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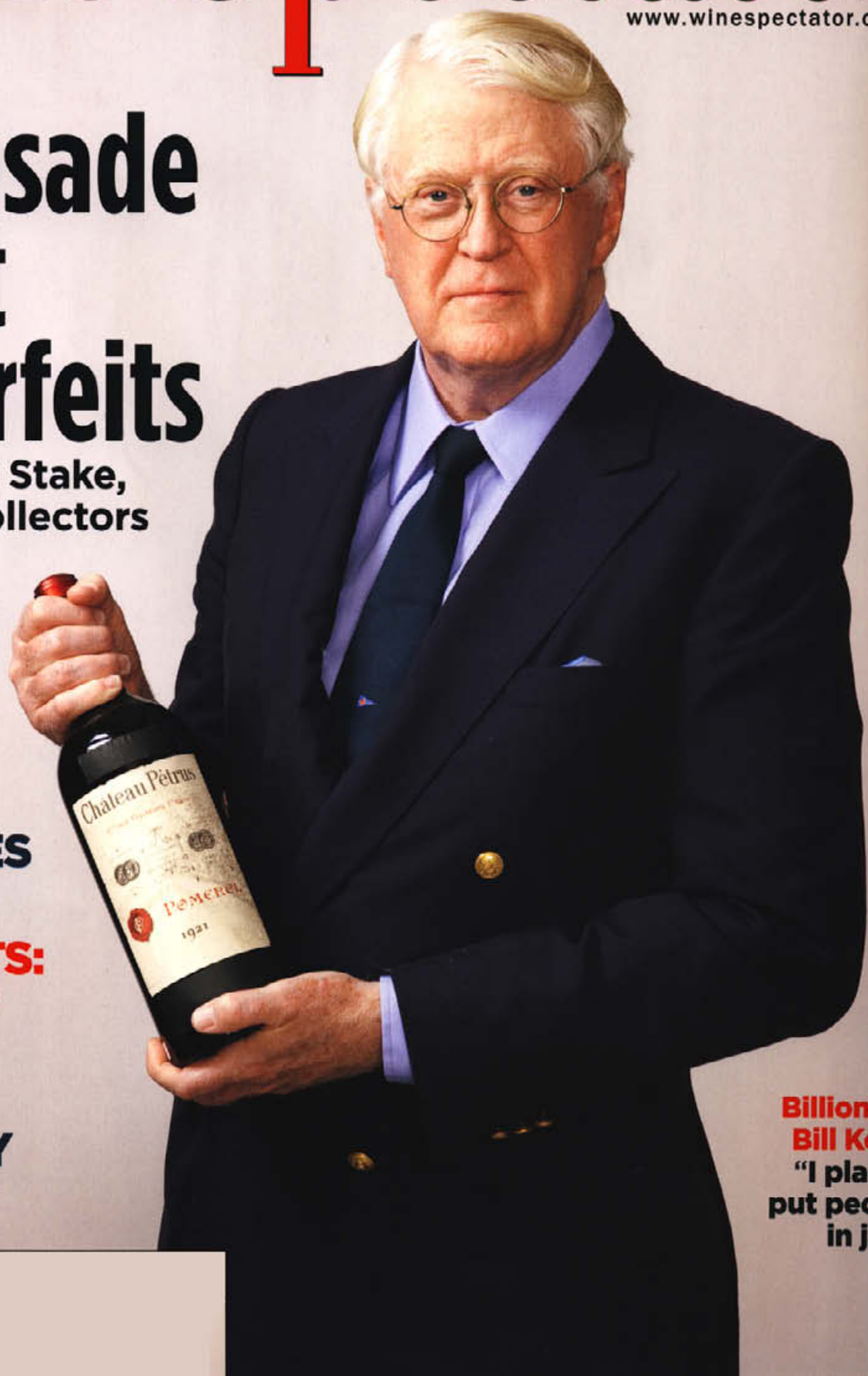
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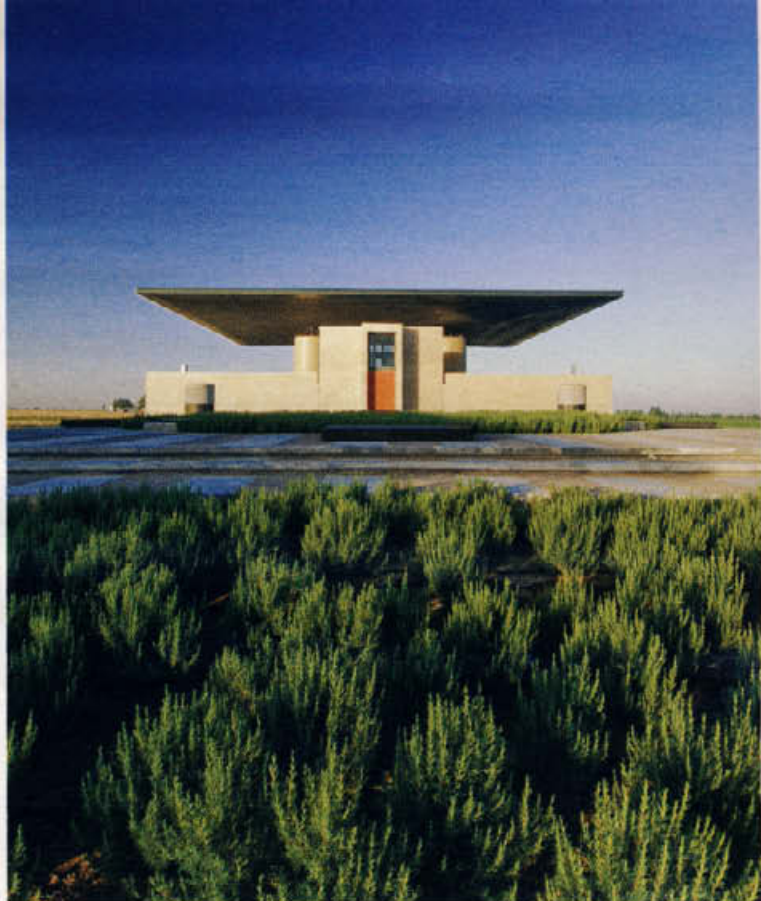
Malbec harvest from Viña Col Marchiori Vineyard in Mendoza

