

MIGHTY MALBEC

March 8, 2014

American Wine Society
Red River Valley Chapter
Mighty Malbec Tasting

7:00 pm at the home of
Dogan Comez and Dana Gulej

\$25 members • \$30 nonmembers
<http://greginnd.com/rrvaws>



“Malena” by Claro Bettinelli

The Distinctive Grape in South America

Malbec

Malbec is a dark, large, thin-skinned grape that grows in large, loose bunches. While it needs ample sunlight and heat, it can do well at relatively high altitudes. It does best in well-irrigated and well-drained soils. It is susceptible to rot in cool and wet conditions, and to frost. It has been claimed that for Malbec to develop to its full potential, it “needs ‘hang time’ even after sugar levels indicate ripeness” or it may be “very ‘green’ tasting, without its characteristic notes of plum and anise” (http://www.winepros.org/wine101/grape_profiles/malbec.htm). Malbecs are not typically made for long aging (often around 5 years), although some Cahors wines, with heavy tannins, can age much longer.

Malbec wines are distinctly dark (intense purple-violet) and can be powerful. Most often used as a blending grape, it has reached its pinnacle as a varietal in Argentina. While, Malbec grows about anywhere a good red varietal grows, in Argentina and the slopes of the Andes, Malbec has found a home where it can be king. Argentine Malbecs typically have aromas and tastes of dark

fruits, such as blackberry, boysenberry, dark cherries, and plum, along with chocolate, coffee, licorice/anise, vanilla, spices, and other favor notes. The Argentine Malbecs are also noted for softer tannins than in France.

Malbec is a more widely grown wine grape than most of us realize. The Oxford Companion to Wine lists some 400 synonyms for Malbec, which a big reason why we are unaware of its actual production quantity. Another reason is that it is typically used as a blending grape rather than a stand-alone varietal. In France, the Malbec is typically called Auxerrois in the Cahors region while in Loire they are Côt, and in Bordeaux as Pressac or Côt. In Australia Malbec is sometimes called Portugal Malbec, and in Portugal, Malbec grapes are also used for at least some ports (<http://www.winesofargentina.org/eng/variedades/malbec.htm> and <http://www.winesofargentina.org/eng/historia.htm>).

Some of the earliest vineyards of France were planted by the Romans in the Cahors region. Malbec came to be widely grown in Cahors and into Bordeaux. In about 1880, phylloxera destroyed much of the vines, but they were

replanted. Malbec was valued in Bordeaux as a blending grape for its color and tannins. In 1956, a killing frost wreaked tremendous destruction in Bordeaux and the Malbec growth never recovered, as new varietals took its place. In Cahors, however, Malbec remained the dominant grape. Cahors was awarded Appellation Controlée status in 1971, and all Cahors wines must have at least 70% Malbec, with many producers using higher percentages (Tannat and other grapes added). Today, there are some 200 producers in Cahors. Wines of Cahors are noted for their big tannins and especially for their very dark color—they are referred to as “vins noirs” or “black wines” of Cahors.

[A little history of Malbec](#)

Wine grapes were brought into Argentina in the early 1560s by Catholic priests from Chile (www.allaboutar.com/ar_wine_intro.htm; www.winesofargentina.org/eng/historia.htm). In the 1800s, French, Italian, and Spanish immigrants brought new varieties and approaches to wine making in Argentina. In 1868, a French agronomist introduced the Malbec grape, along with cabernet sauvignon and merlot, to Argentina from cuttings from Bordeaux (www.uncork.com.au/tidbits18.htm). Wine production grew and while there are multiples wine producing regions in Argentina, the Mendoza region merged as the leading production area and is today regarded as the premiere wine region of Argentina.

Argentina is well known for its cattle ranching, gauchos, and love of beef. It is not surprising, therefore, that Argentines favored big red wines that could stand up to the often grilled red meat. The Malbec grape grows well in Argentina and the wines it produces matched the tastes of Argentineans. By the late 1970s, most Argentine red wine was still produced as table wine, well suited for meals with red meat. For reasons not clear to me, Argentina (government and/or producers) effectively gave up on Malbec and in the 1980s, Argentina went through a “vine pull” process that reduced Malbec vineyards from an

estimated 150,000 acres to about 10,000 acres (www.uncork.com.au/tidbits18.htm). The attitude toward the Malbec wines soon changed, however, and plantings have since rebounded to around 25,000 acres.

Until the late 1990's, Argentina exported less than 10% of the wines it produced, and those wines were very hard to find in the US (thenakedvine.blogspot.com/search/label/malbec). In a relatively short time—about a decade or less—Argentina has emerged as a recognized producer of high quality wines at very good prices. Malbec has now become the signature wine of the country. Argentina Malbecs have less tannin and are softer than Cahors wines.

