



Malbec Mania

Rick Staff
with a remit to sniff, taste,
and spit his way around Nanjing
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM
0-10 A WARNING
11-14 A Feasible Party Prop
15-17 Heartily Recommended
17-19 Exceptionally Good
20 The Apogee Of
WINE EXPRESSION

Despite Argentina's tricky fiscal trajectory of recent decades, a small red berry has triumphed. Just look at the numbers; Argentine Malbec now accounts for more than 70 percent of the entire world crop, representing almost half of all Argentinean wine exports. Argentina's most important export market, by far, is the US which imbibes almost as much as Argentina, estimated recently to be some 47.6 million litres compared to Argentina's 55.4 million, surging from 1,000 cases in 2002 to over 8,000 latterly. Exports to the States are now thought to have a total value of around US\$394.4 million, an explosive rise from US\$14.4 million in the gloom of 2002, the year of Argentina's sovereign debt default crisis.

France, though, is the country where Malbec is thought to have first surfaced, but it suffered from the country's damp northerly climes, the grape having a ready susceptibility to mildew. The severe northern Europe frost of 1956 finally forced the French to largely throw in the towel, subsequently ripping up their Malbec rootstock in favour of more robust varietals.

It is via the French agronomist Miguel Pouget, who in bringing the first Malbec cuttings over to Argentina from France in 1868 under the instructions of an Argentinean provincial governor, that the grape seems to have found its true home. These Pouget cuttings produce berries which are smaller and grow in tighter clusters than their French counterparts, suggesting this émigré may be a unique clone, now extinct in France but thriving in Argentine sunshine. That sun together with the much drier terrain around the rain sheltering Andes (most Malbec production is centred on the Mendoza region), all makes for a plusher, fruitier and more vibrant wine than the French version. And it's not just an easy-drinker either, with greater finesse and complexity found higher up the vine slopes, along with thicker grape skins.

Malbec is now Argentina's most widely planted grape, a mighty 25,000 hectares, and has become something of a cultural emblem through its international success, knocking the French into a cocked chapeau. This success has been achieved mainly through a very suitable climate, but surely it also owes something to being much easier to pronounce than Auxerrois or Côt Noir, the French synonyms for the grape. Significantly, Malbec fame has started to affect France's vineyard roadside signage, now more inclined to use Malbec, the more marketable buzz-word. Look out for it in a supermarket near you:

Move your eyes across Lo Tengo Malbec 2011's label (¥87 Auchan, ¥98 BHG) - that's right, they dance - and then your tongue over a well-made and fulsome wine with cherry flavours and a cassis like sliver of sweetness; it's big but approachable and very warming (15.5 points). Las Moras Malbec 2010 (¥89, Auchan) contains a dense and fascinating maze of plum and red fruit with a hint of violet amongst traces of dark chocolate, a suavely poised wine in spite of its weight (17 points). Viñas Argentina Privado 2011 (¥60, Metro) declares one straight note of easy going blackberry fruit - Miles Davies-esque in precision and clarity - with a pleasingly firm texture. The wine develops more complexity over time revealing enticing notes of coffee and tobacco, and is surely the pick of the bunch for the price (16.5 points).

All three wines work phenomenally alongside steak, Argentina's time-honoured national chow (wine being officially sanctioned the national drink in 2010), but BBQ'd, or slow-grilled, gourmet sausages, and a big slab of very mature cheddar will do nicely if a sufficiently chunky steak is hard to pin down. **WU**