MALBEC MADNESS

Argentina's star red is running up the score / **BY JAMES MOLESWORTH**

Argentina has a winning horse called Malbec, and it's riding it hard. Thanks to the wine's approachable, juicy, fruit-driven profile, along with a multitude of bottlings for \$15 or less, Malbec has captivated American consumers. This demand is triggering increases in both production and exports, providing the wine world with a rare bright spot of growth during a difficult economic period.

Since my last look at Argentina ("More Malbec, Please," Dec. 15, 2008), I have reviewed 600 Argentine wines, the most ever for my annual report. Of these, more than half are varietal bottlings of Malbec or Malbec-based blends, easily making it the dominant grape variety in this report. Furthermore, one-quarter of the Malbecs under review earned outstanding ratings (90 points or higher on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale), an impressive percentage.



Left: Over the past decade, Santiago Achával has overseen the rise of the world-class estate of Achával-Ferrer, which made two classic Malbecs in 2007. Right: Bodegas y Viñedos O. Fournier produces top-scoring Syrah and Tempranillo at its state-of-the-art winery in the Uco Valley, where the varieties thrive in the cooler climate of southern Mendoza.

that builds on the trend established in recent years. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/121509.)

Leading the way are the top bottlings from Achával-Ferrer and Bodega Catena Zapata. These two wineries have consistently duled for the top spot among Argentine Malbecs in my last few annual reports, and they offer a great contrast in styles, with plush, lavish bottlings coming from Carena, and vibrant, piercing wines the hallmark of Achával-Ferrer.

One virtue of these top wines is their ability to showcase Mendoza's varied *terroir*. At first glance, Mendoza seems like a large expanse of land with little variation—an image propagated by the fact that most wines are simply labeled as 'Mendoza,' despite often being sourced from more specific areas within the region. But these differing *terroirs*—from warm spots in northern Mendoza, such as Agrelo and Luján de Cuyo, to the cooler reaches of the Uco Valley in the south, such as Tupungato and La Consulta—can be exploited to enhance both the character and diversity of Argentine wines.

A trio of Malbecs from Achával-Ferrer demonstrates how differences in Mendoza's *terroir* can be expressed in distinctive styles. The Achával-Ferrer Finca Altamira Mendoza 2007 (95 points, \$112) continues the bottling's track record as one of the country's best wines. The Finca Bella Vista Mendoza 2007 (95, \$112) and the Finca Mirador Mendoza 2007 (94, \$112) are also among the top wines in this report.

The Finca Altamira, sourced from low-yielding vines in a cooler, high-elevation area of southern Mendoza, is sleek and stylish, with vibrant fruit and minerality. In contrast, the Finca Bella Vista, which comes from the Perdriel area (and is back after a two-year hiatus due to hail damage in the vineyard), shows a richer, more muscular profile, with black and blue fruits, while the Finca Mirador, from Medrano, offers piercing floral and iron notes.

