

HARPERS WINE & SPIRIT

2022

South America



MALBEC AND BEYOND

Buyers and critics alike share a snapshot of what currently excites them about South America with **Sonya Hook**

“Old vine País, Semillon, Cinsault, Trousseau, Carignan and Chenin are just a handful of my favourites to look for, as well as field blends”

Amanda Barnes



» **AMANDA BARNES,
WRITER, AND AUTHOR
OF THE SOUTH AMERICA
WINE GUIDE**

I am very excited about the rediscovery of old vines and artisanal winemaking in South America. It has led to a greater diversity of wine expressions, and wine styles and varieties which are authentically South American and totally unique.

There is a real old vine renaissance coming from Chile in particular. País is unquestionably the original old vine of Chile and with age, País vines become transparent to their terroir. It is this distinctive impression that is driving many winemakers to make these wines from different regions.

Old vine Cabernet Sauvignon is also well known from Chile, and then we have old vine whites, such as Semillon, which is one of the greatest emerging stars in South America today. Old vine País, Semillon, Cinsault, Trousseau, Carignan and Chenin are just a handful of my favourites to look for, as well as field blends.

One of the other important outcomes of the old vine movement is the creation of Chile's first modern appellation, Vigno, which was established in 2010 to give value to the dry-farmed old vines of Carignan in the Secano Interior.



» **BASTIEN
MARTINOLE, SALES
DIRECTOR, FINE WINES
DIRECT UK**

Malbec is our number one single varietal red wine. Over the past 12 months we have seen a real increase in sales of premium Malbecs, in particular old vines Malbec and reservas with longer time in oak.

Customers are asking for Malbecs that will sit on wine lists next to more classic premium wines from Europe that tend to have the monopoly at the higher end prices, for example fine clarets, Burgundy, Piedmont, and Rioja wines.

As an importer of South American wines what excites us is the fresher style of Argentinian Malbecs coming through, which offer more refinement, more acidity and well-managed integrated oak. For example, those who are using vessels to help with ageing potential rather than adding bold, woody/spicy flavours.

It is also interesting to see a real focus on provenance. We are seeing Mendoza broken down more and more, allowing winemakers to promote typicity of sub-regions such as Agrelo and Lujan de Cuyo. The Argentinian producer we work with (Escorihuela Gascon), has a focus on more natural and terroir driven wines using indigenous yeasts and organic and biodynamic vineyard management systems.

From Chile we have seen strong growth in wines which represent the quality-to-value ratio, especially Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay.



» **CHARLES TYLER,
DIRECTOR, PALADAR
RESTAURANT, LONDON**

Part of our mission at Paladar is to try to demonstrate the diversity of wine being produced from right across Latin America. I am always on the lookout for interesting grape varieties and different regions, and we already have some quirky stuff which is selling well.

Many of our guests are willing to try if prices are sensible. They tend to take a punt on wines in their £30s or £40s, but once you get to the £50 mark people are a bit more cautious.

We have a lovely Syrah from Peru, which is doing well. The one I have been most surprised by is an unfiltered orange wine from Uruguay, a blend of Gros and Petit Manseng. I put it on the list because I thought it was interesting but didn't expect it to do as well as it has.

We have some great wines from Brazil. They can be a bit expensive, so we choose ones we feel are reasonably priced for our customers, but Brazilian sparkling wines are popular, especially our house bubbly from Casa Valduga, at £42 a bottle.

I am looking at Patagonia and Catamarca & La Rioja, to show some diversity. I would love some wines from Ecuador and Bolivia, particularly South Bolivia, across the border from Salta.



» **SARAH BENSON,
SOUTH AMERICAN
WINE BUYER, CO-OP**

I'd say that Malbec continues to be the fastest growing wine variety, but the excitement comes from the premium opportunities where we can showcase the top-quality high-altitude Malbecs from different terroirs. These are the wines that can leverage growing consumer interest in Malbec, encouraging them to trade up and move away from the traditional jammier styles to more structured and aromatic expressions of the grape.

