

“

IT IS IN ARGENTINA'S TEMPERATE MENDOZA REGION THAT MALBEC HAS FOUND A HAPPY DWELLING AMONGST WILDFLOWERS.

# MALBEC COMES OF *AGE*

No longer the lowly grape, the Argentinian red variety has found its pride of place among the desert plains and rugged hillsides of Argentina's wine regions. **Edwin Soon** finds out how the grape is inspiring the country's winemakers.



Trapiche's winery.

Ask a wine enthusiast what comes to mind when he thinks of Argentina and he'd mention Malbec. Argentina is after all, the world's top producer of Malbec, and like many of the country's notable grape varieties, it rose from humble beginnings.

French in origin, Malbec was considered the poor cousin to Cabernet Sauvignon in Bordeaux. The grape had a hard time ripening. Its clusters were big and it lacked

colour, concentration and alcohol. It wasn't a tough fellow, too: it could not weather the cold and was susceptible to rot; a weakness that was severely exposed by the frosts in the 1950s. That was the last straw for many winegrowers. They had had enough of the grape and refused to plant anymore of it.

Thankfully, Malbec did not fall from grace completely. In the dry, right bank of Bordeaux's Dordogne River, Malbec was

retained to be used in blends. The vintners there knew that the grape was not without merit.

Picked in good condition, Malbec provides robust flavours and even earthy, peppery tastes. In a blend with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, Malbec adds complexity to the wine. In the Cahors region of southwest France, Malbec, known as Auxerrois, was also blended with





Kaiken's Vistalba vineyard.



**At Masi Tupungato, I discovered Malbec being made in a totally different fashion—as an Amarone-style ambrosia.**



Trapiche's Los Arboles vineyard.

the traditional Bordeaux varieties to make Bergerac. This wine has depth of colour and generous fruit flavours, making it easily approachable when youthful.

**FLAVOUR OF ARGENTINA**

It is in Argentina's temperate Mendoza region that the humble grape variety has found a happy dwelling amongst wildflowers. The lush Eden-like oasis in the arid plateaus with soils rich in iron and magnesium is home to 65,000 hectares of Malbec or 'fer' vines as they have come to be known in Argentina. A further 10,000 acres of Malbec are found in various regions of the country. In acreage, Malbec dominates the landscape

On a recent visit to Argentina, I was excited to taste and explore the many

facets of the country's iconic varietal. Here, Malbecs are usually straight varietals. Small quantities of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc or Merlot might be blended in to achieve more subtlety, complexity and personality. Still, it was those made from 100% Malbec that blew me away.

The Trapiche Gran Medalla Malbec, 2011, for example, impressed with its herbal, fresh crushed blackberries, mulberries and long finish. There was also the racy, intense vanilla-chocolate nuanced Nieto Senetiner, Cadus Single Vineyards Malbec 2011. Each wine had its own unique character, even though the delicious, dark, sweet fruit core, a character of Argentina Malbec, was always present.

Could Malbec be a grape that responds

to *terroir*? My question was answered at the Argentina Wine Awards judging event when I met fellow judge, Silvio O Alberto, winemaker of Achaval Ferrer, Mendoza.

Alberto filled me on the regional characteristics of the grape. "We produce wine from various sub-regions. Our Malbec (Finca Mirador) from the East in the Medrano sub-region is grown at an altitude of 2400 ft, where you'd find high daytime temperatures and cool nights, along with sandy soils, resulting in wines with lots of structure and spice. Head south, about an hour's drive from Mendoza city, to the Uco Valley, and you'll find the La Consulta sub region at 3400 ft, at the foot of the Andes. Here, our wine (Finca Altamira) has plenty of subtlety. Malbec grown on rocky soils, with temperatures in the diurnal range of 15°C to 30°C, allows fruit to develop more acidity and phenolic maturity," he explained. Alberto went on to add that in the district of Perdiel, in the northern region of Lujan de Cuyo, Malbec grows at 3000ft, on sandy soils with daily average temperatures of 20°C to 25 °C, creating "wines with black fruit flavours, balance and ripe tannins".

Sebastian Zuccardi, winemaker and direct descendent of Argentina's largest family-owned winery Familia Zuccardi, is paying special attention to the earth when it comes to *terroir*, "Besides the microclimate and vineyard orientation, the soils do make a difference. Thus we utilise remote sensing [by satellite] to capture detailed maps of the soil structure in our plots."

