

KEEPING IT COOL

*Blockbuster Malbecs still have their fan base, but consumers are starting to demand a more elegant style. **Rebecca Gibb** finds producers ahead of the game in taming their tannins*

LIKE ALL GOOD wine, Argentina's producers are starting to mature beautifully. The evolution of their signature grape, Malbec, is a clear sign that the country's wine industry is in a new phase of development as a more elegant style replaces the powerhouse wines of yesterday. The beast, it appears, is turning into a beauty.

If you are a fan of concentrated, full-bodied Malbec with a lick of creamy vanilla oak on the finish, there are still plenty to choose from. However, there is a clear, discernible move towards a more restrained interpretation of the variety. Argentine producers are heading for the hills in search of the cooler climate sites that provide fresher, more elegant fruit. Combined with a better understanding of

its soils, and improving vineyard and winemaking techniques, Argentine Malbec is certainly becoming more feminine.

Most producers agree that elegant and fresher styles are the result of higher altitude sites. Higher altitude brings cooler temperatures, and areas such as the Uco Valley are bringing mouthwatering acidity, lower alcohol and less jammy fruit. Leading producer Catena Zapata has vineyards ranging in altitude from 860 to 1,500 metres. Its highest vineyards are in the Uco Valley, and assistant winemaker Mariela Molinari says, 'This is the birthplace of elegant Malbec. These cooler climates allow us to achieve finesse, acidity and concentration.'

Vineyard practices are being adapted to help achieve this. At Trapiche in Luján de Cuyo, winemaker Daniel Pi explains that producers are paying far more attention to soils as well as exploring >

PHOTOGRAPH: MATT WILSON/CEPHAS

LEFT: Sunrise over the Malbec vineyard of O Fournier in Mendoza, one of Argentina's warmer grape growing areas



Nicolás Catena (LEFT) of Catena Zapata and **Antonio Morescalchi** of Altos Las Hormigas (**ABOVE**) are both pursuing a more elegant style of Malbec

‘There is a discernible move towards a more restrained interpretation of Malbec’

COULD YOU TELL YOUR MALBEC FROM YOUR PINOT?

While Malbec is never going to be as delicate as Pinot Noir, Wines of Argentina’s UK director James Forbes claims the two grape varieties have more in common than you might imagine. He tested this idea more than two years ago in a Malbec vs Pinot Noir tasting and is still a firm believer. While most could identify the two grapes, some tasters slipped up. Forbes explains his theory, ‘Malbec doesn’t taste or smell anything like Pinot Noir but it is very aromatic, has soft tannin

and a freshness to it. There is a perception issue – people wrongly assume Malbec is big and tannic.’ Phil Crozier, group wine buyer for the Gaucho group of restaurants, is well qualified to comment, with eight years of buying Argentine wines under his belt. ‘I agree with James (Forbes) about Malbec being similar to Pinot Noir: it is incredibly aromatic with sweet, dense fruit underneath. But the most attractive thing about Malbec is the tannin.’ We await Burgundy’s response.

clonal selection, row orientation and vine density – all crucial to quality. Long hang times are falling out of favour and harvest dates are coming forward, meaning lower sugar levels and fresher acidity.

In the winery, producers are fermenting at lower temperatures, which helps reduce over-extraction of tannins and colour. There is also a trend away from the vanilla and coconut spice of American oak barrels to more subtle, cedar notes of French oak. Antonio Morescalchi, vice president of Altos Las Hormigas, says, ‘We started with American oak but are now migrating to French oak because we want a more restrained style.’ Some are even abandoning

the use of oak altogether. The world’s highest vineyard, Colomé, has produced an unoaked Malbec for the Gaucho UK restaurant group. In a blind tasting, seven out of the Gaucho’s eight tasters preferred the unoaked Malbec to an oaked version. Phil Crozier, the group’s wine buyer says, ‘I would encourage producers to make more unoaked Malbec.’

CHANGING TASTES

Opinion is divided on whether the quest for elegance is consumer- or producer-driven. Malbec has seen stellar success in the US since its major breakthrough on to the international wine scene, thanks to its ripe, sweet fruit and powerful style. And while there are many who continue to love blockbusters, Argentinian producers are noticing a shift in taste. José Manuel Ortega Gil-Fournier says, ‘I travel around the US a lot, and I have seen the market moving towards more finesse, driven by the trendsetters and the trade.’

Molinari agrees, ‘Some people still want a powerful style and that’s why big wines continue to do well. However, if you look at Chardonnay, people wanted the buttery style in that past, but nowadays it’s all about minerality. US consumers want more of that elegance from Malbec and it helps that we understand our terroirs better.’

Consumers are also calling for lower alcohol levels, and producers would be ill-

advised to overlook this trend. In such a dry and sunny climate, high sugar levels – and, consequently, alcohol levels – cannot be avoided. Morescalchi admits, ‘We are looking for a better balance of acid, less overripeness and lighter alcohol by picking earlier. I would like to produce wines below 14% alcohol.’

Other producers are already achieving lower alcohols. For the first time at The Wine Show in London last October, there were no wines over 14% alcohol on the Wines of Argentina stand.