Beyond Malbec, I think there's real potential with premium Cabernet Sauvignon, particularly from Salta and expressions of Cabernet Franc from the Uco Valley as well as revisiting indigenous varieties like Bonarda.

The Co-op has a 40% share of the Argentinian white wine market and so we continue to look at ways to diversify the country's white portfolio as well as introducing a Fairtrade Malbec Rosé. With Argentina's inflation rate at 50%, we want to keep looking at opportunities like Fairtrade that offer a social benefit, because this is important to us as a business.



» **ANDREW CHUDLEY,
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
DAVY'S WINE
MERCHANTS**

Argentina is blessed with a great climate and diverse vineyard sites, so there is a lot to get excited about. Winemaking seems to be continually improving, producing more pure, lifted and balanced wines with careful use of oak. Several fine vintages have no doubt helped but Malbec seems to get better every year, alongside great Cabernets and Merlots. Some of the sparklings and whites being produced are also world class. The Chardonnays I've recently tasted seem much more refined and reminiscent of Burgundy than the heavier, oaky styles of old.

Looking beyond the traditional grapes of Malbec (which is still king for now) or Torrontes, Cabernet Franc is on the rise. It's been the talk of the trade for a while but it's great to finally see a wider choice available from producers, and areas such as Gualtallary in the Uco Valley are making superb examples – much more elegant than many from the Loire – offering ripe, lush fruit and gentle tannin, fresh, but not overpowered with bell pepper. Beyond the mountains and high altitudes, we are looking at the lower-lying regions of Río Negro and Chubut in Patagonia – there are some incredible Pinot Noirs, Chardonnay and Malbecs, and for the whites, Semillon and Sauvignon alongside other aromatic varieties are doing well with fresh styles and lower alcohol, so we are particularly keen to represent these areas.

ADVANCING UP THE WINE LIST



ISTOCK.COM/EVERYTHING BAGEL

From Malbec to Cinsault, Chardonnay and Carignan, **Jacopo Mazzeo** looks at how the on-trade is building Chile and Argentina above the entry level

“It’s still very difficult to list higher-end wines from these regions”

Marco Iaccarino, The Berkeley

WITH ITS MENU populated by Central and South American delicacies, Paladar aptly defines itself as “the taste of Latin America in the heart of London SE1”. To match its geographical scope, the restaurant’s wine list consists of labels from Peru, Uruguay, Brazil, and Mexico. Chile and Argentina feature too, of course – South America-themed restaurants serve as their natural home. Elsewhere however, the continent’s two leading wine-producing countries tend to be relegated to the cheaper end of the wine list.

“We have about a dozen wines from Chile and Argentina but they don’t cost beyond £180,” says Marco Iaccarino, whose list at five-star London hotel The Berkeley is classically focused on Champagne, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Piedmont, and Tuscany.

“We’ve got something super-premium but it is very rarely sold. It’s still very difficult to list higher-end wines from these regions because people willing to

spend tend to drink the classics and few like to experiment.”

Despite the challenges, Argentina’s champion grape, Malbec, is finding its place on wine lists’ premium sections, as a result of drinkers’ increasing awareness of the variety’s quality potential and stylistic diversity.

“Malbec sells itself. Guests order it because it’s as much in their comfort zone as a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc,” says Iaccarino. He argues that when it comes to premium Malbec, drinkers look for fresh, vibrant interpretations. “I tend to buy beautiful, drinkable Malbecs, such as Altos Las Hormigas. A bit austere, it might be difficult to spot in a blind tasting where one could mistake it for an Old World Syrah.”

People are by now familiar with Malbec’s quality potential, yet Five Fields restaurant head sommelier Agnieszka Swiecka believes that awareness of regional differences is yet to break out from industry circles. “Our [older] customers... are enamoured with Malbec from Argentina



“Guests need a bit of a push to help them discover the new blends that are coming out”

Romain Bourger, The Vineyard at Stockcross

– particularly Mendoza – but don't go into details such as asking about different styles from Luján de Cuyo DOC or Tupungato IG. Sub-regions and districts have not reached mainstream use with our customers in the same way Barolo communes have.”



