



the makers of mendoza

Malbec is to Mendoza what Sauvignon Blanc is to Marlborough. **Natasha Hughes** shadows a group of sommeliers on the first of three recent Wines of Argentina trips to the region



Catena has backed up its belief in the differences between vineyards located at different altitudes by planting Malbec at a number of heights. But, like many top producers in the region, it is increasingly seeking to plant at high elevations for its best wines. Its premium vineyard is the Adrianna, located at 1,500 metres above sea level in the Uco Valley. This elevation allows its Malbecs to attain a greater degree of freshness than might otherwise be possible, thanks to cooler temperatures and greater temperature variations.

According to Alejandro Sejanovic, Catena's winery and vineyard director, another factor is also at play when it comes to determining the structure of the finished Malbecs. 'One characteristic of high-altitude vineyards is that the plant needs to protect the seeds from ultra-violet rays by producing thicker skins,' he says. 'The result is that you have a higher than usual ratio of skin to pulp, which helps produce great concentration of flavour and tannin.'

By taking such factors into account in the vineyards, winemakers are able to produce some stunning Malbecs in Mendoza, as the sommeliers on this trip discovered. 'We all got very excited about the wines that showed good natural acidity and minerality. There were a number of wineries that showed us that it's more than possible to create expressive wines with great purity of fruit and beautiful balance here in Mendoza,' concluded Tate Catering's Jade Koch. 🍷

making the most of malbec: imbibe's top tips

Whether you operate a bar, gastropub or restaurant, give your customers a taste of Argentina with marvellous Malbec...

- Remember that Malbec comes in a variety of styles, from big and spicy wines that are a great match for hearty gastropub fare to lighter styles that don't demand food.
- Think beyond the obvious steak match. Malbec isn't just a great partner for beef, it can also work well with game dishes, while the lighter styles can be paired with lamb and duck.
- Argentina is a good source of value-for-money Malbec, but it's well worth considering the pricier examples to add some depth to your list. Encourage your customers to trade up with by-the-glass offers.

What the sommeliers thought



WILL SMITH, ARBUTUS AND WILD HONEY

'It's getting harder and harder to find wines that you can sell for under £20 on a wine list and still make a

margin, and one of Argentina's strengths is that it can hit that price point and still offer good value. But I think it would be a shame for people to think Argentina is all about cheap Malbec as we've seen some really well-structured wines that would hit around £40-£50 on a list.'



NICOLAS ANGELINA, NOURA

'Winemakers who really understand what they're doing have shown that it's possible to create wines

that express their terroir very clearly. The most successful Malbecs were those with lower levels of alcohol that expressed good minerality.'



ERIC ZWIEBEL, SUMMER LODGE

'I was pleasantly surprised by some relative newcomers who clearly took the long-term view

and were creating wines based on a different vision, with a focus on elegance and complexity.'



DAVID VAREILLE, BLEEDING HEART RESTAURANTS

'There are definite terroir differences in Mendoza, and the Uco Valley seems

to produce Malbecs of greater elegance, thanks to the high altitude and cooler climate. By and large, wines from this area showed far more minerality and freshness than those from elsewhere. I also found that wineries using less, or no American oak produced wines of greater elegance.'

For most of us, Mendoza and Malbec go together like a horse and carriage, roast beef and horseradish or champagne and oysters. Just in case you were in any doubt, however, the first sight that greeted our group of travelling sommeliers from the UK as they stepped out of the airport was a carefully tended mini-vineyard packed with a few dozen rows of Malbec vines.

The grape's origins lie in France's Southwest, where it was once a traditional blending grape in Bordeaux and is still the key grape in Cahors. Although there are plantations of the grape in most Argentine wine-growing regions, the plateau of Mendoza is Malbec's adopted homeland. But by making its home here, Malbec has subjected itself to the vinous equivalent of tough love. Sheltered in the rain shadow of the Andean peaks, the Mendoza plateau would be a virtual desert if it were not for the man-made channels that drain off the mountain meltwater to irrigate the vineyards.

BRAVING THE ELEMENTS

'Without irrigation, it would be impossible to grow anything here at all,' says Pedro Marchevsky (see left), one of Argentina's top viticulturalists, joint owner of Dominio del Plata and our guide for the morning. 'There is no lack of water in Mendoza, the big problem, especially at harvest time, in the form of hail, is *frozen* water.'

Modern technology has seen the invention of effective yet expensive netting to protect against this golf ball-sized menace (in fact there's a whole new branch of science devoted to the colour of the netting and how that moderates the effect of the sun). Traditionally though the solution was simple, and to avoid catastrophe, wineries simply planted vineyards in different areas around the region. This has had a profound and positive effect on Argentina's wines today, as winemakers have become highly expert

at blending from a myriad of zones to build wines of layered complexity. Most single varietal Malbecs coming out of Mendoza, for example, are in fact blends.

Broadly speaking there are two schools of thought on what the critical factors are in defining the region's terroir. According to Marchevsky, there are differences in soil structure that characterise each of over 90 sub-zones. But not everyone in Mendoza shares this opinion. 'Terroir in Mendoza is

defined by temperature and altitude,' says Jeff Mausbach, Catenas's wine education director. 'It's one of the key differences between the Old and the New Worlds. In many Old World regions, soil is the key factor – and the best are those poorest in organic matter and those that are the freest draining. Here in Mendoza, where all soils are both extremely poor and very free draining, temperature and altitude become the critical factors.'

Sommeliers' favourites: Mendoza and Patagonia

Luigi Bosca, Icono, Mendoza 2005

£54.45 *H&H Bancroft, 020 7232 5440*

'The wine showed the capacity of Mendoza to produce elegant, Bordeaux-style wines, but with riper fruit.'

