

Recently I attended a BLIND wine tasting, which was a real challenge. I consider myself fairly good at identifying wines, but at the same time, I find blind tastings to be difficult at best. Featured among all the wines we tasted was a Malbec from the Mendoza region of Argentina. I did not correctly identify this wine. I wrestled with the nose, the taste, and even consulted with some of the other tasters. I surrendered to the host. When he revealed that it was a Malbec, I turned green with embarrassment. I should have guessed correctly.

This scenario did serve as a wake-up call. I was struck with the idea that maybe I should revisit Mendoza and dig a little deeper. Although Malbec is native to Cahors in Southern France, is now better known as the icon wine grape of Argentina. How did this come about? I found an article in the New York Times by a writer named Ondine Cohane. She brought out the fact that the financial crisis of 2002 in Argentina was actually a boon to the wine industry. In her article she points to a set of events that started with the devaluation of the Argentinian Peso. The devaluation meant that winemakers could deliver high quality wines to the export market at very low prices. Real estate prices also fell and investors rushed in to snap up prime wine acreage at a fraction of the cost of other regions. Ten years later, the result is a vibrant wine scene with a great array of wines that pleases just about every budget. And at the center of all this is the mighty Malbec grape, growing in a very responsible and sustainable environment, harvested and processed with very modern production methods. From another perspective; Karen MacNeil in her book called THE WINE BIBLE puts it this way: "Mendoza is more than just the leading wine region; it is the heartbeat of the Argentinian wine industry. Virtually all of the wineries of any importance are found in Mendoza."

Malbec is a grape that will always retain importance in France. It will always have demand as a blending grape for Bordeaux wines. It will always be blended with Cabernet Franc and Gamay in the Loire to produce the Sparkling wine known as Saumur. However, Malbec is sensitive to frost. Malbec survives quite well in the higher, drier climes of South America. The lower slopes of the Andes Mountains provide a growing environment for Malbec grapes that possess thinner skins and a soft and supple fruit. At higher altitudes, the varietal develops thicker skins and a deeper concentration of flavor. Wines from these altitudes of around 2000 ft. possess intense, vibrant color and rank among the most respected in South America.

It is difficult to talk about the recent success of Mendoza wines without mentioning The White Varietals. Keeping in mind that Mendoza is by far the largest exporter to the United States of Malbec Wines, I cannot forget about the boatloads of chardonnay that come into the US. (I should also mention that the same success applies to Cabernet Sauvignon.) These wines are produced almost exclusively for export. This practice has been ongoing since the mid 1990's

when Argentina developed a Fine Wine Industry. Prior to this, wine was produced and consumed mostly for in-country markets. The wines that arrive here in the US are competitively priced and the quality is very good. In regards to quality, I would look for it to increase even more. Why? Because superior winemaking talent has established itself in the better wineries like Catena and Trapiche. (Available to us in the Lowcountry.)

In addition to this, there is also a significant Sparkling Wine industry, with prestigious Champagne Houses like MOET & CHANDON, PIPER-HEIDSIECK, and MUMM that have established Argentinian subsidiaries.

There are seven wine regions in Argentina, with Mendoza being the largest. Much has been written about Argentinian wines, and in the future much more will be said. The Argentinian wine Industry is willing to compete in the world markets, willing to experiment, and willing to expand and improve on the other six wine regions. I wonder What Pope Francis is drinking with dinner tonight?

WINESPEAK

I used to live in Medfield, MA. I preferred to do my wine shopping at a place called the Medfield Wine Shop. The owner of the store is a gentleman named Matt. I stopped in the store last week on my way through New England. I asked what was new and exciting in the world of wines. When he responded, "I have some new Malbecs," I was a little surprised, expecting a mighty California or Bordeaux. Without even asking, Matt put a bottle in my shopping basket. We drank the wine that evening and it was excellent. (Matt never disappoints!) But the real lesson was the price. Only \$17.99. That is what we can expect from Argentinian wines... good wines at reasonable prices. Try one. You might like it!

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