

Bright \$20 Argentine Malbecs Conquer Wine World: John Mariani

Review by John Mariani



March 9 (Bloomberg) -- If ever there was a right time to be in the right place when it comes to selling wine, Argentina seems ideally situated to thrive.

In a market with wine prices tumbling from the record highs of the past few years, Argentine winemakers have been quietly building an export market based on moderately priced wines of exceptionally high quality. As the world wine market struggled in 2008, exports of Argentine wines worldwide rose 43 percent by sales and 34 percent by volume over 2007.

A good percentage of these exports are based on a varietal that Argentine growers have capitalized on -- malbec. Exports of malbecs rose 60 percent in volume last year, according to Argentina's Department of Customs.

The best Argentine wines are being made in the Mendoza Valley, in the foothills of the Andes, where more than 900 wineries are spread over 150,000 hectares (370,500 acres). They grow 70 percent of the country's wine grapes, making Argentina the world's fifth-largest producer. The country is also the world's third-largest consumer of wine per capita.

The arid deserts of Mendoza were made fertile with a system of irrigation canals even before the Spanish arrived. The region is still fairly dry, with the Andes blocking the moist air of the Pacific from reaching the valley. Vineyards are planted at fairly high elevations, from 1,500 feet to 5,777 feet.

"We get drip irrigation by using the runoff from melting snow caps, which gives us lower pH levels, higher acidity, deeper color and great aging capacity in our wines," says Laureano Gomez, chief winemaker for [Bodegas Salentein](#).

Global Success

The winery, which built the Killka Gallery of arts and culture, a restaurant and conference center in the valley, is one of Mendoza's global success stories. Its largest market is Europe, followed by Brazil, then Argentina, then the U.S.

At a tasting in New York with Gomez, I was impressed by Salentein's 2006 Reserve Malbec, a big, bright and very elegant red that is barrel-aged for 12

to 14 months and bottle-aged for 6 more. It would be a match for most second-growth Bordeaux or premium Napa Valley reds, though at \$20 it's priced way below those other wines.

Salentein's 2004 Premium Malbec was more complex, with several layers of flavor, minerals and spice. Its 15 percent alcohol and still firm tannins mean it will improve with aging over the next few years. At \$60, it's about as expensive as Argentine malbecs get.

Mendoza Valley

Last month I also attended an Argentine tasting at Spago in the [Ritz-Carlton resort](#) in Bachelor Gulch, Colorado, led by Bon Appetit magazine wine consultant [Steve Olson](#) and Spago's master sommelier Sean Razee.

Both recalled visits to the Mendoza Valley, where they saw first-hand how quickly the wines are improving on the smaller estates. Then they conducted a little test, withholding the prices of the wines tasted till the end of the afternoon. When they did reveal prices, the audience was amazed by how the high quality of the wines didn't jibe with their modest prices.

The tasting also showed that Argentina's wineries can successfully produce other varietals besides malbec. A 2007 BenMarco Cabernet Sauvignon (\$20) was a warm, smooth cab with delightful notes of caramel and toast in the nose. It's a wine to drink right now, probably not a candidate for aging.

An older cabernet blend, 2002 Mapema Primera Zona (\$30), was over the hill, suggesting that Argentine winemakers have learned only recently to tame the tannins and achieve balance in such varietals.

So the malbecs were the best of the tastings.

Malbecs Rule

"Malbec has morphed into what Argentina now makes as well or better than anywhere else," Olsen contended. "The grape has its own distinctions of terroir."

I would certainly agree after tasting 2005 Trapiche Single Vineyard Malbec Vina Fausto Orellana (\$45). It's named after the man, now 80, who planted the vines there 60 years ago. The wine had fine body and scents of cloves and could be enjoyed with any red meat.

Susana Balbo's 2007 malbec, remarkably priced at just \$27 when only 600 cases were made, opened up slowly and revealed an impeccable equilibrium of fruit and firm tannins that ensures a long life to come. This is a winery I definitely want to keep my eye on. It represents the future of Argentine viniculture.

([John Mariani](#) writes on wine for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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