

Argentinian reds – everything but Malbec

Argentina is all the rage – particularly with fans of powerhouse wines. But could Chilean specialist Peter Richards MW find freshness and balance in its non-Malbec reds?



IN ARGENTINA, SIZE matters. This is both a good and a bad thing. The world's eighth largest nation – typecast as extrovert and ebullient – yields the wine world's fifth biggest crop. Within this annual tsunami of wine, there are many bottles that are hock full of intensity, individuality and ambition.

On the one hand, this is laudable. On the other, the results can often be undrinkable.

This simple truth was brought home to me recently when confronted by a large room suffused with the heady perfume of Argentinian wine and a brief to taste reds other than Malbec (or, at the most, with a minority blend of Malbec). By the end of the day, I was spent: the vim leached from me by a succession of weighty bottles, bruising wines, hefty price tags and – most heinously – a confounding lack of diversity and drinkability. Where was the scent of Cabernet, the grace of Pinot, the vibrancy of Patagonia, the weightlessness of altitude? In short, the much-vaunted natural variety of Argentina? Sadly in absentia – with the exception of the 15 wines below.

Of course, this can be seen as a vindication of Malbec. This, the most widely planted fine wine variety in the country, has the capacity to retain a lissom grace and poise in Argentina's fierce upland climate where others can lapse into turgidity. But even this optimistic interpretation raises thorny questions featuring eggs and baskets.

“Cabernet Sauvignon, Tannat, Tempranillo and Petit Verdot all show flashes of brilliance in Argentina”

Perhaps it's best to view this tableau as a work in progress. One winemaker whose wines I admire spoke in detail about his ongoing quest for 'more natural and site-connected wines, with less intervention and clean, fresh results'. It's precisely this kind of endeavour, added to hard-won advantages such as experience and vine age, that makes the difference. The likes of Cabernet Sauvignon (and its blends), Tannat, Tempranillo and Petit Verdot all show flashes of brilliance in Argentina; it is up to the winemakers to consistently coax from them elegance as well as exuberance. Great wines – whether they are sold in the US or UK – must be a blend of both.

For now, it pays to choose your producers and wines with care. The traditional heartlands of Mendoza – Luján de Cuyo, Agrelo, Barrancas – are often the best spots for Bordeaux varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. The high-altitude Uco Valley can confer freshness and balance on big-boned reds. When it comes to non-Malbec reds, experienced producers with proven track records often make the best options. Don't be afraid of buying older vintages either; the best wines will have the balance and structure to age well. And the good news? It's often the cheaper wines (in lighter bottles) that are the most drinkable and rewarding.

Peter Richards MW is a writer and broadcaster specialising in the wines of Chile. He visits Argentina often and writes regularly on its wines, most recently for the award-winning Wine Opus book.

The wines were tasted, non-blind, at the annual Wines of Argentina tasting in September 2011

For full details of UK stockists, see p108

Richards' top non-Malbec Argentinian reds



Cheval des Andes, Vistalba 1999 ★★★★★ 18pts/20

£50 The Champagne Co
This blend (60% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Malbec) was the first vintage of Cheval des Andes, the venture between Argentina's Terrazas de los Andes and Bordeaux's Cheval Blanc, and was never commercially released. Damson and cassis notes on a graceful, herb-tinged, leathery palate. Food-friendly. **Drink:** 2012. **Alcohol:** 13.5%



El Porvenir de los Andes, Laborum Tannat, Cafayate 2007 ★★★★★ 17.5

£25.99 Barrica Wines, Good Wine Online, Latin Wines Online, Ruta 40, South American Wines Online, Market Quarter, The Vin Bin, The Vine King, **Wines of the World**
This dense and thrilling wine has aromas of dried flowers, damsons and molasses, with an intense but lifted palate. Young despite its age. **Drink:** 2012–2015. **Alc:** 14.5%



Zuccardi Q, Tempranillo, Santa Rosa 2008 ★★★★★ 17.5

£16.99 Ann et Vin, Cambridge Wine Merchants, Classic Wine Direct, Fine Wine Co, Henderson Wines, Imbibros, Old School Wines, Oxford Wine Co, Talking Wines, Worth Bros
A perennial Argentinian classic with engaging flavours of raisined fruit and clotted cream. **Drink:** 2012–2013. **Alc:** 14%



Catena, Appellation Cabernet Sauvignon, Mendoza 2009 ★★★★★ 17

£13.50 Cavas de Gaucho, Gemini Wines, The Vineyard (Ramsbottom)
Catena has done commendable work with Cabernet in Argentina; these old vines in Agrelo make for a style that's restrained in aromatics but with a juicy, grippy palate and great ageing potential. **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 14%



