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Neal Martin



Malbec Is From Mars, Pinot From Venus

Men are men. Women are women. Except for hermaphrodites...and cross-dressers...and the odd Thai lady-boy.

But look, you know what I mean.

We are totally different: aesthetically, psychologically and socially. Don't you sometimes listen in on your wife or girlfriend's jabbering on the telephone and wonder what planet they are on? The psychological differences between sexes appear within weeks of being

born. I take two-year old Lily to the playground and all she wants to do is push her one-eyed dolly around in a miniature pushchair procured from "Pound-Stretcher" whilst feral male toddlers rub dirt into each others' hair.

We often describe wines as being masculine or feminine and we mainly, though not exclusively, attribute the differences to the grape variety. With respect of red varieties, the most testosterone-fuelled would be Tannat: big, brawny, austere and muscular. It is the Chuck Norris; the Clint Eastwood of grape varieties and joining his gang would be Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Mourvèdre, and Nebbiolo amongst others. Then we have the softer, fleshier, muliebral grape varieties: Merlot, Gamay, Sangiovese and in between Grenache, Zinfandel and Tempranillo that swing either way.

(Snowed covered vineyards in Argentina. Eiswein anyone?)

Back on a shamrock-infested St. Patrick's Day, I was invited to an intriguing dinner within the salubrious confines of the Langham Hotel in central London, the objective to ascertain the similarities between two grape varieties: Malbec and Pinot Noir apropos the country where the former reigns: Argentina. Now I must confess that when this idea was first mooted to me, my immediate answer was that there would be "Bugger all."

Malbec is a masculine grape especially in South America where it engenders full-bodied, tannic, sinewy wines counterbalanced by less austerity than say Cabernet

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as feminine as Audrey Hepburn, lighter, far less tannic, a grape that expresses itself in purity and poise rather than brawn and muscle. Call me arrogant but I was confident that I would be able to distinguish between the two by appearance alone. All you need is eyes in your head.

(Malbec...in all its manly glory.)

But anyway, I accepted the kind invitation not only to reaffirm my conviction that Malbec and Pinot Noir are ampelographical chalk and cheese, but because Argentina excels with some of the most exciting Malbecs the New World has to offer. Malbec is a grape in ascendancy at the moment, especially in Argentina where its viticultural emblem, its standard bearer, their signature for world-class wines. I perused Jancis Robinson's

"Vines, Grapes & Wines" for background information. First published in 1986, it was revealing to discover that Malbec merited just two sentences and those mentioned its popularity, but not quality, in Argentina. I assume any revised edition will be more comprehensive given the seismic changes that have taken place in South America.

Speaking of Jancis, she was given the onerous task of sourcing the Pinot Noirs and was therefore the only participant aware of their identity. But like everyone else, she had no idea about the Malbecs and all the wines were decanted in random order.

The Wines

As I anticipated, if the raison d'être was to gauge the similarities between Argentinean Malbec and Pinot Noir then I would have to coarsely reiterate that there are "Bugger all." You do not need to sniff or slurp the wine: just compare the lighter, paler Pinot Noirs to the darker, more opaque Malbecs. I scribbled down "PN" and "M" against each wine and none managed to trip me up. Surely this entitles me to place the letters "M" and "W" after my name???

But the real reason I was attending was to gauge whether Argentinean Malbec deserves global attention, to which I can conclude that some certainly do, albeit sometimes at a price. My top score was awarded to **Noemia 2004** from **Bodegas Noemia Patagonia** in the Rio Negro Valley, the bodega a partnership between Italian wine producer Countess Noemi Marone Cinzano and Danish winemaker Hans Vinding-Diers (whose names one usually associates with Argiano in Montalcino.) This is a stunning wine that marries the seductive smoothness of Burgundy with the voluptuousness and spiciness that Malbec can offer. Certainly there is a lot of vanillary new oak at the moment, but it is in tandem with the fruit concentration and should meld into the texture of this classy wine in four or five years. My second highest score was also awarded to a Malbec, namely **Vina Victorio Coletto Single Vineyard 2004** from **Bodegas Trapiche**. At half the price this offers better value for money, with an opulent, ginger-tinged nose and a rich, pure, damson flavoured palate that is beautifully balanced – a ravishing

Another Malbec deserving praise came in the form of **Susana Balbo Malbec 2005** from **Dominio del Plata** that was again laden with new oak on the nose but was blessed with an irresistible palate, pure, lush and silky at first but then slightly grainy on the finish.