"Other producers may irrigate throughout the season, but our regime is

to provide water only when the vines really need it. Call it strategic irrigation if you like. We irrigate before bud burst and later when the soil starts drying out," he shared. "The roots of the vine then grow deep, seeking water and thus obtaining minerals from deep within the soil. The resulting grapes, and wine, will take on the rich flavours and aromas of earth—that is the taste of *terroir*."

I tasted three of Familia Zuccardi's Malbecs that clearly defined the response of the grape to different *terroir*. The Aluvional 'La Consulta' was masculine with dark fruit, coffee and mocha tones. The Aluvional 'Vista Flores' was all spice, peppers, herbs and floral whilst the Aluvional 'Alta Vista' presented herbs, baked bread, cherry overtones and a mineral, textured finish.

Zuccardi's single vineyard wines were in a different league, though. The Malbec of Finca Piedra Infinita (alluvial soils of the Tunuyán River, but with large deposits of limestone) showed fine tannins, small black fruit and a long finish; the Malbec of Finca Los Membrillos, (traditional Mendoza viticulture) was warmer with plums, lively acids and quite broad in the mouth; and the Finca Canal Uco Vineyard (stony soils, a canal formed by thawed snow) had cherry notes and powdery tannins.

**NEW EXPRESSIONS**

In Mendoza's sub-region of Vistalba, owner and winemaker Aurelio Montes Jr of Kaiken winery, told me that "terroir is not the only way we want to sell our wines". "Whilst we do produce single vineyard wines, we think blends make for sound and good tasting

wines. It is the taste that appeals to wine lovers and consumers." Montes Jr believes that he can achieve more complexity by blending wines. He would take Malbec from say, Altamira (known for its elegance and lighter tannins), and blend them with Malbec from Aguillo (prized for its florals and fruit and soft round character in the mouth).

In an elegant, sunlit tasting room with views of the stunning Andes, I tasted the Kaiken Ultra Range Malbec 2011, which composed of grapes from Vista Flores, Altamira and Los Abores. I was impressed by the wine's intensity, lushness, silky tannins, and its wide spectrum of aromas and flavours. Montes Jr shared that blending Malbecs from different regions is not their only approach. "In the Kaiken 'Terroir' series," he added, "we are producing wines from specific regions but the expression comes from a blend of different varietals." The Terroir Series Malbec blend 2011, made with Bonarda from Agrilo and Petit Verdot, was incredibly complex with earth and saline bitter sweet spices.

At Masi Tupungato, I discovered Malbec being made in a totally different fashion—as an Amarone-style ambrosia.

Masi is the famous Italian producer of Amarone and Venetian wines. Masi is also credited with inventing the 'ripasso', a technique that allows normal wines to be endowed with the flavours of Amarone: leftover grape skins, seeds and wine lees of Amarone are added to a regular wine such as Valpolicella, giving the latter a greater flavour and complexity.

Masi Tupungato's Paso Doble 2011, a wine made from 70% Malbec blended with the Venetian grape, Corvina, is amazing. The Corvina is prepared like Amarone, using *appassimento* (drying of grapes on racks to concentrate flavours) and a new method called 'double fermentation', where Malbec is re-fermented with dried *appassimento* Corvina grapes (instead of leftover grape skins and lees). The wine has an incredibly refined nose, with layers upon layers of small ripe red fruit aromas. Thanks to bold and talented vintners like Masi Tupungato, Malbecs from this part of the world are continuing to surprise and delight wine buffs with their various expressions. **WD**

**Age-worthy Malbecs**

- Bodega Rolland 2008, Val de Flores Malbec. It has some complexity with leathery and soy overtones, but still maintains a soft core of sweet black fruit, sticky tannins and a saline aftertaste. The quaff can age for another decade or more.
- Monteviejo S.A Lindaflor 2009, La Violeta. Leaner and more youthful but also with sweet fruit, solid tannins and length - a keeper that will blossom with time.
- The Kaiken 2009, Mai Malbec has notes of mint, herbs, and black olive nuances over delicious dark fruit.

**Other noteworthy producers of Malbec**

Zaha & Teho, Alpasion, Melipal, El Esteco, Finca La Chamiza, Rutini, Fabre, Mendoza Vineyards, Valentin Bianchi Sacif, Pulenta Estate, Trivento, El Esteco, Ambrosia de Tupungato, Aleanna, Vicentin Family, Vina Cobos, Nieto Senetiner, Lagarde, Riccitelli, Santos J Carelli, Cavas La Capilla, Andeluna and Norton.

