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Argentina's Andes Advantage

By Dave McIntyre

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Lonko Single Vineyard Malbec 2005

Patagonia, Argentina

*** Exceptional

GREAT VALUE

This undiscovered gem from the Neuquen region features impressive structure with firm tannins and a delicious core of fruit.



Ask a retailer or restaurant sommelier which wines are most popular today, and one of the first answers you're likely to get will be malbec. Specifically, malbec from Argentina. Ask which wines over-perform for their price, and you'll probably get the same answer.

Argentina's wine exports to the United States have risen dramatically, from 15.6 million bottles in 2002 to 52.8 million last year, according to the May issue of Wine Enthusiast magazine. Most of that increase has been malbec.

Malbec is one of the five major red grapes of Bordeaux, typically blended in small amounts for its deep color and soft texture. It forms the backbone of the "black wine" of Cahors in southwestern France (with the pseudonym "auxerrois") and appears occasionally in the Loire Valley under the alias "cot." But it makes its name in Argentina, which has claimed it as its signature grape.

Why is Argentina's malbec so successful?

Value. Simple economics are in play here. Land, labor and raw materials are cheap in Argentina. A favorable exchange rate, stemming from the country's currency crisis at the beginning of this decade, also helps keep prices low on U.S. retail shelves.

Quality. Argentine malbecs "taste up," meaning they seem more expensive than they are. An \$8 malbec from Argentina will often compete favorably with Cotes du Rhone or California cabernets and merlots at twice the price. Quality is high across different styles, from juicy crowd

pleasers made entirely in stainless steel to broad-shouldered, lavishly oaked wines that offer richness and nuance. Quality is also remarkably high up and down the price range, from that \$8 bargain to wines that chime the register at more than \$100 retail. Whatever your budget, Argentina has a malbec for you.

Altitude. The Andes Mountains afford Argentina's winemakers a distinct advantage. The main wine region is Mendoza, in the Andes foothills of western Argentina, where vineyard altitudes push 5,000 feet above sea level and higher. Other regions, such as Cafayate to the north, which is producing some fine white wines, and Neuquen to the south in Patagonia, have vineyards even higher. By contrast, Napa Valley's Mount Veeder tops out at 2,000 feet, with its highest vineyards at about 1,000 feet above sea level.

For every 100 meters in additional altitude in Mendoza, the average temperature drops by 1 degree Celsius. That means grapes with higher acidity and softer tannins. But the intensity of the sunlight also increases, allowing the grapes to achieve maximum ripeness while the cooler temperatures keep sugars in check. Intense sun does not equate to heat. The combination of cool temperatures and high-intensity sun yields wines of great extraction, soft if not disappearing tannins and impressive structure and balance. When carefully made, malbecs do not have the excessive alcohol that mars so many modern wines.

Argentina's charms have attracted foreign investors in its wine industry, including the luxury conglomerate LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton, which owns [Terrazas de los Andes](#) winery; the famed French consultant Michel Rolland, who has two properties in Argentina and advises a host of others; and California's Paul Hobbs, who produces impressive malbec at various price levels at his [Vina Cobos](#) winery.

For consumers, malbec's softness makes it very approachable and gives it a velvety texture. Even massively concentrated malbec from Argentina can be easy to drink. Tannin seems to disappear and becomes a matter of faith: It must be there, given the wine's structure. If tannin is felt at all -- that drying sensation on the finish of big red wines -- it is most likely either from oak treatment or from highest-altitude fruit. Therefore, malbec is very nice as a "cocktail" wine, sipped alone or with small appetizers at parties.

But it is also versatile with food. Beef comes to mind when thinking of Argentina, but don't limit yourself to the obvious. Try malbec with anything from the grill, plus pizza and pasta, roast chicken and seafood.

I will interject one negative caveat: Too many Argentine wineries are using those obscenely thick, heavy bottles designed to present a facade of quality despite the needless waste of resources to produce and transport them. They should put their egos into the wine itself, rather than the bottle.

But for consumers on a budget, Argentina's malbecs offer plenty of opportunity to explore without breaking the bank. We can still trade up when buying down.