Jancis had mischievously included an Argentinean Pinot Noir, the **Cincuenta y Cinco 2005** from **Bodega Chacra** that I rated very highly because it has such a natural sense of balance, a virtue not easy to attain with Pinot Noir, Old World or New. The disappointments were the two wines from the most well-know producer, **Catena Zapata**, neither the **Catena Alta Malbec** nor the **Adrianna Lot 3** inspired, the first rather commercial and the second lacking complexity and elegant (not what you want from a bottle retailing for £40.00.)

As for Jancis' Pinot Noir selection, both **Sylvain Cathiard's Nuits St.-Georges Murgers** and **Marquis d'Angerville's Volnay Taillepieds** were showing well, despite being born in **2003** where some Pinot Noir's are already tasty flabby and tired. The **2005 Felton Road Block 5** from Central Otago is a beautiful wine: smooth, intense, slightly spicy and distinctly New Zealand rather than Burgundian. Again, it is not a cheap wine but probably a fraction in price of some Grand Cru 2005's from the Côte d'Or.

Unfortunately, the blind tasting could not dispel my disaffection for Oregon Pinot Noirs. I know that **Cristom** has a good reputation, but the **Marjorie Vineyard 2004** came across rather loose-knit, lean and slightly green on the finish. Oh well, my epiphany will have to wait, but wait I will and for the record; my fellow tasters rated it highly. Blind tasting does not always avail the results you hope for. Also disappointing was the **Knox Alexander Pinot Noir 2003** from **Au Bon Climat** that was rather enervated and tart on the finish.

After the tasting we tramped upstairs for dinner where HRH Jancis was anxious to know the result of the Manchester United score whilst Princess Margaret Rand sat opposite, appalled how anyone could harbour the slightest interest in such a rakish game when there is all that opera to sit and listen to. As we regaled over a delicious three-course meal, I took the opportunity to drink the wines rather than sample them and the Argentinean Malbecs continued to impress, loosening up a little, becoming more approachable. The top scoring wines accompanied the cuisine with aplomb, warranting their scores I had awarded them just an hour before.

Argentina is a country with immense potential and in Malbec; they undoubtedly have the wines to compete on the world stage. In a sense this is what Chile is missing: a flagship variety upon which the reputation of winemaking as a whole can be pinned. A few weeks later I whet my palate with several wines that had been awarded accolades at the inaugural Argentinean Wine Awards held earlier this year and the notes are listed separately below. I will not go into too much detail, save to say that **Bodegas Callia** wowed with two stellar wines and the **Fabre Montmayou Malbec Gran Reserva 2005** represents outstanding value-for-money.

A comprehensive report on Argentinean wines will follow later in the year, after the massive "Wines Of Argentina" tasting in the autumn. I am sure that I will be able to distinguish between the Pinots and the Malbec and indeed the women and the men. Unless they invite the Thai Ladyboys Wine Circle of course – then I will be in trouble.

(Many thanks to James Forbes and Tim Johns at Wine of Argentina UK who organized this tasting and are doing a sterling job promoting this country's wines.)

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The following wines were tasted at the London Wine Trade Fair in May 2007. They were all winners at the inaugural Argentina Wine Awards held earlier this year although this does not represent all the winners. Since the tasting sheet included UK stockists and prices I have included them.

2005 Fabre Montmayou Malbec Gran Reserva, Mendoza (92/100)

A pure 100% Malbec aged for one year in French oak, this wonderful wine the Luján de Malbec trophy. A very reserved, almost Bordeaux like nose with a touch of cigar box. Very pure with great delineation and beautifully integrated new oak. The palate is full-bodied, very well balanced with notes of blackberry, a touch of Valrona chocolate and damson. Very suave and elegant with a silky smooth finish. An absolute delight. Tasted May 2007.