Chile also emerged on the international scene in the 1990s as major wine producing country. Chilean wines hit the markets in the US a little earlier than Argentina. While Carmenère is perhaps the most distinctive wine of Chile, a broad range of wine varieties are produced including Malbec, which is now the third most grown grape in the country (www.uncork.com.au/tidbits18.htm).

Malbec in the United States has remained largely a blending grape. However, there have been scattered vintners who produced Malbec wine as a distinct varietal. I don't know how many of these wineries consistently produce Malbec as opposed to producing in only in exceptional years. Perhaps the future popularity of Argentine and other Malbecs will be the key to American production.

Malbec wines are produced in other countries, as well, although in very small amounts. Web searching produced Malbec wines from Australia (where I think the production is growing), New Zealand, and Italy.

MIGHTY MALBEC WINES

2011 Francis Coppola Malbec

100% Malbec; 12 months French Oak
California
Happy Harry's \$16.99

Dark garnet color with aromas of plums, berries, earthy mineral tones. Cassis, cherry, anise and espresso on the palate.

2011 Bodega Elvira Calle Alberti 154

100% Malbec; 10 months in French Oak studded concrete tanks
Mendoza, Argentina
Happy Harry's \$12.99

2008 Domain du Peyrié Cahors

Malbec
Cahors, France
Bridgeview \$16.99

Black currants and thick skinned blueberries are tempered with ferrous minerals, a firm grip of nutty tannins and blackberries all along the finish. Bright acidity whets the appetite and makes me yearn for a fine cut of venison or lamb, boar or cassoulet.

2009 Château Eugénie Tradition

80% Malbec, 20% Merlot
Cahors, France
88 points Wine Enthusiast
Bridgeview \$15.99

Fruity wine when young, red fruit aroma, blackcurrant, cherry, woodland fruits, with a slighty spicy touch. Pronounced, unpretentious flavour on the palate, warm, rich in substance.

2012 Blackcabra

100% Malbec
Mendoza, Argentina
Happy Harry's \$14.99

This medium-bodied, easy-drinking wine offers notes of blackberry jam, juicy blueberry, coffee, spice and white pepper.

2010 Susana Balbo Signature

95% Malbec, 5% Cabernet Sauvignon; 13 months 80% New French and 20% second year French oak
Mendoza, Argentina
89 points International Wine Cellar
Happy Harry's \$23.99, also available at Bernies

Beautiful deep violet color with exploding aromas of blackberry, black cherry, and violets framed by hints of oak and mint. The wonderful aromas are mirrored on the palate, and they are joined by ripe plum fruit and a hint of toasty vanilla, bittersweet chocolate, and a hint of mint on the finish.

2011 Colomé Estate

85% Malbec with Tannat, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Petite Verdot; aged in new and second year French oak
Calchaqui Valley, Argentina
93 points The Tasting Panel
Happy Harry's \$27.99

Dark and dense with ripe blackberry and spice; intense with depth and beautiful oak influence and vivid, rich flavors; lush, elegant and stunning; the best vintage yet of this important wine.

2010 Tikal Natural Organic

100% Malbec
Mendoza, Argentina
91 points Robert Parker, International Wine Cellar, Wine & Spirits
Bernie's \$23.99

The 2010 Natural is 100% Malbec made from organically grown grapes and aged for 12 months in French and American oak. It offers up an expressive nose of wood smoke, spice box, violets, tobacco, and black cherry. This is followed by an elegant, sweetly-fruited, forward wine that over-delivers in a big way. Drink this outstanding value over the next 5-6 years.

2009 Trapiche Jorge Miralles Terroir Series

100% Malbec, single vineyard
Mendoza, Argentina
93 points Wine Enthusiast, 90 points Wine Spectator
Costco \$39.99

Full-bodied and richly textured, this 2009 "Finca Jorge Miralles" Malbec from Trapiche fills the mouth with flavours reminiscent of plums, dark cherries and blueberries, which are supported by the sinuous and glossy tannin structure that make fine Malbec such an attractive and fashionable wine at the moment. Increasingly flavours of chocolate, coffee bean and liquorice emerge from the mid-palate, with hints of clove and a little white pepper spice breaking up the lengthy finish. A significant level of acidity prevents the plush fruit notes from becoming cloying and in combination with the tannins offers significant potential for further maturation.

2009 Lapostolle Clos Apalta

78% Carmenere, 19% Cabernet Sauvignon and 3% Petit Verdot
Colchagua Valley, Chile
96 points Wine Spectator, 93 points Wine Enthusiast, 91 points Robert Parker, 2005 vintage was WS #1 top 100 wine in 2008
Bernies \$94.59

Typically intense, polished and smooth up front, this has concentrated aromas of graphite, cola, wild berry, spice, coconut and wood. It feels full and makes a statement on the palate, where baked, earthy, fully loaded flavors of clove, herb and black fruit hold court. Oaky and spicy on the finish, this needs another 2-4 years to fully settle.