Luigi Bosca, Gala 4 Cabernet Franc-Malbec, Luján de Cuyo 2008 ★★★★★ 17

£18.45 Bancroft Wines, Concept Fine Wines, Petit Canon, Planet of the Grapes, Tim Syrad Wines
This debut blend (with 5% Malbec) from classy outfit Luigi Bosca showcases the elegant, understated charms of Argentinian Cabernet Franc. Good value and food-friendly. **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 14.6%



Masi Tupungato, Corbec, Tupungato 2008 ★★★★★ 17

£22.20–£24.99 AdVintage, Berkmann, D Byrne & Co, Harrods, Highbury Vintners, Kibworth Wines, Mill Hill Wines, Oakdene Fine Wine, Polygon Wines, Q Wines, Ruby Red, Selfridges, Slurp, Sniff & Spit, Swig, The Vineyard, Wapping Vine Yard, Wine Direct
Made from semi-dried grapes with Italian know-how, this Corvina/Malbec blend is reticent on the nose, with irony and earthy hints, while juicy, layered and elegant on the palate. **Drink:** 2012–2016. **Alc:** 14.5%



Pascual Toso, Alta Reserve Syrah, Barrancas 2007 ★★★★★ 17

£24.49 Old Butchers Wine Cellar
A brooding, dark-fruited style with compact, malty, savoury flavours. Moreish. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14.3%



Pulenta Estate, La Flor Cabernet Sauvignon, Agrelo 2009 ★★★★★ 17

£9.75–£10.50 Bacchanalia, Berry Bros & Rudd, Chamberlain Wines, Grapeland, Quaff, Secret Cellar, Slurp, Swig, Wine in Cornwall, WoodWinters
A refined red which melds glossy fruit with elegant scents of roasted peppers and graphite. Savoury and gently spicy; very stylish. **Drink:** 2012–2013. **Alc:** 14%



Viña Alicia, Cuarzo, Luján de Cuyo 2007 ★★★★★ 17

£51 Ruta 40
This outlandish Petit Verdot (with splashes of Carignan and Grenache) teeters on the verge of caricature. Ludicrously proportioned and priced, the wine's massive earthy, peppery, baked plum flavours are exponential in effect but deftly crafted. Impossible not to be moved by this wine. **Drink:** 2012–2014. **Alc:** 14%



Domaine Jean Bousquet, Cabernet Sauvignon, Tupungato 2010 ★★★★★ 16.5

£8.75 Vintage Roots
This great-value Cabernet, made from organic grapes, has restrained aromatics but a lovely mid-weight flavour profile with notes of green capsicum and cassis. Grippy yet refreshing, great with steak. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13.5%



Doña Paula, Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Luján de Cuyo 2010 ★★★★★ 16.5

N/A UK www.donapaula.com
Sleek and engaging, this elegant Cab is a testament to the virtues of the 'less is more' philosophy of Argentinian wine. Very pleasant. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14%



Luigi Bosca, Finca La Linda Tempranillo, Luján de Cuyo 2009 ★★★★★ 16.5

£8.30 Bancroft Wines, Erik Laan Fine Wines, Latitude Wine, Petit Canon, The Dorset Wine Co, Thind Wine Merchants, Wine Rack
Classic aromas of red berries and tea leaf lead into a juicy, nutty flavour profile. Refreshing and engaging. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14.1%



O Fournier, B Crux Blend, Uco Valley 2007 ★★★★★ 16.5

£16.90–£18.99 Butlers Wine Cellar, Coe Vintners, CPA Wines, D Byrne, Edward Parker, Seckford, SH Jones, Slurp, Swig, The Wine Centre (Colchester)
A grown-up wine, dense and spicy, with flavours of dried red fruits and cream. Well balanced but needs food. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 15%

Norton, Finca la Colonia Barbera, Mendoza 2010 ★★★★★ 16.5

£7.50 All About Wine, Berkmann, Flagship, Imbibros, Liquid Pleasure, Milford Wine Centre, Slurp, Thames Food & Wine, Zelas
This crunchy, tangy, gently spicy red has flavours of baked herbs and plums. Well priced. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13.5%

RJ Viñedos, Joffré e Hijas Bonarda, Luján de Cuyo 2007 ★★★★★ 16.5

£14.99 Chester Beer & Wine, El Madero, Highbury Vintners, Selfridges, Spirited Wines, Vinology
A traditional but refreshing wine with leafy, raisined aromas and leathery hints. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13%