

Wine Spectator

More Malbec Please

As quality improves for Argentina's signature grape, imports continue to increase

By James Molesworth

American wine lovers know a good thing when they taste it, and they are increasingly enthusiastic about Argentina's plush and vivid Malbecs. Argentine vintners are responding by producing ever more, and ever better, wines.

Argentina exported 3.2 million cases of wine to the United States in 2007. That's still only about half of what neighboring Chile currently sends to the States annually, but the total represents a significant increase over the country's previous record of 2.6 million cases in 2006.

"Mendoza and Patagonia are two magic words these days for my customers," says Tom Gannon, sommelier at Rothmann's Steakhouse & Grill in New York, who notes that he's steadily selling more and more Argentine Malbec despite a wine list that's heavy in California Cabernet and Bordeaux.

Since my last report on Argentina ("Malbec Laps the Field," Dec. 15, 2007), I have reviewed more than 500 Argentine wines, the most in any year since I began covering the region for Wine Spectator in 2000. The boom in reviews mirrors the trend in imports to this country, as Argentina is rapidly gaining market share thanks to its agreeable, juicy, steak-friendly reds.

Quality is on the rise along with sales. Malbec remains the country's flagship variety and leads the way among its top bottlings. Overall, nearly 100 wines in this report—an impressive 20 percent of the total number—earned outstanding ratings (90 points or higher on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale). Of the more than 220 Malbec or Malbec-based blends under review, nearly 120 rated 88 or more points, with 70 of them hitting the outstanding mark. (An alphabetical list of all wines tasted for this report is available)

Argentine Malbec isn't without its hiccups, however. Some wines tend toward overripe or jammy flavors; others aim for extraction or lay on too much oak, thereby losing focus. The best versions simply let the grape do the talking, with a vivid range of raspberry, blueberry and boysenberry fruit intertwined with spice and graphite hints and backed by supple tannins and fresh acidity.

Many of the best Malbecs in this annual roundup come from the 2006 vintage—not an outstanding year overall, but one that featured cooler temperatures and a longer growing season that benefited this late-ripening grape.

The top-scoring wine this year is the Achával-Ferrer Malbec Mendoza Finca Altamira 2006 (96 points, \$112). Since its debut 1999 vintage, this wine has established a track record as one of the country's greatest bottlings of pure Malbec. It shows a sleek, racy profile, with raspberry and graphite notes that sail on endlessly.

Finca Altamira is sourced from a vineyard in southern Mendoza's cooler Uco Valley, a region that is rapidly emerging as a serious rival to the warmer spots of central Mendoza. The winery also struck gold with its Malbec Mendoza Finca Mirador 2006 (95, \$112), which is sourced from the Medrano area in the eastern part of the province, known for wines with darker profiles and more pungent minerality.

Joining these in the classic category (95 to 100 points) are the Alta Vista Alto Mendoza 2006 (95, \$80) and the Bodega Noemía de Patagonia Río Negro Valley 2006 (95, \$130). These wines represent Argentina's strong suit—rich, ripe, racy, full-throttle reds made from the Malbec grape that reflect distinctly different terroirs. (Some of the country's top bottlings are Malbec blends; the Alta Vista Alto contains 15 percent Cabernet Sauvignon.)

Other high-scorers include the Bodega Catena Zapata Malbec Mendoza Alta 2005 (93, \$50), the Altos Las Hormigas Malbec Mendoza Vineyard Selection Reserva 2006 (92, \$24) and the Trapiche Malbec Mendoza Viña Fausto Orellana 2005 (92, \$50).

Recognized as the industry leader, Nicolás Catena excelled as usual this year, with nine outstanding bottlings from his flagship Catena Zapata winery. Catena also owns the Alamos and Bodegas Esmeralda wineries, which crank out solid values, such as the Alamos Malbec Mendoza Selección 2007 (90, \$15) and the Alamos Malbec Mendoza 2007 (88, \$10). Bodegas Escorihuela and Familia Rutini, of which he is part-owner, are consistent producers of very good wines, and Catena's joint-venture with Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite) regularly delivers outstanding bottlings as well, including the Bodegas Caro Mendoza 2006 (91, \$50), the current release.

In Catena's case, the apple has not fallen far from the tree. His daughter Laura, with her Luca label, and his son Ernesto, with his Tikal, Bodegas Tahuan and Alma Negra labels, are also producing very good to outstanding wines.

Laura Catena's Malbecs offer further evidence of the potential of the Uco Valley. Her high-end offering, the Luca Malbec Altos de Mendoza Nico 2005 (94, \$125), is sourced from two old-vine vineyards in the La Consulta region of Uco. As is typical of wines from this prime area, it's exotic, with intensely concentrated but remarkably creamy fig, raspberry, boysenberry and currant fruit, yet a nice bittersweet ganache twinge and a racy graphite underpinning on the finish helps keep it all honest. Meanwhile, her Luca Malbec Uco Valley 2007 (93, \$35) shows the kind of bang for the buck that Argentina can deliver.

"I like the profile [of Uco Valley fruit] because of the violet aromatics and big tannins, which—if worked on correctly—can be as smooth as one likes," says Laura.

Winemaker Luis Reginato, who fashions the wines for both Laura and Ernesto Catena's labels—as well as for the superb, value-oriented La Posta del Viñatero winery—was born in La Consulta and has helped the Catenas seek out some of the area's best spots.

"Luján de Cuyo is a large district with very diverse areas and subareas," says Reginato about the better-known region of Mendoza. "But the Uco Valley is twice as large. So I would dare to say that the Uco is twice as diverse as Luján."

