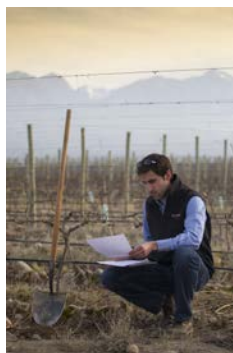


Why is Argentinian Malbec Unique in the World?

Researchers explain why Argentine Malbec is different from Malbec wines from other parts of the world.

By Sebastián Ríos



The name of the wine is “Mad Hatters” (like a mad hat..) the label illustrates a gaucho, or the idea of a gaucho, for someone who is unfamiliar with Argentinian culture. It’s a Malbec. The label specifies the main characteristics associated with Argentina’s signature grape, Malbec, as indicated by the map of South America on the back of the bottle that identifies Argentina. However, Mad Hatters is not an Argentine wine – it’s a wine from South Africa. An attempt to join the incredible world success of the French variety of this grape that has found its best expression in Argentina.

As an Argentinian, saying that Argentine Malbec is unique is not just a “love is blind” expression, but confirmed data. In fact, Argentine and American researchers have identified distinctive characteristics in Mendocinian Malbec, that differ widely from Californian Malbec or any other version.

“This is the most extensive Malbec study that has been carried out and probably, it’s the most extensive study of any grape variety in the world,” says Fernando Buscema, executive director at Catena Institute of Wine and co-author of this study published in Food Chemistry magazine.

“Malbec is not a grape variety cultivated exclusively in Mendoza or Argentina. Even though world-class Malbec is associated with Argentina and Mendoza, there are other countries such as France, the U.S. or Chile, trying to produce high quality Malbec as well,” adds Buscema. “The perception that we are trying to prevent is that Argentina’s signature grape becomes a commodity. Through this research and other studies we are trying to associate high quality Malbec with specific vineyard sites. For instance, if someone wants to drink a Malbec that is ‘unique’ and world-class, the grapes must come from a specific site or terroir, and our expectations are that such site is located in Argentina, specifically in Mendoza.” He adds, “without going into further detail, this is what the best wine regions in the world have done in the past, like Bordeaux or Burgundy. In these regions, a specific vineyard site has more prestige or is more important than the grape variety associated with it.

FROM NAPA VALLEY TO TUPUNGATO

Luján, Maipú, Tupungato and San Carlos are all regions in Mendoza that are associated with producing high quality Malbec. Napa, Sonoma, Yolo, Lodi and Monterrey in California also produce Malbec. In these nine wine regions, researchers from the Catena Institute of Wine and from UC Davis in California selected 41 vineyards planted with Malbec, which were thoroughly evaluated through chemical and sensory analysis.

“We applied strict protocols in order to ensure that the plots selected were truly representative of the vineyards chosen and we also applied standard vinification parameters to avoid any possible interference with the specific characteristics of each site or terroir”, explains Buscema.

In order to evaluate the aromatic compounds of the wines analyzed, three female field experts were hired. In addition, to analyze the corresponding flavor profiles, a group of highly

qualified wine tasters were summoned. What was the result ?

Results indicated that both in terms of aroma and flavor, Malbec from Mendoza can be easily distinguished from Malbec from California. This proves that Malbec wines are not all the same and that in fact terroir has a great influence on the type of Malbec obtained, concludes Buscema.

But what was the difference between Malbec from Mendoza and Malbec from California? “When evaluating the wine samples from Mendoza, more wine tasting descriptors had to be used (both for aroma and flavor), which indicated a higher level of complexity in comparison with the Californian wines. The Mendocinian versions displayed more intense ripe red fruit and had a softer texture than the wine samples from California, that offered rather citric fruit hints.”

“Wine descriptors such as “softness” in Malbec from Tupungato, “chocolate and dried fruit flavors” in Malbec from San Carlos or “low astringency and good acidity” in Malbec from Maipú, differ very much from the wine descriptors found in Californian Malbec: “grapefruit and citrus in Lodi, artificial fruit and cooked vegetables in Yolo, soy sauce and meat flavors in Monterrey.”

Also, one of the big conclusions of this comparative study showed that not all Mendocinian Malbec wines are the same. On the contrary, certain factors such as climate and soil proved to have a direct impact on each Malbec sample. Even lots within the same vineyard varied from one another. A perfect example of these differences can be observed by tasting a Malbec sample from “Adrianna” vineyard, located at almost 5,000 feet elevation, being at present the most studied vineyard in the world.”

MALBEC WITH DIFFERENT SURNAMES

It was Nicolás Catena’s pioneering vision and his search for colder vineyard sites – explains Alejandro Vigil, Chief winemaker at Catena Zapata – which led to the plantation of the “Adrianna Vineyard” in Gualtallary, Tupungato.”

“Nicolás Catena believed that Argentine wines should be obtained from colder areas”, says Vigil. “In 2004, when I vinified our first Malbec from Adrianna Vineyard, Laura Catena realized that we had obtained something different, something singular. And so our Catena Zapata Malbec Argentino was born, which was our first wine ranked by Robert Parker (one of the most prestigious wine critics in the world) with 98+points.

“This fact made me realize of something very important for Argentinian viticulture - that two Malbecs obtained from nearby sites, with only a few kilometers distance between each other, had very different flavor profiles.”, adds Vigil.

In fact, this is what the study carried out by Fernando Buscema and his Californian colleagues has proved – that the four Mendocinian sites analyzed offer different Malbec versions, with different characteristics. “Malbec from Tupungato and Maipú received higher scores in terms of unctuousness and red fruit flavors, whereas Malbec from Luján and San Carlos displayed spicy, floral and black fruit flavors,” explains Buscema, whose team has recently sent a new study to a leading science magazine, providing a detailed analysis of the phenolic compounds found in the same Mendocinian and Californian vineyards.

“We expect to achieve a full understanding of our regions, unveiling the uniqueness of each terroir, and tell the world about it,” says Buscema.

According to Alejandro Vigil, the knowledge gained in terms of the role of terroir through these studies “makes it necessary to identify each Malbec one by one, rather than describing it just as a varietal. For example, referring to Malbec from Maipú, Malbec from Tupungato and so on, as if Malbecs had surnames. Our vast diversity of soils, climate and altitude is what makes our Malbec unique, allowing us to offer different options to consumers.”