

The Best New Wines from Argentina

By [Stephen Tanzer](#)

JAN / FEB 09

In the ten months ending in October of 2008, the total dollar value of wine shipped by the top ten wine-exporting countries to the U.S. was essentially flat compared to the first ten months of 2007. But over the same period Argentina set records for both the quantity and dollar value of wine it sent to the U.S.—up 18% and 40% respectively. Argentina now ranks fourth in volume and sixth in dollar value among exporters of wine to the U.S. While much of this recent growth was accounted for by bulk wine, the rising popularity of malbec, Argentina's signature red variety, has also played a key role. Malbec continues to be red hot: it now represents about 45% of cases shipped to America of Argentine wine, and 53% of dollar value.

In my extensive tastings of well over 600 Argentine wines in recent months, nearly half of the bottles I tried were malbec or mostly malbec. I discovered superb values in every price range, although it must be said that the range of quality and styles was mindboggling. At one end of the spectrum, there's plenty of insipid, rustic, overripe or downright flawed wine on the market. And at the other extreme, numerous good but expensive flagship bottlings do not justify their price tags in today's more cost-sensitive market. With consumers balking at paying \$50 or more for Châteauneuf du Pape or California cabernet in a difficult economic environment, how many drinkers will be willing to fork over that much for malbec from Argentina? Happily, one can also find some classy, structured, ageworthy red wines that are fairly priced at that level.

A few observations from my tastings this year. Recent vintages in Argentina have been conducive to making excellent wine. Vintages 2007, 2006 and 2005 were all at least very good, and all three years have yielded many outstanding red wines. Of those three vintages, I have found quality to be most variable in 2006: even some pricey items showed evidence of quick or uneven ripening. In some wines, grape sugars may have galloped ahead of true phenolic maturity. The result is frequently a liqueur-like or stewed-fruit character, or even an overripe/underripe quality in some bottlings. While some '06s are quite expressive in their youth, they seem to lack the depth and balance of the other recent vintages.

Malbec rules. Wine lovers who prefer the restrained sweetness and moderate alcohol levels of Old World wines may find some of the richest malbecs a bit unwieldy and overripe, if not downright sugary or roasted. There are also many solidly made but rather chunky and unsophisticated wines that offer considerable appeal to tasters who don't require their wines to show clarity or subtlety of aromas and flavors. But there are also plenty of laid-back, more serious and ageworthy versions, many of them characterized by aromas and flavors of fresh dark berries, violet and peppery lift, and firm structure for development in bottle. Paying \$40 or more—and in some cases much more—for icon bottlings of malbec is no guarantee of a superior bottle. As in so many other countries with relatively recent histories of making wines for demanding international drinkers, high-end bottlings here generally get a lot of new oak. Yes, the flagship wines come mostly from low-yielding old vines in the most favored sites, but their distinctive voices too often struggle to be heard over the din of oak. And expensive French oak is not automatically high-quality expensive French oak. This is hardly a problem limited to Argentina. Call me a cynic, but I have long believed that, as a general rule, the best French oak barrels are reserved for the home market.

But bargains abound. In my recent tastings, a number of wineries stood out for the quality of their offerings in the \$12 range. These bottles compare favorably in concentration, character and consistency to the best red wine values from anywhere. Alamos, Andeluna, O. Fournier's Urban Uco range, Goulart and Trumpeter are just a few of the labels that come to mind. There are also some genuinely excellent wines available for around \$20: check out current releases from the likes of Bodega Benegas, BenMarco, Clos de los Siete, Finca Decero, Navarro Correas, La Posta del Viñatero, and Tapiz/Zolo.

Clearly, American wine drinkers are capitalizing on Argentina's very low land and labor costs. We're also benefiting from the fact that many Argentine producers are obsessed with establishing their brands in the important U.S. market, even if that means forgoing short-term profits. It never fails to amaze me that many of Argentina's ultra-premium bottlings are 50% to 100% more expensive in the home market—this despite the fact that their prices put them beyond the means of all but the wealthiest Argentines.

Patagonia intrigues me. There aren't that many wineries in Patagonia to begin with, and among them only a handful export their wines. But the best of these bottles are wonderfully energetic and often floral wines characterized by juicy acidity and lovely flavor definition. Malbec this far south can take on an almost pinot-like texture—and the fascinating pinot noirs from Bodega Chacra suggest that this very dry climate, with its warm days and chilly nights, may offer considerable potential for the variety.

Chardonnay and beyond. Really interesting chardonnays are scarce in Argentina, the finest of them coming mostly from the Catena family. But in my recent tastings I ran across some surprisingly fresh sauvignon blancs. Better still, Argentina's unique torrontés, typically the first wine to arrive at the table at a banquet in a Buenos Aires restaurant, makes for a lovely aperitif or first-course wine, and more of these wines are now available in the U.S. market. Even if torrontés rarely has the texture or complexity to merit a 90+ rating, the best examples are dry, delicate wines whose combination of stone and soft citrus fruits and floral notes is reminiscent of viognier.

Remember cabernet. Finally, in your rush to try malbecs, don't overlook Argentina's cabernet sauvignons, which can be very good.

[2007 Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Treinta y Dos Patagonia](#)

(\$95) Good full, deep red. Deep, musky aromas of black cherry, licorice, violet, spices and underbrush; distinctly blacker in character than the Cincuenta y Cinco. Then firm and mineral in the mouth, with very primary, energetic flavors of dark fruits and spices. Finishes with solid but suave tannins and excellent tangy length and lift. These two fascinating wines, from vineyards originally planted in 1932 and 1955, give further evidence of the considerable promise Patagonia offers for high-quality pinot noir. (Kobrand, Inc., New York, NY)

92

[2007 Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Cincuenta y Cinco Patagonia](#)

(\$64) Moderately saturated medium red. Captivating aromas of strawberry, raspberry, pepper, spices and herbs. Lush, suave, sweet and seamless, with a lovely Burgundian delicacy to its juicy red berry and spice flavors. Finishes with broad, dusty tannins and lingering sweetness. I love the stem component here.

91

[2007 Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Barda Patagonia](#)

(\$23) Dullish red with a pale rim. Candied red fruits and mocha on the rather perfumed nose. Juicy, spicy and aromatic, with sweet red fruit flavors complicated by almost Burgundian meat and underbrush. A supple pinot with a light touch.

88

Priced from: 26.95