

MALBEC'S OWN COUNTRY

Close to 70% of all Argentine wine grows in the region of Mendoza, including the country's most famous vintages. Jürgen Mathäb reports.



landscape at the foot of the Andes. Above all there are the Argentinians themselves, hospitable people who never seem in a bad mood. Yet only 30 years ago, Argentina didn't attract wine lovers and consumed almost all of the wine it produced. The style was old fashioned – more or less oxidised wines made from plants forced to grow huge quantities of grapes – and so were the wineries. They used big wooden vats, sometimes made of rauli (beech), to ferment and store the wine. Cool fermentation was unknown. Most of the production was cheap and sold in 5-litre demijohns called 'damajuana'. It was possible to make good wines the old way, but few wineries did.

The first vines

European immigrants brought the first vines to Argentina in the 16th century. One hundred years later, they arrived in Mendoza. The first big development came in the middle of the 19th century, when French agronomist Michel Aimé Pouget brought French varieties of better quality to Mendoza; it is no surprise that he brought Malbec, because Cot (the original name for the grape) was the most planted variety in Bordeaux at that time. For another 140 years Argentine wine didn't change much, not even after phylloxera arrived in Europe, because the insect never attacked South America.

Then, around 1990, two things happened. First, national consumption per capita declined. Second, the pioneer Nicolas Catena hired Californian winemaker Paul Hobbs to

MENDOZA'S TOP VARIETIES

	1990 (ha)	2018 (ha)
Malbec	9,600	36,000 ↗
Cabernet Sauvignon	2,100	13,300 ↗
Syrah	620	9,900 ↗
Pedro Ximenez	16,000	8,000 ↘
Chardonnay	855	5,300 ↗
Red varieties	35,553	93,000 ↗
Rosé varieties	75,196	35,000 ↘
White varieties	33,660	24,000 ↘
TOTAL	146,700	153,000 ↗

SOURCE: WINES OF ARGENTINA

modernise his Bodega Esmeralda. Hobbs's Alamos Cabernet Sauvignon was the first modern wine in Argentina.

This caused a revolution. It took about 15 years to bring vineyards and wineries to an international standard, and for them to adopt modern viticultural techniques including those used to grow grapes at high altitudes. Winemakers went higher and higher in search of cool climates, while drip irrigation replaced flooding of the vineyards. Malbec was recognised as being a great advantage for Argentina, helped along by international

ARGENTINA AT A GLANCE

- 5th largest wine producer in the world
- 7th largest country in cultivated surface
- 10th largest wine exporter
- \$821m in total exports (2018, FOB)
- 275m litres, total exports 2018

Portuguese and English are often heard in Argentine wineries. In the past 20 years, Mendoza has become an attractive region for oenotourism, not only for Argentine travellers, but for Brazilians and Americans. As a result, the hospitality staff now need to speak both languages.

There are good reasons to visit, ranging from the magnificent architecture to the vineyard-surrounded restaurants and the dramatic

investments such as Clos de los Siete, founded by oenologist Michel Rolland and Pomerol winemaker Jean-Michel Arcaute, which brought Malbec international recognition. Valle de Uco, a new wine region, became famous. Argentina began to export wine – by 2010, more than 2m hectolitres of what was mostly Malbec was being sent abroad.

Yet only 30 years ago Malbec was often removed because common opinion proclaimed: “This is not our future, Cabernet is.” But after oenologists began comparing the two grapes, and consumer demand for Malbec rose, it became known as one of the top varieties. Argentina, it seems, is a paradise for this old grape – so much so that wineries in Cahors, the only place where Cot remains important in France, admit that Argentina can teach them a lot about making world class wines from Malbec.

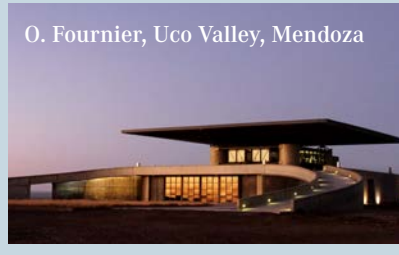
Malbec meets Mendoza

French Cot is perfectly adapted to the high-altitude desert climate in Mendoza with its warm days and cool nights. Malbec does not have its own varietal aromas, but shares common dark fruit aromas with the other main red varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. Like them, Malbec expresses its aromatics differently depending on the terroir in which it is grown. That it can produce easy-drinking wines at one level, and complex and harmonic wines at a higher level, is an important strength of the grape. Its many ripe tannins are another, as is its age-worthiness.