Approximate RRP: £9.99 For Stockists Contact: Vinothentic 020 7354 1994

2004 Finca El Retiro Reserva Especial Tempranillo (89/100)

This is a pure Tempranillo of which 50% is aged for 12 months in French oak. A light, feminine nose of blackberry, hedgerow and cassis with prudent use of new oak. The palate is medium-bodied, very smooth and harmonious with a fleshy, supple texture. Raspberry coulis, black cherries and raspberry on the finish. Cohesive, very well crafted and slips down the throat almost too easily. Tasted May 2007.

For Stockists Contact: Harvey Millar Wine & Spirit Agencies 08702 418459

2005 Bodegas Callia Magna Shiraz, San Juan - Tulum (94/100)

A 100% Shiraz from San Juan/Talum is matured for 8 months in French and American oak, this is a brilliant wine. A surprising light, almost ephemeral nose at first with cherry and wild strawberry with a touch of freshly mown grass and hawthorn. Builds nicely with aeration and eventually displays great delineation. The palate is full-bodied, supremely well balanced and very cohesive but refined. Blackberry, cigar box, a touch of black pepper. This has class written all over it and was a worthy winner of a Gold Medal at the inaugural Argentine Wine Awards. Tasted May 2007.

For Stockists Contact: D & D Wines International Ltd 01565 650952

2005 La Mascota Cabernet Sauvignon, Mendoza – Maipú (83/100)

This pure Cabernet Sauvignon, aged 60% for 15 months in French oak never quite realizes its ambitions, primarily because it tastes a little over-macerated with a distinct prune-like scent. Again the palate is lacking definition, rather cloying and sugary sweet. Not my style of Cabernet irrespective of origins.

Approximate RRP: £9.99 For Stockists Contact: Enotria Winecellars Ltd 020 8963 4820

2003 Valentin Bianchi Enzo Bianchi, Mendoza - San Rafael (86/100)

This is predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon with 90% aged for 14 months in new French oak. Like the La Mascoate before it, the Cabernet is not as well handled as other producers' Malbec, the nose with plum, dates and scorched leather, the palate excessively sweet with some dry tannins on the finish. It needs more finesse and sophistication. Tasted May 2007.

Approximate RRP: £20 For Stockists Contact: Liberty Wines Ltd 0207 819 0321

2004 Norton Perdriel Single Vineyard Mendoza - Luján de Cuyo (92/100)

The Perdriel Single Vineyard 2004 is a blend of 60% Malbec, 28% Merlot and 12% Cabernet Sauvignon aged entirely in new oak for 16 months.) A sophisticated nose of plum, blackberry and a touch of forest floor. Well balanced on the fleshy palate with ripe plum with a touch of Asian spice and sappy red cherries. Touch of white pepper on the finish with well-integrated new oak. Focused on the finish, moderate length, this is a very fine Perdriel. Tasted May 2007.

Approximate RRP: £9.99 For Stockists Contact: Berkmann Wine Cellars 020 7609 4711

2004 Bodegas Callia Grand Callia, San Juan - Tulum (95/100)

Another astounding wine from Bodegas Callia, a blend of 40% Shiraz and 20% each of Malbec, Merlot and Tannat, all aged for 18 months in French and American oak. The nose is simply gorgeous with ripe plums, blackberries and vanilla pod. Superb definition with scents of blueberries becoming more obvious with aeration. The palate is full-bodied, very pure with a touch of espresso. Cherries, blackcurrants, a touch of fresh tobacco towards the finish, which has exquisite delineation and focus. A very elegant wine to cherish. Tasted May 2007.

For Stockists Contact: D & D Wines International Ltd 01565 650952

2005 Eral Bravo YBS, Mendoza - Luján de Cuyo (88/100)

A blend of 60% Malbec, 30% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Syrah aged for 16 months in French oak, the nose here is very closed at first, reluctantly offering scents of wild hedgerow, cedar and a touch of lemongrass. The palate is just a tad over-extracted with sinewy, bold tannins and a lack of definition and poise on the finish. Not bad by any means, but I am sure it could be better with perhaps a little less oak. Tasted May 2007.

Approximate RRP: £19 For Stockists Contact: No UK Representation

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