



# Malbec's naked beauty

Oaky, ripe and high-alcohol Malbecs may be what put Argentina on the map but times have changed, says Patricio Tapia. He discovers that fresh, pure, unwooded wines – still with the grape's soft tannins and easy charm – are the country's new calling card





## Soil matters

Malbec's texture is one of the reasons it has enjoyed such great commercial success. Even in early-harvested versions, the texture is still silky, gliding across the palate as if it were on skates. 'There's no doubt that Malbec's tannins are a lot easier than in other grapes, but I don't think we can extend the earlier harvest to all terroirs,' says Alberto Antonini, the Italian consultant who is a partner in the Altos Las Hormigas winery and consults for other Mendoza wineries, including Renacer.

'It's easy to do an earlier harvest with more freshness and less alcohol and still have good tannins in shallow, stony soils with a good amount of chalk. It is less easy in deeper, more clay-based and fertile soils where an early harvest can result in underripe, unpleasant flavours.'

Antonini began working in Mendoza in 1995 after falling in love with the region and with Malbec. 'The overripeness, over-extraction and excessive oak, along with viticulture based on synthetic products and winemakers with huge egos – what I call 'the five enemies of real wine' – were very strong in Argentina,' he said. 'The trend began to change five or six years ago when we realised those 'five enemies' were affecting the purity of Malbec and were only creating commercial wines designed to please the consumer but with very little identity.'

Both his Alto Las Hormigas, Clásico 2013 and Renacer's Punto Final of the same vintage are very good examples of this change of direction: fresh, made with first-rate fruit and aged in stainless steel or cement. Both are juicy and have a lively nature, while retaining that crowd-pleasing Malbec spirit and soft texture that make them so easy to drink.

Finally there's another important detail. Unlike varieties such as Cabernets Sauvignon or Franc,



**Above: 15 years ago, Familia Zuccardi planted a new Malbec vineyard on chalky soils in the micro-region of San Pablo in the Uco Valley at 1,400m altitude. The grapes went into its Polígonos Malbec (see p29)**

**Top left: Italian winemaking consultant Alberto Antonini (right) with Chilean soil consultant Pedro Parra**

Malbec is much lower in the pyrazines responsible for those green aromas that modern winemakers are so afraid of. This means, among other things, that the window for harvesting the grapes is much wider and therefore, the possible styles that can achieved are also much greater.

Until now, the rule was to harvest Malbec late to produce sweet, ripe wines. But with the current research into new terroirs and less intervention in the cellar, the trend toward harvesting earlier is giving the variety a whole new face. It's comparable to when a beautiful woman takes off her make-up to reveal a completely different type of natural beauty that lies beneath. **D**

*Patricio Tapia is the DWWA Regional Chair for Argentina and publishes his annual Descorchados guide to the wines of Argentina, Chile and Uruguay*

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Above: pickers celebrate the end of the harvest at Familia Zuccardi

Michelini and his brother Juan Pablo have been crafting similar examples at Bodega Zorzal, where Michelini consults and his brother is winemaker. 'They've been calling me the 'green Michelini' since I worked at Doña Paula [where he was winemaker from 1999 to 2003] because I was looking for fresher, more linear, food-friendly wines. That's why I picked the grapes earlier than usual,' he says.

But there's more to Malbecs de soif than earlier harvests. Parallel to the search for greater freshness

and less sweetness has been focused research on different places to plant, and further exploration of the expression of Malbec in each. Zuccardi's Polígonos series of wines is a good example. 'The project aims to show the expression of different areas in the Uco Valley. They are wines that come from vineyards we consider to be representative of each area and that we work with to maintain the differences without much intervention – without overripening or over-extracting or covering the fruit with oak,' says Sebastián Zuccardi.