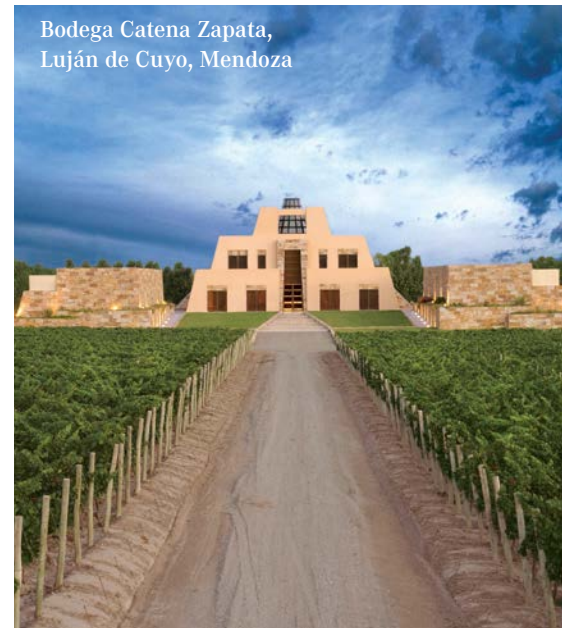
Mendoza is a special terroir that’s unique in the world, where vineyards are situated between 500m and 1,400m above sea level. Like a crooked plane, the region begins on

SIGNIFICANT SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED WINERIES

Achaval-Ferrer, Cobos, O. Fournier, Weinert, Susana Balbo, Zuccardi Uco, Catena Zapata, Cheval des Andes, Mendel, Altos Las Hormigas, Terrazas, Luigi Bosca, Malbec de Angeles and PerSe Wines.



Bodega Catena Zapata, Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza



the western side at the foot of the Andes, and arrives at its lowest level about 120km east of Mendoza. The climate is warm and temperate, with more rainfall in summer. Soil in this sedimental plain is usually alluvial, containing conglomerates, sandstone, gravel and sometimes calcareous sediments (best seen in Lujan de Cuyo, Altamira and Gualtallary subregions).

Mendoza is a desert-dry region with only 220mm of rainfall per year and agriculture

would not be possible without irrigation. Three rivers bring water from the Andes which is distributed by a sophisticated canal system. This makes Mendoza, with its 2m inhabitants, the largest oasis on earth.

Terroir has little to do with where a winery is located in Mendoza, as most wineries get their grapes from different subzones, according to their needs. La Paz, Rivadavia and San Rafael are more usually known for higher yields and the production of entry-level wines, although

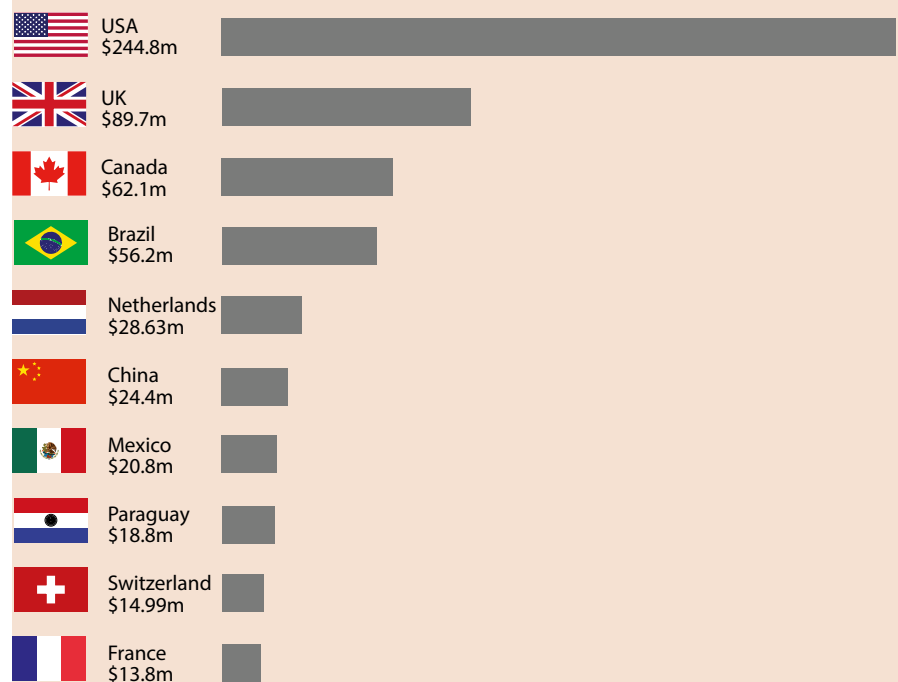
THE BIG FIVE

Argentina’s five biggest wine companies, which produce between 20m and 240m bottles, are:

- Peñaflor/Trapiche, which owns more than 3,000ha of vineyards
- Catena Group
- Norton
- Zuccardi
- Trivento

ARGENTINA’S TOP EXPORT MARKETS

Value (US\$) x 1m



SOURCE: WINES OF ARGENTINA

Bodega Melipal,
Luján de Cuyo, Mendoza



some good wines and important brands are also to be found. The subregions Lujan de Cuyo and Valle de Uco, and also sometimes Maipú, are known as a source of higher-quality grapes.

