vines of Mendoza, a cooperative, said: "You can make better wine more cheaply in Argentina than anywhere else in the world."

Though the collaborations between two of the best chateaux in Bordeaux and top Argentine winemakers are not cheap, they are affordable, especially when compared with other famous joint-venture wines, like Opus One from California, founded by Château Mouton-Rothschild and Robert Mondavi, which can easily cost $250 a bottle. Cheval de los Andes runs around $90 in the United States. And Caro sells for about $60.

These wines seem innovative, but like heirloom tomatoes, they are throwbacks. No one associates the malbec grape with Bordeaux today, yet it was once important there. But it was tricky to cultivate: disease prone and sensitive to humidity. It is still the major grape in the Cahors region of southwest France, but in Bordeaux, it was largely abandoned 100 years ago.

One reason appears to be that malbec may not take well to grafting, Nicholas Audebert, the winemaker for Cheval des Andes, said at a recent tasting in New York. But grafting was the only way for vineyards in Europe to replant after the infestation of phylloxera in the late 1800s. "Here in Mendoza, there are desert conditions, so it's dry and vine diseases are not a problem," he said.

"We want to reconnect with malbec in a Bordeaux blend," Mr. Audebert said, "to use it the way it was in the past."