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The International Wine Review

Double Issue

Report # 26: The Diverse Wines of Argentina

Introduction



Argentina is world famous for its Malbec. Six years ago we wrote about Malbec in Report # 5 *Argentina's Magnificent Malbec* and predicted great things. Since that time, Malbec has been the engine behind an unparalleled 300 percent

growth in wine exports. It remains Argentina's most important grape, with 13 percent of total premium varietal plantings. And Mendoza remains the country's most important wine region with 69.5 percent of total grape production. More importantly, it is by far the most important region in terms of premium wines, representing 91.5 percent of all bottled wine and 94.1 percent of all wine exported to the US.

However, Argentina produces many more varieties than just Malbec, and good quality wine is produced in many more provinces than Mendoza. In this report, we update our assessment of Malbec and Mendoza but, also, explore the diverse wines and wine regions found in other parts of the country. As part of this exploration, we traveled to Patagonia to meet the winemakers of Neuquén and Río Negro, as well as to Mendoza, and we tasted the wines of San Juan, Salta, and La Rioja, too. Altogether, we tasted almost 600 wines; our evaluations of those wines are in the Tasting Notes and Ratings section at the end of this report.

What we discovered was a country of diverse terroir and diverse wines. It includes some of the world's southernmost vineyards in Patagonia, some of the world's highest vineyards in Salta, irrigation canals first constructed by the Incas, the strong, dry Zondo wind that comes out of the Andes, a 450 year old wine-growing tradition that began with the monks who accompanied the Spanish conquest of South America and world class winemakers descended from the Italian and Spanish immigrants of the 19th century. In the 20th century, Raúl de la Mota and Nicolás Catena lead the way, but Susana Balbo, Daniel Pi, Andrea Marchiori, José Galante, José Luis Mounier, Roberto de la Mota and others followed in their footsteps. They were aided in this journey by some of the world's best international consulting winemakers—Michel Rolland, Alberto Antonini, and Paul Hobbs.

The grapes are equally diverse, ranging from Malbec and Bonarda, two European red varieties that flourish in Argentina's hospitable climate to Torrontés, a *vitis vinifera* grape unique to

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Argentina, and including a wide range of the wine world's most popular wine grapes today, including Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Pinot Noir. While Malbec remains Argentina's most important red grape by far, Torrontés has become its main premium white varietal.

Argentina is also diverse when it comes to the wine market. While many countries enter the global market by producing inexpensive wines, Argentina did so by producing medium-priced Malbecs. Today it competes across the board, from inexpensive, entry-level wines to pricey, luxury cuvées. Its inexpensive wines are often incredible values, while its luxury cuvées compete with the best wines of the world. The top rated Malbecs in each price category are listed in Annex 1 to this report.

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Introduction

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In this report, we start by exploring the history of wine and winemaking in Argentina up to the present day. We then examine the principal winemaking regions, from Salta in the north to Patagonia in the south, and take a close look at Argentina's successful unique varieties—Malbec, Bonarda, and Torrontés. Next, we examine the market for Argentine wine and the challenges the country faces in continuing to increase both the quantity and quality of exports. Finally, we present our evaluations of the best Argentine wines in the Tasting Notes and Ratings at the end of the report, and we list the top Malbec and Torrontés wines. We encourage readers with a special interest in how Malbec is grown and vinified to consult the technical Annex to this report.

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Mike Potashnik, Publisher
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