Crozier has seen consumers growing ‘bored’ of big Malbecs, but he is vociferous in his opposition to the call for lower alcohol. ‘Argentinian wines come from a warm climate and high alcohols are inevitable. As long as the alcohol is in balance, there is no problem.’ In sunny, almost desert-like conditions (Mendoza’s annual rainfall is just 200mm compared to Bordeaux’s 900mm), the upshot is high alcohol. If you want 8% wines, the best advice is to head to the Mosel instead.

Current trends show consumers are looking for ‘drinkable’ wines, which don’t require a knife and fork. Buttery, oaky Australian Chardonnays are largely a thing of the past – could Argentinian Malbec be facing a similar fate? The answer is not yet. The blockbuster style still has a loyal following in the US, and is behind Malbec’s export success. Yes, a more elegant style is emerging, but the beauties and the beasts will sit side-by-side on wine lists for the foreseeable future. **D**

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THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS By Christelle Guibert

Without irrigation, Argentina would be a dry desert. From a European point of view, it would seem crazy to plant vines in such extreme conditions, but the Argentinians have enjoyed great success by harnessing their chief asset: altitude. While the highest vineyard in the world is located in Salta, just over 3,000m above sea level, the average altitude in Mendoza is around 900m. Wineries such as Catena Zapata are experimenting with high altitude vineyards and during my last visit, I was fascinated by the different styles of Malbecs influenced by vineyard altitude. In theory, the closer you are to the Andes, the higher the altitude and the cooler the vineyard. The cooler area of Tupungato in Uco Valley displays more aromatic Malbec characters, with a fresher acidity. Warmer regions such as Luján de Cuyo exhibits more concentrated, sweet and plummy fruit characters. A majority of producers tend to blend grapes obtained from cooler and warmer vineyards in order to increase the complexity and intensity of fruit, or simply for purely practical reasons.

COOL CLIMATE MALBECS TO TRY:

CATENA ZAPATA, MALBEC, ADRIANNA VINEYARD 2005 ★★★★★
The Adrianna Vineyard is located in the Gualtallary district, 1,500m above sea level. Lovely fruit expression with lots of purity and aromas of red cherry and spice. All elegance and finesse, delicate red fruit characters with round tannins supported by a natural acidity. First Growth quality. **£36.95; Hai, You**

TRAPICHE, VIÑA CRISTINA Y BIBIANA COLETTI, EL PAVEL 2006 ★★★★★

From Tupungato vineyard, this cuvée displays pure cassis fruit with some liquorice and a hint of white flower. The palate is fresh and young supported by a lively acidity and grainy tannins; fine minerality on the finish. **£25; You**

SOPHENIA SYNTHESIS MALBEC, UCO VALLEY 2007 ★★★

The grapes for this are sourced from the two high-altitude vineyards of Tupungato and Gualtallary. The wine displays elegant fruit ripeness with spice and toasted aromas. Intense plum fruits on the palate, with a natural acidity, great concentration and complexity; very long finish. **£18.95; Eil**

SOPHENIA RESERVE MALBEC, UCO VALLEY 2007 ★★★

From Tupungato and Gualtallary, a lovely fruit expression with aromas of plum and violet. Elegant tannins, with floral characters and natural acidity. The tannins are very well-integrated; good depth on the finish. **£10.95; Eil**

O FOURNIER, ALFA CRUX MALBEC, UCO VALLEY 2006 ★★★

From the foothills of the Andes, this wine displays intense plummy aromas with a hint of chocolate. The palate has a natural acidity with concentrated black fruits. A bigger style than most wines from this area. **£19.99; Hgt**

AND SOME FROM WARMER AREAS: ACHAVAL FERRER, FINCA ALTAMIRA, LA CONSULTA, LUJAN DE CUYO 2006 ★★★★★

This displays black forest fruits with spicy aromas. An elegant structure overlays a natural acidity, rich fruits and lots of layers on the finish. **£49.95; C&B**

MENDEL, LUJAN DE CUYO 2007 ★★★★★

Attractive combination of blackberry with spice and raisins. A very elegant style, full-bodied with concentrated black cherry and blackberry characters; intense, ripe tannins on the finish. **£13.50; PrA**

WALTER BRESSIA, MONTEAGRELO MALBEC, LUJAN DE CUYO 2006 ★★★★★

Vibrant nose with bright cherry and plum fruits; well-integrated spicy oak. On the palate, the high but refreshing acidity is framing the concentrate fruits of black berries and plums; rounded tannins on the finish. **£14.95; SVS**

CHAKANA MALBEC RESERVE, LUJAN DE CUYO 2007 ★★★

From the Agrelo vineyard comes this fresh and vibrant, fruit-driven wine with tones of black fruits and plums. The palate is complex, with a good purity of black fruit and some smooth tannins; very modern, fresh style. **£10.49; Fel**

DOMINIO DEL PLATA, BENMARCO MALBEC, LUJAN DE CUYO 2006 ★★★

90% Malbec and 10% Bonarda, this combines elegant concentration with rich, black forest fruits. Robust, with intense tannic structure around very ripe black fruit; good Malbec expression on the finish, very fruit-driven. **£11.99 Maj**

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