Malbec

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Malbec was originally a grape associated with south west France but today is much more glorious in South America.

Better known then as Cot, it was the most commonly planted vine throughout south west France, including Bordeaux, and was still widely grown there until the severe winter of 1956 killed many of the vines and more glamorous alternatives were replanted. It even has its very own synonym, Pressac, on the right bank of the Gironde. In Bordeaux today it is not common - growers complain of coulure, poor fruit set - but is mainly grown in such outlying parts of Bordeaux as Bourg, Blaye and Entre-Deux-Mers. It is also theoretically allowed, although not widely grown, in a wide range of other appellations in south west France but it is in Cahors that it is best known, even if it travels under the name Auxerrois or Cot here. (It is also known in the Loire Valley as Cot but is a marginal ingredient in the appellations of Anjou-Touraine.)

The regulations for Cahors stipulate a minimum of 70 per cent of Malbec/Auxerrois/Cot and the vine seems to do best on the this topsoils of the arid *causses*, the limestone plateaux above the river Garonne which are Cahors's most traditional vineyards. Certainly wines made here rather than down by the river bank seem to have the greatest potential for ageing, especially when blended with Tannat rather than Merlot grapes.

There has also been a recent influx of money and ambition into Cahors, from foreigners whether they be from New York or Paris such as the family behind the Cartier empire which is determined to produce in Le Pigeonnier a Cahors worthy of cult prices. See for details of some other very glamorous Cahors made in the style of the most sumptuous Argentine Malbecs. But the fact remains that a great deal of Cahors is pretty rustic stuff, often a little thin and animal on the mid palate.

Apart from the fact that they are both red, one can hardly recognise a relationship between most of the Malbec produced in Cahors and that produced in its modern home, Argentina. In the 1980s Argentina's vineyards, particularly those in the dominant wine region Mendoza, were awash with Malbec and the Argentine wine industry was rather ashamed of the fact, assiduously pulling it out in favour of something more obviously fashionable such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

But the particular strain of Malbec that was taken to Argentina, it is thought in the mid 19th century and possibly via the cuttings imported into Chile from Bordeaux, has adapted itself so spectacularly to local conditions that foreign visitors to Argentina's winelands on the heavily-irrigated eastern flanks of the Andes had by the 1990s convinced the Argentine wine industry that Malbec was the jewel in its crown. This was unfortunately not in time to stop so many vines being pulled out that Malbec was for a time overtaken as Argentina's most planted noble grape by a particularly Argentine version of the northern Italian grape Bonarda however.

Good Argentine Malbec, and there is a great deal of it for Argentina is one of the world's most prolific wine producers, is deeply coloured, spicily rich with an exuberant juiciness and has as a trademark an almost velvety texture. Some Malbecs are made for long ageing but generally the wines have much softer tannins than Argentine Cabernet Sauvignon, for example. With its high levels of alcohol and fruit, Argentine Malbec is not difficult to like.

Mendoza is Argentine Malbec's homeland and within it the Lujan de Cujo district just south of the leafy city of Mendoza was relatively early identified as Malbec's spiritual home. Malbec can be planted at slightly higher altitudes than the late ripening Cabernet Sauvignon - in fact it retains its acidity and aroma better that way. Examples of Malbec from some of Argentina's cooler wine regions such as Rio Negro as far south as Patagonia manage a particularly appetising combination of juicy sweetness and a certain vigorous, sappy character.

It is significant that so many of those now trying to make luxury wines in Argentina have either based their extremely expensive blends on Malbec or at the very least incorporate it to a significant degree. I am thinking here of such as names as Caro (a joint venture between Chateau Lafite-Rothschild and Nicolas Catena), Catena Zapata, Cheval des Andes (a joint venture between Chateau Cheval Blanc and LVMH's Terrazas de

los Andes which already makes extremely good Malbec at various different levels itself), and Michel Rolland's own extensive range of Argentine wines such as Yacochuya from Salta in the north (with the Etchart family) and the Clos de los Siete project high up in the Andes near Vista Flores with various, mainly French partners.

Ancient Malbec vines are the chief component of candidates for the world's highest vineyards in Salta province, at Swiss

art collector Donald Hess's Colomé vineyard near Los Molinos and on Tacuil, the neighbouring farm wich still belongs to Raul Davilos, the man who once owned Colomé. It is worth noting that the average age of Argentina's Malbec vines is relatively high - doubtless a factor in the quality of the wine they produce.

Malbec seems to be a good candidate for blending – especially with wines naturally high in tannins and/or acidity. Cabernet Sauvignon is an obvious blending partner.

It is hardly surprising that Argentina's neighbour Chile is now also producing some very successful Malbec. In fact Chile has long had quite substantial plantings of old Malbec vines and in those vineyards where irrigation is not to enthusiastic and yields are not too high, Chile's Malbec can produce some lusciously ripe, dark and characterful wines. Viu Manent was one of the first Chilean bodegas to specialise in Malbec but now there are dozens.

Australia has some Malbec planted and South Australia can boast some interesting blends of it with Cabernet. Argentina's success with the variety means that it has been taken a little more seriously there than it once was. The wines so far seem more like Cahors plus sunshine rather than like those of Argentina.

A handful of California producers believe that Malbec is a suitable ingredient for a truly authentic Meritage (Bordeaux dark-skinned grape) blend - although it is hardly ever found in Bordeaux's better reds nowadays.

In north east Italy some vines called variously Malbec, Malbech, or Malbeck are to be found.

Some particularly good Malbecs:

Catena Alta Malbec, Argentina

Colomé, Argentina (via Hess Group of Switzerland)

Cheval des Andes (via Ch Cheval Blanc in Bordeaux)

Clos de los Siete (via Michel Rolland of Pomerol)

Terrazas de los Andes Gran Malbec

Ch Lagrezette's top Cahors Le Pigeonnier

Ch de Cèdre' top Cahors Le Cèdre and GC

Domaine Cosse Maisonneuve’s top Cahors

Viu 1 from Viu Manent, Chile