Kelvin McCabe, Roka

Bodega Noemia, J Alberto, Rio Negro 2005

£22.85 *The Wine Treasury, 020 7793 9999*

'It was easy to drink, elegant and charming, with great balance between alcohol, tannins and length.'

Eric Zwiebel, Summer Lodge

Catena Zapata, Adrianna Vineyard Malbec, Uco Valley, Mendoza 2005

POA Bibendum, 020 7722 5577

'It was an absolutely effortless wine. The aromatics were perfect – and so interesting, with its aromas of flowers and oyster shells. It also showed great minerality.'

Jade Koch, Tate Catering

Achaval Ferrer, Finca Bella Vista, Mendoza 2007

POA Corney & Barrow, 020 7265 2530

'Ripe, with wonderful concentration of fruit and expressive minerality derived from its terroir, with perfectly integrated oak. Elegance and finesse in a glass.'

Nicolas Angelina, Noura

Bodega Chacra, Cincuenta y Cinco, Rio Negro 2007

£34 *Lea & Sandeman, 020 7244 0522*

'It has its own identity, sitting somewhere between the New World and the Old. Unbelievable acidity – it gave me goosebumps to see a Pinot Noir grown in the desert with this kind of freshness.'

David Vareille, Bleeding Heart Restaurants

wind of change

The Argentines are excited about Patagonia, and certainly its arid, wind-lashed climate can offer something different. The question, as **Natasha Hughes** and a group of sommeliers discover, is what?



Out on the fringes of Patagonia's irrigated zone, the sage green colour of drought-resistant scrub is punctuated by the burnt brown grasses of summer's end and the white trunks of ghost gums. Closer to the road, espaliered apple trees mass in tidy ranks, protected from the 100-mile-an-hour winds that regularly sweep across the Patagonian plain by cordons of poplar trees. Orchards like this drive the region's economy, with much of its fruit being shipped overseas. Those cherries you had last Christmas were probably picked from a tree whose roots dig deep into Patagonian soil.

But these days Patagonia's fruit crop is expanding beyond apples and cherries and into grapes as winemakers (and winery owners) have begun to get very excited about its potential as a viticultural area. Over the past decade, there's been

some major investment in both vineyards and wineries – and it's now beginning to bear fruit, as our group of UK sommeliers visiting the region discovered.

As a winemaking area, Patagonia is divided into two zones, Neuquén and Rio Negro, which both lie along the region's

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of confidence in the
region's potential

northern border, butting up to the provinces of Mendoza and La Pampa. To the south lies an ocean of pampas grass, then come the ice floes, the penguins and, eventually, Antarctica. Thanks to the cool

winds that bluster up from the Southern Ocean, Patagonia has the potential to grow grapes of very high quality indeed.

Of the two regions, Rio Negro has the longest viticultural history: immigrants to the region have been tending vineyards for at least a century. The oldest winery, Humberto Canale, celebrates its 100th birthday this year. But while most of the region's producers are aiming at the mass

market, it's the top-end boutique wineries that are generating the most excitement. Our guide around Patagonia, Hans Vinding-Diers, the winemaker at both Bodega Noemía (a Malbec specialist) and Bodega Chacra (whose focus is Pinot Noir), had consulted in the region for a number of years and could see the potential in its terroir.

"The soils, which are alluvial with a calcareous bedrock, were deposited



What the sommeliers thought



KELVIN MCCABE, ROKA

'Patagonia's doing really well, especially considering it was a desert to begin. For

me, the best wines from the region – which came from Noemía and Chacra – were exceptional. The Noemía wines, in particular, showed a real expressive minerality.'



JADE KOCH, TATE CATERING

'I think there's the potential to make top-end restaurant wines in Patagonia, but they need to

learn how to make the best of their terroir and I'm not sure everyone has done that yet. Though we did see some expressive, almost delicate, wines with great minerality.'

Patagonia for the on-trade

JAMES FORBES, WINES OF ARGENTINA

'From an on-trade point of view it has always struck me that the wines of Patagonia are exceptionally well suited. Leaving aside grape varieties and styles (of which there are many), all of the wines are characterised by profound minerality, juicy natural acidity and clear pure fruit. This gives them great versatility both by the glass or as matches for a wide range of dishes. Pinot Noir and Malbec are the stars here and the pricing is sharp too! If you don't believe me try them for yourself at our Annual Trade Tasting at Lord's on 15 September.'

by glaciers during the last ice age,' he explains. 'They're very poor soils that are appropriate for making fine wines rather than big, fat wines.'

The other attraction of the area, for Vinding-Diers, was the climate. 'The humidity is, at most, 40%, so there's no vine disease, and the region has a high degree of thermal amplitude, with big temperature swings between day and night,' he explains. 'What's more, we get incredibly pure water from the Andes.'

While soils vary across Patagonia (although there's a consistent stoniness, the result of alluvial deposits), the relatively cool temperatures and large diurnal swings, along with low rainfall levels, are consistent across the region. These promising conditions are the key reason that Neuquén has seen the birth of seven new wineries over the past

decade. Seven new wineries might not sound like a lot, but given the scale of investment at each – and the fact that there were no wineries in the region beforehand – there's clearly a lot of confidence in the region's potential.

The pioneering wineries in Patagonia, such as Familia Schroeder, Valle Perdido, Universo Austral, Bodega Fin del Mundo and NQN, have planted a broad portfolio of varieties that range from Sauvignon Blanc to Viognier, and Pinot Noir to Petit Verdot. In an atmosphere of experimentation and discovery, Malbec is already proving its worth and most producers seem very excited about the long term prospects for Pinot Noir. And as our sommeliers on the trip agreed, in the case of Neuquén, it's journey from barren desert to fine wine producer will be one well worth watching. 🍷