Lujan de Cuyo is not only a source of premium grapes but was also the first DOC to be defined in Argentina. The area, which is south of Mendoza city, is home to prestigious wineries such as Norton, Lagarde, Weinert and Luigi Bosca, and when the Malbec boom began, many new wineries were founded close to Lujan and in the higher altitudes of Agrelo and Perdiel. Wines from Lujan tend to be complex, offering fruit, minerality, spices and sometimes earthy aromas. Some old

vintages from the region show that the wines have a great ability to age – the 1977 Weinert Estrella Malbec being a famous example.

Around the year 2000, the desert on the way from Tupungato to Tunuyán was also planted with vines. As there is no running water, flooding was not possible and viticulture only became a reality after deep wells were dug and their water distributed by drip irrigation. The Uco Valley became another success story, because the fruity, fresh style of the wines produced there was in line with international trends. A lot of new wineries sprang up, including Clos de los Siete, while sites such as Altamira, Gualtallary and Los Chacayas were shown to give Malbec a distinctive

A CLASSIC WINERY: WEINERT

On the old road from Mendoza to Lujan is a brick construction with an impressive underground cellar full of big old oak casks that seems to hark back to the old ways. And it does. Weinert produces about 400,000 bottles of wine per year, buying grapes mostly from Lujan and Agrelo. "The Uco Valley is too fresh and fruity and one dimensional," says Swiss-born winemaker Hubert Weber, who has run the cellar for more than 20 years. The reds are aged in old wooden tanks for up to ten years; there is not a single barrique in the winery, as Weber believes young fruit characters and barrel aromas and flavours should not dominate the wine. Top bottlings include the Cavas de Weinert, Tonel Unico and Estrella, which are complex and have great ageing potential.

taste. This drove the birth of super-premium single vineyard wines, which now sit at the top of Argentina's wine pyramid. Not all these vineyards are young, as old plantings have been found close to Tupungato and around La Consulta and Vista Flores.

THE AVANT GARDE: ZUCCARDI UCO

Their big La Agricola winery is still located about 50km east of Mendoza but the Zuccardi family decided to build a showcase winery in the Uco Valley, close to the famous Altamira Cru. Opened in 2016, it's an impressive all-concrete structure: winemakers Sebastian Zuccardi and Laura Principiano work only with concrete tanks, concrete eggs and wooden casks of 500

litres or more, to avoid a strong wood influence. There are no stainless steel tanks to be found. They study the soil scientifically before planting to decide grape clones, rootstocks and methods of irrigation. Their best wines, the Piedra Infinita and the Aluvional series from Gualtallary, Altamira and Chacayas, are excellent examples of single vineyard Malbecs.



Other grapes

Malbec is not everything Mendoza offers: a range of grapes are grown there including Bonarda and Cabernet Sauvignon. Cabernet Sauvignon can produce excellent wines, some bottled as varietals, such as Finca los Membrillos from Zuccardi, Primus from Salentein and Gran Cabernet from Malbec de Angeles. Others are blended with Malbec, for example Cheval des Andes and Cavas de Weinert. In recent years, high-quality Cabernet Franc has also appeared on the market. And that's not forgetting the whites, which have also improved a lot in the past five years. Some of the Chardonnays from high-altitude vineyards have reached the highest international standard for quality: Catena's Adrianna White Stones and Adrianna White Bones, from grapes grown 1,500m above sea level, compete in blind tastings with the best Burgundian whites. ■



15-17 March 2020

MEININGER'S WINE BUSINESS INTERNATIONAL meets ProWein

...because audience matters



The preparations for PROWEIN 2020, the world's most important wine fair, are now in full swing. From 15 to 17 March 2020, the eyes of the wine business world will be focused on Düsseldorf, Germany, making it an occasion not to be missed.

Meininger Publications is a vital partner with ProWein, and will be communicating all the essential facts about the fair to trade visitors via MEININGER'S WINE BUSINESS INTERNATIONAL. The **MWBI ProWein issue** will be launched on 21 February, 2020.

Don't let the opportunity pass to use Meininger's Wine Business International to speak to the international decision makers coming to Düsseldorf.

A presence in the magazine can announce your presence at ProWein 2020, present your wines, and let people know where to find you.

Meininger's Wine Business International is read by the wine world's decision makers, including traders, importers, wholesalers, retailers and buyers, with a press run of more than 10,000 copies that's read in more than 30 countries.

MWBI ProWein issue 2020
Publication date: 21 February, 2020

Ask for our 2020 Rate Card, and then talk to us about how we can make ProWein a success for you.

I look forward to hearing from you...

Jörg Sievers, Sales Manager
Phone +49 63 21-89 08 67
sievers@meininger.de

