



Wine

Olé to Argentine Cahors

‘These are dark, pure, fragrant and nervy red wines . . . The Lot’s Argentine renaissance looks set to continue’

Andrew Jefford



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AUGUST 4, 2016 7:12 AM

by: **Andrew Jefford**

This had to happen. A European grape variety makes its way to the southern hemisphere. It flourishes there. After 150 years of endeavour, southern plantings exceed tenfold those of the north; it is the new home rather than the old which brings the variety global attention. With growing confidence, the southern winemakers make their way north to see whether they might have something to offer the natives, and to understand the variety’s original character and context. The circle is completed.

That variety is Malbec (also known in France as Cot or Auxerrois). Its birthplace was Cahors, in France’s Lot; its parents are a nearby Tarn variety called Prunelard and the almost extinct Magdeleine Noire des Charentes (the mother of Merlot). It reached Argentina via Chile in the mid-19th century. Plantings there surged as the phylloxera crisis of 1860-1880 battered

Cahors. For reasons no one understands, this variety from the fresh, wet, hilly Lot river valley prospered in the high-altitude desert of Argentina's Mendoza — to the extent that “Malbec” for most drinkers is now synonymous with Argentina. It produces dark, glossy, energetic red wines there; the best have the kind of structural firmness which marks Europe's finest reds.

In the summer of 2013, a group of South American wine producers took a study trip through some French wine regions and decided to spend a free Sunday in Cahors. This being France, they expected closed doors — but the Cahors region has an unusually dynamic marketing director, Jérémy Arnaud, and he made sure that the region welcomed the visitors with an extensive tasting and a regional seminar.

The South American organisers were Chilean soil consultant Pedro Parra and Mendoza-based Antonio Morescalchi of Altos Las Hormigas. They were dazzled by what they saw in the vineyards — because, as Morescalchi put it, “our focus on the trip was limestone and minerality ... When we arrived in Cahors, our eyes went out of their orbits — there were huge slabs of limestone everywhere, big hills made entirely of this type of rock and a river cutting through it leaving white cliffs of limestone. It was very impressive.” But there was a problem: “Limestone character was showing very little, if at all, in the wines. Most of them were so big, fruity and powerful that the sought-after texture that we love so much was completely disguised, and the freshness lost.” Heated though civil discussions with the locals followed.

Parra and Morescalchi couldn't forget Cahors. Having failed to find what they dreamed of there, they decided to try to create it themselves, together with Altos Las Hormigas winemaker Leonardo Erazo Lynch and consultant Attilio Pagli. The group returned, retasted and identified a shortlist of a dozen properties where they felt they could identify “the limestone character”. They visited them all and talked to their proprietors, eventually deciding to work with three on a series of joint-venture wines. The first efforts are now in bottle.

Let me say at this point that I was puzzled by what Morescalchi told me. I enjoy exuberant, generous Cahors. Some very talented winemakers (not least Pascal Verhaeghe of Ch du Cèdre and Michel Rolland on behalf of Ch Lagrezette's Alain-Dominique Perrin) have made sumptuous wines there which brim with regional character. It's true that these have tended to come from the Lot river gravels rather than the limestone uplands (causses), which was the soil type that interested Parra and Morescalchi. When I met the pair in Cahors this January, I was astonished by the clarity of their vision — and a recent review tasting of their work was an enlightening shock.

These are dark, pure, fragrant and nervy red wines with a fine-grained but nonetheless palpable textural presence and sustained acidity. The acidity is ripe and fruit-bonded: the wines drink well. I'd forgotten Morescalchi's account of that seminal trip as I tasted — then realised I'd noted that they were indeed like a kind of dark, black-red Chablis, even to the extent of having a fruit style best described as “sour”. Malbec in Cahors always has that sour-ripe potential — the ripeness of wild plums such as damsons and sloes rather than sweet cultivated plums. What one might call a “mineral” substrate is there too: unfruity flavours

linked to texture. None are oaked; all are aged in concrete, to maximise vineyard character.



2014 Plateau, Causse des Ons, Cahors, around £23 per bottle from Bottle Apostle, Vagabond Wines and H2Vin (some stockists have the 2011 but the 2014 will follow). Dark black-red in colour, with pristine wild-plum scents and a creamy intrigue. The palate is sour, fresh, cascading and bright, with soft-textured support for the pungent, dramatic fruit: refreshing yet satisfying.

Vineyard names, bizarrely, aren't allowed on labels of Cahors wines, and the domain names themselves are already in use, so the three wines are called Causse du Théron (from the Sigaud family at Métairie Grande du Théron), Causse du Vidot (from the Croisille family at Ch les Croisille) and Causse des Ons (from the Jouve family at Domaine du Prince). The 2014 "Plateau" wine from Causse des Ons seems to me to be the most successful so far, but all are wines of drama and gastronomic intrigue.

Parra and Morescalchi's project isn't the only example of Argentine-French collaboration in Cahors. Leading local négociant Bertrand Vigouroux of Georges Vigouroux produces a wine called Antisto which exists in Malbec Mendoza and Malbec Cahors versions; he also works with Paul Hobbs (a Californian with extensive Argentine experience) as "Paul Bertrand" on a sumptuously rich Cahors called Crocus. Léo Borsi, the Argentine winemaker for Châteauneuf du Pape property Vieux Télégraphe, is also working on a Cahors joint-venture project with local landowner Pascal Piéron called Clos Ultralocal El Cahors; and, most excitingly of all, the owners of Fabre Montmayou in Mendoza, Hervé and Diane Joyaux-Fabre, are planning a Cahors investment too. Fabre Montmayou is an old-vine Malbec specialist whose Mendoza wines are some of the finest you can find. The Lot's Argentine renaissance looks set to continue.

Andrew Jefford's weekly blog 'Jefford on Monday' appears every

Monday on [decanter.com](http://www.decanter.com/) (<http://www.decanter.com/>).

Jancis Robinson returns on September 3

Illustration by Graham Roumieu

Other Argentine-Cahors joint venture wines

- Georges Vigouroux: Antisto Malbec Mendoza and Malbec Cahors
- Paul Bertrand: Crocus
- Borsi et Piéron: Clos Ultralocal El Cahors

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