

Argentina & Chile's 17 Best Values

By Ray Isle

Around the time of the first Thanksgiving celebration at the Plymouth Colony in 1621, workers were already harvesting grapes in the vineyards of Chile and Argentina—and in fact had been doing so for almost 75 years. In both countries, Spanish missionaries had brought vines over from Europe in the 1500s; the first professionally farmed vineyard in Chile was established in 1554.

Nevertheless, South American wines didn't have a major presence in wine shops in the United States until the early 1990s. Chile started the movement and quickly became known for delicious wines at very affordable prices. Lately, it has been Argentina's turn: Measured in dollars, Argentinean wine imports to the U.S. rose 31 percent from the first six months of 2006 to the first six months of 2007. Both countries have their specialties. From Chile, look for crisp, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc from the Casablanca and San Antonio valleys, both located close to the Pacific Ocean, and reds made from Carmenère, a distinctively spicy French grape abundant in Chilean vineyards. In Argentina, the Salta province is known for Torrontés, a native grape variety with a distinctive, floral aroma that makes some of the country's most interesting whites. But Malbec from Mendoza is unquestionably the country's marquee variety—its rich blueberry and blackberry flavors, light smokiness and soft tannins lead to immensely appealing red wines.

Both Chile and Argentina produce an enormous amount of wine. Not all of it is remarkable, or even good, but the best bottlings—such as the 17 here—still represent extraordinary value at \$20 or less a bottle. Beyond that, any one of them would make an ideal partner for roast turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy and the 10 or 12 other side dishes of a traditional Thanksgiving.



STAR SELECTIONS

2006 Cocodrilo Cabernet Sauvignon (\$17) California winemaker Paul Hobbs founded his Argentine winery in 1991, and makes impressive wines in both the United States and Argentina, among them this black tea-scented Cabernet.