



# NEXT BIG THING?

Malbec may be the red grape of the moment, but it is far from reaching its full potential in the UK, writes **Adam Lechmere**

**A**s research for this article I did a quick straw poll, asking friends and relations to list five red wine types, whether grape or region or style, without thinking too hard about it. The answers came back: Shiraz, Tempranillo, Rioja and Merlot. Cabernet Sauvignon, Beaujolais. Chianti, Barolo, Pinot Noir and Châteauneuf. Mâcon-Villages, St Emilion, Claret and a rare style called Bordeaux Nouveau. I asked why no one mentioned Malbec. “Oh, yes,” they said. “That would have been next on my list.”

Malbec, it seems, is the next big thing on everybody's list. A recent survey by the Wine & Spirit Trade Association (far more scientific than mine) found that 18% of respondents said they had drunk Malbec in the past month. The variety came fifth, with Merlot in pole position (49% of respondents), followed by Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz/Syrah, and Pinot Noir with 19%. Malbec was ahead of Tempranillo, Côtes du Rhône and Chianti. The WSTA has no comparative figures for this particular poll but on the evidence from retailers and restaurants, the grape that Argentina has made its own is on the crest of a very exciting wave – but nowhere near the top of its trajectory.

“People who like hearty red wines but also sweetness of fruit character, love Malbec,” says Ben Smith of the Concha y Toro group, whose Mendoza brand Trivento is garnered with awards and critical approval. Trivento has jumped from thirteenth-best-selling Argentinian brand in the UK in 2013, to number one this year. Sales have doubled in a year, from 153,000 cases to 325,000 as of July 2016.

Across the UK, figures show Malbec sales almost doubling in the off-trade, from £69.4 million by June 2015, to £101.9 million a year later – a jump of 46.8%. In comparison, the traditional big hitters are stable or losing market share. Zinfandel is down 9.4%, Cabernet Sauvignon is down 3.2%, Shiraz and Merlot up 7% and 6% respectively.

## ‘Must-have grape’

“Malbec is the must-have grape of the moment,” Laithwaite's wine director Abi Hirshfeld told Harpers. Sales are up 25%, she added, pushing Argentina into the top six revenue earners for the UK merchant.

“We've had a 65% increase in off-trade sales. Its growth has been explosive,” says Virgin Wines buying director Andrew Baker. In consumer tastings “it's difficult to put on too much Malbec”.

“Malbec – which is responsible for 61% of Argentina's wine exports – is a category in its own right,” says Andrew

Maidment, UK director of Wines of Argentina. Exports were up 20% from 2014 to 2015, and in the off-trade they stood at £112 million – up 30% in value and 33% in volume. For Maidment, all the indicators are healthy. “It sells at a higher average price, and Malbec consumers are younger than most – like California and New Zealand – and their income level is higher than average: they are ABC1s.”

Malbec's growth, Maidment says, started in the on-trade and the independent sector. “Then we saw Majestic pick it up because they realised they could make some money out of it, and now, recently, the major multiples have come on board. It's an attractive category for them because of its higher average price.”

Wines of Argentina's research has found that “people are switching to Malbec from Spain”, Maidment says. The reason for that, he infers, is that Malbec is “stylistically bigger, juicier, more fashionable. It's trendy compared with Rioja, popular with younger, trendsetting consumers.”

At Gaucho, the group of 18 restaurants (in and around London, in Leeds and Manchester, Dubai, Hong Kong and Buenos Aires) that carries 194 Argentinian wines, all but 10 of which are exclusive to Gaucho, wine director Phil Crozier says Malbec is “part of the everyday wining and dining language in the UK. It's a brand in itself. Everyone who comes into one of our restaurants knows about Malbec.”

That's natural enough – a steak house tends to attract people who like their red wines big and bold.

But Crozier says it's more complicated than that. Gaucho customers aren't what you might expect. “There is an equal number of women and men. They tend to be aspirational, you can get intellectual types. They want to learn about wine.”

Outside the specialist restaurants like Gaucho, the story is rather more straightforward. “Malbec definitely has a more masculine image. We over-index in sales to men,” Maidment says. In surveys, Malbec and Argentina are usually associated with such traditionally masculine concepts as “gaucho” (the Argentinian cowboy, that is, not the restaurant), “beef”, “rugby”, “polo” and so on. Smith at Concha y Toro says Trivento is mostly bought by men, an anomaly when 70% of overall wine purchases in supermarkets are made by women.