Matching the Achával-Ferrer wines step for step is the high-end portfolio from the industry's dominant player, Bodega Catena Zapata. The Malbec Mendoza Nicasia Vineyard 2006 (95, \$120), also sourced from Altamira fruit (a different vineyard in the same area as Achával-Ferrer's), is just as sleek, but





Mist drifts off the river in Patagonia's Valle de Azul, where Bodega Noemía de Patagonia makes gorgeous Malbecs, such as its top-rated Río Negro Valley bottling, at a newly built winery.

denser, with loads of plum and blackberry fruit. The Malbec Mendoza Argentino 2005 (95, \$123) blends grapes from Gualtallary and Altamira to create a muscular, toast- and fruit-filled version.

Other top-scoring wines include the Bodega Mendel Malbec Mendoza Finca Remota 2007 (93, \$115), another bottling that uses Altamira fruit; the Viña Cobos Malbec Mendoza Marchiori Vineyard 2006 (93, \$175), made from a single vineyard in Perdriel; and the Bodega Noemía de Patagonia Río Negro Valley 2007 (94, \$110), a racy, graphite-filled Malbec sourced from old vines in Argentina's southern region of Patagonia.

These wines represent the quality pinnacle of Argentine Malbec today and carry commensurate price tags. But there are worthy alternatives at lower prices. The Altocedro Malbec La Consulta Reserva 2007 (92, \$38), from owner and winemaker Karim Mussi, offers the grape's captivating fruit profile with a sleek, racy finish. Altos Las Hormigas, Bodega Colomé, Finca Decero, Piattelli, Finca & Bodega Carlos Pulenta, Bodega Renacer Pascual Toso and others also make outstanding Malbecs for less than \$40 a bottle.

Those looking for maximum value will be happy to hear that I tasted more than 60 Malbecs for this report that cost \$15 or less per bottle and rate 85 points or higher. The Bodegas y Viñedos O. Fournier Malbec Uco Valley Urban 2008 (89, \$11) is among the top values, as are Malbecs from Ave, Bodega del Desierto, Henry Lagarde, Bodega Norton, La Posta del Viñatero, Proviva, TriVento and the Catena Zapata-owned Vista del Sur. Results in this price range are inconsistent, however, as a proliferation of bottlings has somewhat diluted quality.

With the explosion of Malbec bottlings available in the United States, it's becoming increasingly important for consumers not only to exercise caution when choosing among various wineries, but also to know their vintages. Of the vintages that currently dominate the market (and make up the bulk of wines in this report), 2006 is the best, followed by 2007. The majority of top bottlings from 2008 have not yet been released, yet some early returns on the year are promising, and it may eventually match 2006 in quality.

The wines of 2006 have fleshed out since I first began tasting them two years ago, with a number of the late-releases showing better fruit and purity than many earlier releases. This has led me to upgrade my overall assessment of the vintage, from 89 to 91.

In general, 2007 is a step behind 2008, as late-season rains in the warmer areas such as Luján de Cuyo hampered the harvest there, although cooler spots such as Altamira saw extended, drier harvest periods that led to fresh, pure, stylish wines.

The 2008 vintage featured a cold winter and a late start to spring, with cool temperatures running through the first half of the season, accentuated by a damaging spring frost in the Uco Valley. The second half of the vintage warmed up, however, and the Malbecs show potential. (The grape typically ripens late and benefits from longer growing seasons.)

Malbec is Argentina's star, but other grapes can be more than role-players. Blue-chip varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Syrah are plentiful, while Argentina's own Bonarda and Torrontés add diversity. Once you step outside the Malbec realm, however, you will have to choose carefully, as the grab bag of non-Malbecs contains wines of variable quality.

Argentine bottlings of Cabernet Sauvignon often feature dark, loamy personalities that lack the polish of the best Napa offerings or the racy structures of the best Bordeaux, but there are still some solid efforts. There are more than 80 Cabernet-based reds in this report, with Bodega Catena Zapata and Viña Cobos leading the group. The Bodega Catena Zapata Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Alta 2005 (93, \$57) is a rare Argentine version of Cabernet that shows ripe, suave fruit and a long, stylish finish despite its concentration. Other outstanding Cabernets were produced by Finca Decero and Bodegas Tahuan, which Nicolás Catena's son Ernesto started in 2003. Tasty values include the Bodega Norton Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Barrel Select 2006 (88, \$13) and the Familia Zuccardi Cabernet Sauvignon Mendoza Santa Julia Reserva 2007 (88, \$12).