That diversity is created by vineyards at a range of altitudes, from 2,600 to 4,900 feet above sea level, a wider spread than in central Mendoza. As elevation changes, so does the effect of the area's cold nights, which offset the warm, sunny days by allowing the grapes to retain their acidity while extending the ripening period.

Argentine vintners, who have historically based themselves in central Mendoza, are only now plumbing the Uco Valley, homing in on spots like La Consulta, where some forgotten old-vine vineyards can still be found. Karim Mussi, a third-generation immigrant of Lebanese descent, decided to follow in his father's footsteps and enter the wine business. When he told his father of his plans, the older Mussi asked him where he wanted to grow vines.

"I told [my father] the best wines were made in Luján and Maipú," says Mussi, referring to the historical center of Mendoza wine production. "And then he gave me a nice hit upside the head before saying 'La Consulta.'"

Now, after working in the area for a few years, Mussi admits his father was right. "I like La Consulta because it's an old terroir, with history," he says. "But no one knows it, so at the same time, it's also new."

Mussi's Altocedro Malbec La Consulta Reserva 2006 (92, \$30), which is sourced from a single 2.47-acre plot of 100-year-old Malbec vines, is one of the most exciting wines I tasted this past year. This pure fruit- and mineral-driven expression of Malbec was fashioned in a decrepit winery that Mussi is currently renovating by hand, with only one assistant. Other wineries in the area worth seeking out include Bodegas y Viñedos O. Fournier and Bodegas Salentein.

Along with the emergence of the Uco Valley this past year, Argentina's development is highlighted by several new or improving wineries. Alta Vista has finally settled in after a change in winemakers and extensive infrastructure renovations. The winery's lineup of single-vineyard Malbecs from the 2006 vintage is outstanding, highlighted by the Malbec Luján de Cuyo Alizarine 2006 (93, \$50), sourced from the prime Las Compuertas vineyard. Owner Patrick d'Aulan and his new winemaker, Matthieu Grassin, have their hands firmly on the wheel.

Several new wineries also debuted this year, with excellent results. They include Ksana, made by winemaker Héctor Durigutti; Finca Las Divas, where California-based winemaker Paul Hobbs is consulting; and Inacayal, a separate line produced by winemaker Adriano Senetiner of Viniterra. Other changes on the scene include those at Viña Cobos, which has relabeled its varietal line as El Felino. The winery's El Felino Malbec, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay all deliver solid value in the less-than-\$20 range.

Malbec may be Argentina's star, but the country's wine industry is not a one-grape show. A cast of well-known blue-chip varieties, accompanied by a few Argentine specialties, makes up a large chunk of this report. Cabernet Sauvignon continues to show improvement, both in stand-alone versions and, increasingly, as a blending partner with Malbec.

"Cabernet is the frame, with its structure. [Along] with the fleshy, sweet fruit of Malbec, it's a great combination," says Roberto de la Mota, whose Bodega Mendel Unus Mendoza 2006 (93, \$50) combines the two grapes to produce a tightly wound but racy wine that delivers a superripe core of blueberry, raspberry and fig fruit.

Syrah and Bonarda round out the top red varietals. The latter is the second most widely planted grape in Mendoza, after Malbec, and typically produces soft texture and forward, plummy flavors.

Among whites, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are steady if uninspiring. A growing number of Argentine vintners are turning their focus to Torrontés, whose spicy, Muscat-like aromatics and tangy, fresh notes of tangerine, nectarine or clementine can offer a nice change of pace. Freshness is key, though, in delivering quality bottlings of Torrontés, as the grape is prone to oxidation and does not perform well in oak, gearing it toward wines for immediate consumption. The Bodega Colomé Torrontés Calchaquí Valley 2007 (87, \$13) is one of the best examples to date of what this variety can achieve.

Though not as well-known a value producer as Chile, Argentina offers a large group of delicious bottlings that won't break the bank. There are nearly 150 wines in this report costing \$20 or less that achieve very good quality (85 to 89 points). Bodega Luigi Bosca, Bodega Norton, Viña Doña Paula, La Posta del Viñatero, Dominio del Plata and Finca Sopenia are some of the wineries producing excellent values.

Mendoza still dominates the Argentine wine industry, accounting for three-quarters of its production. But Patagonia, located 600 miles to the south, is emerging with a growing number of interesting wineries and high quality wines. With poor, virgin alluvial soils and greater diurnal swings (the difference between daytime and nighttime temperatures) than Mendoza, the Patagonian province of Neuquén is proving to be an intriguing spot for wine production. Coupled with the history and older vines of the Río Negro province, which forms the eastern half of the region, Patagonia now demands consumer attention. (For more on this burgeoning area, see "In Deepest Patagonia," Nov. 15, 2008.)

But while Malbec soars and values abound, Argentina is not without its challenges. The number of wines with triple-digit prices is growing at an alarming rate. There are 18 such wines in this year's report, one more than in all previous years combined. With a high rate of inflation and a currency still pegged at 3 pesos to the U.S. dollar, which itself has suffered against other currencies, Argentine wineries have had to increase prices to offset shrinking profit margins. Not wanting to lose market share at the volume end of the production, most growers are raising prices on their higher-end wines instead.

In addition, consistency still remains an issue for the country's vintners as a whole, with 10 percent of the wines in this report failing to rate at least 80 points.

But despite the economic rumblings and the stubbornly persistent percentage of plonk, Argentina continues to steady its footing. By focusing on the grape that it does best, while also setting itself apart from other wine regions, Argentine wine is clearly here to stay.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Argentina.