For Baker at Virgin Wines, the strong identification with a particular style might cause problems in the future. “People have quite unsophisticated ways of buying. They say ‘I like Argentinian Malbec’ and they don't explore other styles.” He says people are fully aware of the differences between Argentinian and Chilean Malbecs. The latter, from a cooler climate, tend to be lighter and softer, but “Argentina is far

“  
**Malbec is a  
category in its  
own right”**

**Andrew  
Maidment**





Argentina and Malbec are often associated with traditionally masculine concepts

more marketable than Chile: it's much easier to send an email selling Argentinian Malbec."

Baker says it's incumbent on retailers like Virgin to "push the boundaries a bit, introduce them to lighter styles like a Malbec-Bonarda blend, for example", and he's not alone in understanding the need to diversify. Wines of Argentina is making a conscious effort to "push the feminine side" of Malbec, Maidment says, "to move away from the traditional, rustic image, to show Argentina as a foodie destination and not just a steak destination."

Argentinian Malbec has a rich and varied history as a base on which to build this narrative. Introduced to Mendoza in the 1850s, it has long been championed by some of the country's greatest winemakers and viticulturalists. The renowned Nicolas Catena, for example, was an early pioneer of high-altitude microclimates, planting the Uco Valley at 1,440m, and discovering how sunlight intensity softened and sweetened Malbec tannins. Catena's 1994 and 1996 Malbecs were highly praised (by Robert Parker in particular), reinforcing the interest of globetrotting winemakers like Paul Hobbs, Michel Rolland and Donald Hess, who continue to explore the possibilities of different terroirs.

### The importance of regionality

Regionality is the future for Malbec. California, Chile and South Africa (not forgetting Cahors, the birthplace of the grape) already have Malbecs that are gaining notice. Argentina must exploit its regions as a point of difference.

Mendoza accounts for nine out of 10 Argentinian Malbecs, but there is increasing interest in other regions, both from producers and consumers. Grupo Peñaflor, Argentina's largest producer (and one of the world's top 10), owner of Finca Las Moras, Trapiche and Bodegas Santa Ana, is just one major producer looking beyond Mendoza.

"Even though [it] continues to be the wine 'capital' for Argentina, the wines we are getting from regions like Cafayate (Salta), Chañar Punco (Catamarca), Pedernal Valley (San Juan), Gualtallary (Mendoza) and even Chapadmalal in Buenos Aires are outstanding," says export manager Martin Navesi.

“  
It's difficult  
to put on too  
much Malbec”

Andrew Baker

At Gaucho, Crozier has noted more sophistication in the questions that diners are asking. "Five years ago people would simply ask for Malbec. Now they are beginning to say, 'I like my Malbec in this particular style'. The staff are highly trained, and we are now trying to educate people in the regions, which aren't nearly as well known. So if someone wants an intense, rich red they will be steered towards Salta. If they want something more aromatic they will go to the Uco Valley, if a lighter, more European style of Malbec we'll send them to Patagonia."

It's a similar story at Coya, the high-end Peruvian-South American restaurant in London's Mayfair. Wine buyer Nobuko Okamura says her customers "are increasingly comfortable with top-end Malbec ... we're showing smaller, more interesting producers, different styles from different terroirs".

In particular, like Crozier, Okamura has noticed diners wanting "leaner, more European styles" – and this is where El Niño comes in. Just as the wet 2011 vintage in California forced many winemakers to produce lighter, less alcoholic wines, Argentina's rainy 2016 has had the same effect. Winemakers across the country reported lower sugar and higher acidity in their wines.

"Since vintage 2014, a change in style is being reflected in the making of Malbec, with a tendency towards fresher wines with floral and spicy notes," Eduardo Wexman of Montes-Kaiken in Mendoza told Harpers. "In the 2016 these characteristics were accentuated since spring saw temperatures way below the average, giving us very good phenolic maturity with lower alcohol."

Kaiken – owned by the Chilean kingpin Aurelio Montes and run by his son Aurelio Jr – is "searching for new terroirs that will showcase these characteristics", Wexman adds.

Malbec – easy to pronounce, accessible, adaptable, complex and ageworthy – would seem to be unstoppable. And the steeply rising statistics only tell part of the story. "We're still only 3% of the market," Maidment points out. "New Zealand is double the size of Argentina. We've still got a hell of a lot to do." □