

San Francisco Chronicle

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2006

THE CHRONICLE'S WINE SELECTIONS

Argentine Malbec

While Malbec serves mostly as a blending grape in France, California and other wine regions, it is Argentina's finest stand-alone variety. When grown in the high-altitude vineyards in Mendoza, at the base of the Andes, Malbec offers intense black-fruit aromas and flavors, hints of blueberry and spice, and toothsome tannins. It typically has the firm tannins and structure of Cabernet Sauvignon, the subtle herbaceousness of well-made Merlot and the juiciness and meaty spiciness of Syrah.

Argentine Malbecs range in price from \$8 to the very rare \$150, though \$20 buys a fine wine that's great for both sipping and pairing with meat dishes.

There are many good-value Argentine Malbecs priced at \$10 or less. They may not offer as much complexity as the wines recommended below, yet they are well-made and are a good introduction to Malbec. Among them: 2004 Dona Paula Los Cardos Mendoza Malbec (\$10), 2004 Don Rodolfo Cafayate Valley Malbec (\$10), 2004 Finca El Portillo Mendoza Malbec (\$9), 2004 Familia Rutini Trumpepeter Tupungato Malbec (\$9), 2005 Familia Zuccardi Santa Julia Mendoza Malbec (\$8), 2004 Valentin Bianchi Elsa San Rafael Malbec (\$9) and Catena Zapata Alamos Malbec (\$10).

For more complex, polished wines, look to our top scorers from 52 current-release Argentine Malbecs tasted:

★★ 2004 **Altos Las Hormigas Mendoza Malbec (\$11)** A perennial favorite, Las Hormigas ("the ants") is juicy and easy-drinking, yet full of classic Mendoza blackberry and plum fruit and spiciness. Velvety tannins seal this enjoyable deal.

★★★ 2002 **Catena Zapata Catena Alta Angelica Vineyard Mendoza Malbec (\$45)** Deeply flavored and well-structured, this wine begins with smoky, meaty aromas that lead to a succulent red- and black-berry palate. It's a toasty, vanilla-coated style, yet has enough fruit to carry the oak. The tannins are firm yet polished; acidity is crisp and refreshing.

★★★ 2004 **Dominio del Plata BenMarco Mendoza Malbec (\$20)** Inky in color and dense in its meaty, fully ripe black plum and black-berry fruit, it has a lively juiciness that makes it immediately drinkable. Complexity comes from cigar box, orange zest, vanilla and oak nuances, with ever-so-slight touches of tar and coffee. This wine offers more than its price would suggest.

★★½ 2003 **Familia Rutini Felipe Rutini La Consulta Mendoza Malbec (\$18)** Smooth tannins and luscious raspberry and black-berry fruit are the high points of this well-priced wine. Dark chocolate, black pepper and toast add interest.

★★ 2004 **Familia Zuccardi Santa Julia Reserva Malbec (\$11)** This is an outstanding value — dry and full-bodied, with leathery, black-fruit flavors plus dark chocolate, tar, coffee and black pepper. Coating tannins should soften with time in the bottle.

★★ 2003 **Joffre Mendoza Malbec (\$21)** Made in a slightly sweet style, it's reminiscent of blackberry-syrup, with herb, pepper and licorice notes. Oak plays a major role; crisp acidity is a balancing factor.

★★½ 2004 **La Posta del Vinatero Pizzella Vineyard Mendoza Malbec (\$17)** Richly layered aromas and flavors of blackberry, raspberry, cocoa and black olive give this wine depth; additional complexity comes from fennel-seed and mineral notes. Brisk acidity refreshes the palate.

★★ 2003 **Salentein Valle de Uco Malbec (\$18)** Vivid aromas of blackberry, plum, cocoa and oyster shell are followed by a full-bodied palate ripe with berry, cherry and black-pepper flavors. Closes with some alcoholic heat.

★★ 2003 **Tempus Alba Preludio Mendoza Malbec (\$22)** Tart raspberry and cranberry fruit give this wine a bright, lively profile, with plum, licorice, chocolate and toast framing those flavors. A hint of beef bouillon adds savory complexity.

★★½ 2004 **Tikal Amorio Altos de Mendoza Malbec (\$31)** This youthfully tannic wine should see its edges rounded with a year in the cellar. Toast, vanilla and black-fruit aromas lead to a powerful, structured palate of ripe blackberry, licorice, tar and espresso. A dash of vanilla adds creaminess to the otherwise firm texture.

★★★ 2003 **Valentin Bianchi Particular San Rafael Malbec (\$30)** About 7 percent each of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot were added, giving the wine great depth and structure, while the flavors remain lively and concentrated. Juicy black plum and blackberry fruit get a lift from tobacco, spice and smoke notes; the texture is silky, the finish lingering.

★★½ 2003 **Vina Cobos Bramare Marchiori Vineyard Mendoza Malbec (\$85)** This rich, plush — and expensive — Malbec produced by Sebastopol's Paul Hobbs has an inviting stony aroma along with floral and blackberry notes. The palate is deep in blackberry, blueberry and plum, with spice, vanilla and toast in supporting roles. The tannins are supple, and clean acidity counters the ripe fruit.

★★★★ 2003 **Vina Cobos Cobos Marchiori Vineyard Mendoza Malbec (\$150)** See "\$150 Argentine Malbec?" this page.

★★½ 2004 **Vina Cobos El Felino Mendoza Malbec (\$25)** Paul Hobbs' "The Cat" pounces on the palate with a balanced mix of lip-smacking dark berry fruit, peppery spice and clean acidity. The tannins are polished, the finish long and rewarding.

— Linda Murphy

Key: ★★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent ★★ Good

\$150 Argentine Malbec?

Paul Hobbs of Sebastopol produces a \$150 Malbec from the Mendoza region of Argentina. That's right, \$150.

Is his 2003 Vina Cobos Cobos Marchiori Vineyard Mendoza Malbec worth the price?

Let's just say it earned four stars on our four-star rating system, that it's an amazingly deep and powerful mouthful of exotic blackberry, blueberry and plum fruit, with spice and toast notes, a meaty texture and velvety tannins... and that it sells out.

After that, the wine's value is in the palate of the beholder.

Hobbs, who also makes fine single-vineyard wines from Sonoma County and Napa Valley grapes under his Paul Hobbs Winery label, is a partner with the husband-and-wife Mendoza winemaking team of Andrea Marchiori and Luis Barraud in Vina Cobos. If their \$150 Cobos is too rich for you, try the 2003 Vina Cobos Bramare (\$85) or the 2004 Vina Cobos El Felino (\$25) Mendoza Malbecs (see "The Chronicle's Wine Selections" this page). Both are winners.

— Linda Murphy