A BETTER VALUE ALTERNATIVE

While quality Malbec might represent a safe bet for wine buyers, younger drinkers' propensity to venture beyond the usual means that the premium end of Britain's lists allows room for off-the-beaten-track options too. “Younger customers tend to experiment more, and are often more interested in lesser-known grape varieties and up-and-coming regions,” says Swiecka.

“In Chile, Itata is getting attention, and grapes like Cinsault or País attract interest.” She points out that known and respected European producers' involvement in South American projects turned a number of wines, including Cheval des Andes and Terrazas de los Andes, into icons and argues that these ventures represent an opportunity to popularise lesser-known regions and styles. “Recently, Bodega Chacra – a personal project of Piero Incisa della Rocchetta – [helped] put Patagonia on the map,” says Swiecka, adding that these projects could also give timid white wine explorers a chance to explore out from their geographical comfort zone while sticking to charted stylistic waters. “Our guests are always looking to find great alternatives to Burgundy and are happy to pay a premium for that. They feel that they still get value and it's an exciting new experience without getting too much out of their comfort zone,” she says, quoting Bodega Chacra's Chardonnay-led partnership with Burgundian winemaker Jean-Marc Roulot, and Chile's Aristos project, fruit of the collaboration of Louis-Michel Liger-Belair of Domaine du Comte Liger Belair, Francois Massoc of Calyptra, and consultant Pedro Parra.

Indeed, with premium Argentinian and Chilean wine demanding lower prices when compared to their European counterparts, they represent better-value substitutes for classic Old World labels. “For somebody who likes Burgundy but does not want to order a Chassagne Puligny, there are plenty of alternatives in Chile and Argentina, with Pinot Noir, Carignan, Sauvignon Blanc or Sauvignon Gris below the £100 mark,” says Iaccarino. “You can even push a Carignan from the south of Chile, very lifted and aromatic, a Syrah from Casablanca, or an Argentinian Cabernet Franc. People might also be willing to spend the same [as for a Burgundy] but get higher quality, obviously in a slightly different style.”

As Burgundy, Bordeaux and California become increasingly inaccessible to most drinkers' wallets, Iaccarino is convinced that the market for Chilean and Argentinian wine in the £60-80 price bracket is bound to grow, granted that suppliers invest in fresh, elegant expressions that depart from the fruitier labels available in the UK's large retail sector.

“Even those who are willing to spend a lot, when they see a £200-300 Burgundy that five years ago would cost £100, they say ‘maybe let me see what I can find in Chile,’ he says. “Of course you need to have something easy to sell, but [the future is about] investing in premium

wines with typicity to offer as an alternative to Burgundy or California.”

Romain Bourger, head sommelier at The Vineyard at Stockcross, Berkshire, believes that, by taking the by-the-glass route, even the least-known South American wine can ease its way into a wine list. “Wines that cost about £12-20 trade price sell relatively well, but when it gets too expensive it becomes more difficult,” he says of his list, one of the country's most comprehensive. “By the glass [through Coravin] you can sell more premium. Something like a GSM blend that you can say is similar to a Châteauneuf-du-Pape. The guests get good value, aren't worried that they might not like it and if they do they can get a bottle later. Guests need a bit of a push to help them discover the new blends that are coming out.”



YOUNGER CONSUMER APPEAL

While lesser-known Chilean and Argentinian wines require a certain degree of hand selling, some niche labels might bear the additional appeal of smaller-scale production – and often greener credentials – that resonate well with a younger audience looking to champion artisan winemakers and a low-intervention approach to viticulture

and vinification. Southern Chile is, for Paladar director Charles Tyler, the ideal region to explore when looking for artisan, sustainable businesses.

“Many of the wines from southern Chile and in the new extreme regions coming under cultivation are organic because expensive artificial fertilisers or pesticides have never been used in these often remote, poor and neglected areas,” he says.

“This, along with the ‘natural wine’ fashion can be an important marketing tool for these niche producers. Winemakers are being more adventurous and are rediscovering grape varieties and vines that were, in some cases, planted hundreds of years ago and are now making really interesting boutique wines.”