One of the Polígonos series of wines is San Pablo, a Malbec with 12.5% alcohol made from a 15-year-old vineyard planted on calcareous-rich soils – these soils are crucial for Zuccardi's search for freshness. 'There are places that make me want to go farther out on a limb, and this is one of them. First for the altitude, which gives me slower ripening, but also for the chalky soils. With this type of soil we can harvest earlier because the texture and minerality of the Malbec comes from the soil, not from the ripeness, so I can pick earlier than before,' says Zuccardi.

The Polígonos San Pablo is unlike any other wine in the Zuccardi catalogue. It's fresh, lively. Its aromas and fruity flavours show no greenness whatsoever. The acidity is pronounced but without sacrificing the smoothness of the tannins that seems to be a trademark of Mendoza Malbec. ➤

## Tapia's top unoaked Malbecs



**Familia Zuccardi, Polígonos San Pablo, Uco Valley**  
18/20 (93/100)

£23 Caves de Gaucho

From vines planted in 2000 in the San Pablo area, this is by far the most extreme red in Zuccardi's portfolio. With such a low alcohol, this is pure and crunchy Malbec, filled with violet and herbal aromas on a soft and tender palate. Not many wines like this in Mendoza. **Drink** 2014-2016 **Alcohol** 12.5%

**Polopuesto, Sur 9 Días, Gualtallary, Tupungato 2013** 17.75 (92)

N/A UK [pol.pier.andnes@gmail.com](mailto:pol.pier.andnes@gmail.com)

Hard to find even in Mendoza, you should keep an eye on this small, artisanal producer. This is the definition of a *vin de soif*, equivalent to a young Chinon with its fruity and herbal character. It is refreshing and firm, with a soft and round texture and super drinkability. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 13%

**Matías Riccitelli, The Apple Doesn't Fall Far from the Tree, Mendoza 2012** 17.75 (92)

£12.92-£13.69 Eclectic Tastes, Strictly Wines

Winemaker at Fabre Montmayou, Matías Riccitelli has his own small project where The Apple is his basic wine. Blending fruit from

Gualtallary and the warmer Perdriel, this is pure raspberry juice, crisp and soft, ideal for a picnic. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%



**Zorzal, Terroir Unico, Gualtallary, Tupungato 2013**  
17.75 (92)

£11-£12 (2011) Bluebird, Blanco & Gomez, DVine Cellars, Slurp

From chalky soils in Gualtallary, 1,500m above sea level, this is a pure expression of high-altitude Malbec. No wood interfering with the generous layers of red fruit and violet notes; the texture is tight and chalky. A refreshing drink for summer nights. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 13.5%



**Altos Las Hormigas, Clásico, Mendoza 2012** 17.5 (91)

£12.99 (2013) Cambridge Wine

Merchants, Highbury Vintners, Raisin Fine Wines, Winedirect

Easy to drink, simple to understand and so seductive. With its core of red fruits, spices and flowers, this is exactly the kind of wine with which to understand how lovely and approachable Malbec can be. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%

**Atamisque, Serbal, Tupungato 2013** 17 (90)

£9.96-£13.49 Hennings, Raisin Fine Wines, Quaff, Winedirect

Atamisque's style tends to be refreshing and tight, and this basic line, Serbal, is a good example of this. This Malbec is pure and light, with a certain electricity running around the bright fruit flavours. A lovely red for the barbecue. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 13.5%

**Dominio del Plata, Susana Balbo Crios, Mendoza 2012** 17 (90)

£12.99 Corks of Cotham, Inverarity Morton, Refreshers, Raisin Fine Wines, Leamington Wine Co, Christopher Piper

Pure, easy-going Malbec, filled with raspberry and violet tones. Vibrant acidity plays a major role, as well as the soft, round texture. Textbook. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%



**Bodega Renacer, Punto Final Clásico, Mendoza 2012** 16.5 (88)

£10.99 (2013) Widely available via

UK agent Liberty Wines

Ripe and round, this is velvety and crisp at the same time, offering a refreshing feeling despite its ripe red fruit and its lovely sweet finish. **Drink** 2014-2015 **Alc** 14%

For UK stockists details, see p90