Thanks to its location in the cooler Uco Valley in southern Mendoza, Bodegas y Viñedos O. Fournier continues to set the pace for Syrah and Tempranillo. The winery's Syrah Uco Valley 2004 (91, \$80) showcases the house style—ripe, dark and toasty—while its Tempranillo Uco Valley Urban 2008 (88, \$11) is a dynamite value, offering focused red currant, red licorice and roasted vanilla bean notes. Fournier's neighbor Altocedro fashioned a delicious value in its Tempranillo La Consulta Año Cero 2008 (89, \$19), while Henry Lagarde, Luca, Dominio del Plata and TriVento are also producing solid Syrah and/or Tempranillo bottlings.

Bonarda is Argentina's version of California's Charbono grape—a late-ripening variety that provides dark color, ripe, plummy fruit and soft, friendly tannins. It's Argentina's second most widely planted red grape, after Malbec, and is typically a source for excellent value. The Altos Las Hormigas Bonarda Mendoza Colonia Las Liebres 2008 (87, \$12) is one of the country's most consistent value performers, while bottlings from Alamos (made by Catena Zapata), Durigutti and Proviva (under the Maípe label) are also solid.

Pinot Noir has only a tiny presence in Argentina, but the grape manages to shine in the country's Patagonia region, where boutique producer Bodega Chacra has begun to establish a track record. Following the elegantly styled 2007s, from a cool growing season, the winery's latest releases from the warmer, wind-blown 2008 vintage show greater depth and length. The Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Río Negro Treinta y Dos 2008 (92, \$120) rivals the winery's '05 as its best vintage to date. If the triple-digit price tag is tough to swallow, try the Bodega Chacra Pinot Noir Río Negro Barda 2008 (90, \$25), made from the winery's youngest vines. The wine shows crushed cherry fruit, spice and mineral notes.

Argentina's white wine specialty is Torrontés, which produces spicy whites filled with rangerine, orange and floral flavors. When bottled early, shipped quickly and enjoyed fresh, these wines can provide a nice change of pace. The grape typically does best in the northern Salta region as opposed to the warmer San Juan or Mendoza areas, so look for that name on labels and stick to the most recent vintage—it's not a grape that ages well.

Match the Bodega Colomé Torrontés Calchaquí Valley 2008 (88, \$15) with crab cakes or chicken and creamed chanterelle mushrooms. Good Torrontés can also be had from Alta Vista, Koch, Finca & Bodega Carlos Pulenta and Bodegas Terrazas de los Andes.

For Argentina, all the foundations are in place: a vast expanse of land; a dominant and distinctive varietal in Malbec, backed by several supporting players; and an American consumer base that's thirsty and eager to explore. While a few wineries are exploiting this combination with great success, a groundswell of more consistent quality is still needed to take Argentina to the next level. In the meantime, choose wisely and enjoy the ride.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Argentina.



Bodega Chacra's Piero Incisa della Rocchetta—whose family owns renowned Tuscan estate Tenuta San Guido—crafts outstanding Pinot Noir at a once-abandoned farm in Patagonia.

Rating Red Wine Vintages in Argentina's Mendoza Region

2008	87-90	Cool, wet weather marked the first half of season, but March and April turned dry and windy, with lots of sun. Mendoza Malbecs show promise thanks to a long, fresh harvest period; Patagonia also strong	NYR
2007	88	Up-and-down growing season with some hail, cool temperatures and late-season rains; wines have lower alcohols and softer tannins. Late-ripening spots in Mendoza (La Consulta, Altamira) strongest	Drink or hold
2006	91	Cool growing season, but dry, with harvest stretching into April and May. Consistent for all major varieties, with top Malbecs showing excellent purity, balance and poise	Drink or hold
2005	90	Cool temperatures early led to reduced yields, but warm, dry March and April helped ripen grapes. Late-ripening Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon excelled	Drink or hold
2004	90	Warm, dry season with Malbec the star; some late, heavy rains led to variable Cabernet Sauvignon	Drink
2003	91	A February heat wave during a long, dry season led to some inconsistencies, but Malbec excellent	Drink
2002	94	Stellar growing season with optimal harvest conditions yielded racy, ripe fruit. Best vintage in a generation, with all varieties performing well	Drink
2001	87	Cool growing season, with the harvest dampened by rain. Cabernet Sauvignon generally better than Malbec	Drink
2000	86	Cool and wet, but a long growing season allowed for a late-ripening harvest. Malbec generally better than Cabernet Sauvignon	Drink

Note: Most Argentine white wines should be drunk on release.

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended. Drinkability: "NYR" means the vintage has not yet been released; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink.