

Malbec is the hottest grape in the United States. No, not hot in terms of terroir (*tear wahr*) i.e. where the grapes are grown, but in popularity. Everyone's drinking this fruit-forward wine from Argentina.



A Bit of History

Way back in the Middle Ages, Malbec was made into "Black Wine" enjoyed by European royalty. Popular in southwestern France, where it's known as *Cot*, it was a major blending grape in 19th century Bordeaux. *Phylloxera*, that little root louse that devours grapevines, devastated the vineyards around Cahors, France in the 1880's. After a freak frost in 1956, it lost favor to other red varieties in Bordeaux. It's still one of the six varieties allowed in red Bordeaux wines. The other five varieties used to produce Bordeaux are: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Carmenere. (Red Bordeaux wines are usually blends of grapes)

Malbec has found a home in Argentina. It's virtually the national grape there.

Cuttings from French vineyards were smuggled into Argentina in 1868. Since then, this dark grape has flourished in the area known as Mendoza. This region, located in the shadows of the Andes Mountains, is dry and sunny almost year round. Mendoza has hot days followed by cool nights at higher altitudes than virtually any other grape growing location. This dramatic diurnal temperature variation has a very positive effect on the grapes. Maximum exposure to sunlight increases the grape sugars while the cooler night temperatures preserve the acidic balance of these marvelous Malbec grapes. Some of the best Malbec vineyards are planted as high as 4,000 feet above sea level. The cumulative effect is very ripe grapes with high levels of acid. For us this means better wine!

In 2002 Argentina exported 1.3 million cases of wine to the USA. In 2010 we imported more than 4 million cases of Malbec alone from our southern neighbors. Why is this inky purple wine so popular? Three reasons. One, it's fruit-forward, full-bodied and tastes great all by itself. Secondly, Malbecs are priced at a variety of prices, from seven dollars to seventy dollars. Many are in the retail "sweet spot" of ten to fifteen dollars. There are numerous examples at lower prices and some extraordinary wines at higher prices as

well. Lastly, and perhaps most important, Americans can pronounce the name of the wine.

The Taste of Malbec

Malbecs are easy to enjoy. They have the big fruity aromas most Americans like in their wines. A typical Malbec smells of dark berries, plums and cherries. Many Malbecs also have bouquets of mocha, violets, and spices. If oak is used in making the wine, vanilla and smoke may join the mélange of smells. Softer and rounder than Cabernet Sauvignon, lush and velvety, these wines have moderate acidity with supple and satiny tannins. Big flavors follow those big aromas. Berry flavors abound, blueberry, boysenberry and blackberry are all typical of this grape. These are "fruit-juicy" wines. Chocolate, black pepper and meaty are also used to describe the taste of this crowd-pleaser.

Those smooth tannins give many Malbecs a finish more luxurious than you might expect for the money you've paid. As with most wines, the wine's finish is frequently proportionate to the price. The longer the finish ("hang time" for you football fans) on your palate, the more expensive the wine. It's an accurate rule of thumb in gauging the quality of the fermented juice of the grape.

So what foods pair well with Malbec? Good news—a wide variety of dishes fare well with this rising star of the wine world. Yet another reason this wine is so popular. First and foremost is beef. Grilled steaks and chops are mainstays of the Argentinean diet. They love beef and they love Malbec. Especially together. Most Argentinean beef is grass-fed, resulting in not only better flavor than our corn-fed beef, it's also easier to digest. South of the border the favorite way to grill is on a *parrilla*, a giant grill over massive amounts of charcoal.

Chimichurri, a sauce made from finely chopped parsley, minced garlic, olive oil, oregano, white or red vinegar, and red pepper flakes is a traditional accompaniment to that delectable grilled meat.

Roasting, barbecuing and smoking are all cooking methods that work well with most Malbecs. The ingredient of the moment, bacon, is a great match with Malbecs. The smokiness of the bacon together with the Malbec's smokiness is a perfect pairing. Pork chops, spareribs and pork tenderloin all work well with this flexible wine. Sausages on the grill are yet another delicious combination.

Mexican cuisine, frequently a wine pairing challenge, goes well with this spicy wine. Fajitas, tacos, burritos, let your creative juices flow. *Empanadas*, a mainstay of the Argentinean diet, are enhanced by the enticing aromas and flavors of Malbecs. Indian food, one of the more challenging cuisines to match with wines, is enhanced

Marvelous Malbec

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with a fruity style of Malbec. Try a lamb curry with a bottle of fresh, young Malbec.

If you're a non-meat eater, dishes focusing on mushrooms bridge nicely with the earthiness of the wine. Tomatoes, either in sauces or as an ingredient in dishes, boost the wine's red fruit character and provide a contrast to the black fruit flavors.

Malbecs really are marvelous wines. They're affordable, tasty, very flexible, and available in a variety of styles, from backyard quaffers to elegant wines meant for aging in your cellar.
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