

# SNOW ON WINE

## French Refugee Grape to Argentina - Now It's Conquistador

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Mention of Malbec wine today and Argentina comes to mind. And rightfully so because of the 129,000 acres planted to Malbec worldwide almost 100,000 are in Argentina<sup>3</sup>. And 60% of that in the famed Andes foothills of Mendoza<sup>1,3</sup>. But although it is well documented the first Malbec cuttings were brought from France to Argentina in 1868 by French agronomist Michel Pouget, it's ascendancy didn't begin until about 1990. Malbec, also known as Cot or Auxerrois, is a very old variety with origin in Southwest France's Lot river valley around the ancient town of **Cahors**. The very survival of the grape, and it's refugee passage to Argentina where it now finally thrives is a fascinating tale.

The history of Cahors begins in Roman times as evidenced by old Roman walls and an amphitheater. It's medieval Valentre bridge (begun 1380) is a UNESCO world heritage site, and there are records in England the "Black Wine of Cahors" was imported there in the 12th and 13th centuries<sup>3</sup>. Here Malbec (or Auxerrois as it was called in the Lot valley) grew then and grows now on steep slopes of limestone at an altitude of below 1000 ft. Perhaps because of terroir or clonal differences or both the grape and it's clusters are different here and in Argentina where "Bunches are smaller and tighter and berries smaller than on the Cot vines of"<sup>1</sup> Cahors. Volcanic soil and high altitude (2,600 to 3,600 ft) of the Andes foothills, as well as crisp dry mountain air make a big difference. The French Phylloxera plague wiped out most vines in Cahors in the 1800's, and Malbec there was not fully replanted until well into the 20th century. So many think that the Malbec brought to Argentina in 1868 may have come from other areas of France than Cahors, and thus might be different clones .



The most fertile vineyards of Cahors lie in the valley along the Lot River. (Photo by Jérôme Morel, courtesy of UIVC)

We are frequently reminded that Malbec is one of the six authorized grapes of the Bordeaux region (along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Carmeneré). Although Malbec wasn't recorded as grown in Bordeaux until 1782, "Cahors Black wine" was shipped down the Lot to the Garonne and on to Bordeaux. There it was used to darken and strengthen Bordeaux wine in light years. So Malbec was in Bordeaux wines before the vines

arrived. In the terrior of Bordeaux, Malbec is prolific, and apparently was more about volume than quality. However in 1956 a bad frost famously wiped out most of the Malbec. Afterward in the 1960's about 12,360 acres remained and that had languished to only 2,308 acres by 2012. Thus today the epicenter for Malbec in France is clearly Cahors and the Lot valley. To be labeled as such it must be at least 70% Malbec, with the rest being Merlot or Tannat. But clearly the world epicenter of Malbec is Argentina, and within Argentina it is Mendoza. To be labeled Malbec in Argentina wine must now be 100% Malbec.

So if Malbec's arrived in Argentina in 1868, why was it not until the last 20 years the Argentinian Malbec craze began here? Hugh Johnson reports that in the 1980's their wine industry was well established and a century old, but dominated by large industrial wineries churning out massive quantities of drinkable wine with "little pursuit of excellence"<sup>2</sup>.

The native Criolla grape and Malbec were both in use and the wine industry was sustained by domestic consumption of cheap “vino de mesa” or table wine. Quality was not suitable for export. All of this was undoubtedly linked to political instability and economic downturns. But in the early 1990’s there was a shift to quality, and a move to become a wine exporting nation. The focus for red wine went primarily to Malbec and for white the Torrontes grape. Production shifted to small wineries focused on quality. They flourished and grew in number.

Wineries climbed to higher slopes where small yields produced very flavorful grapes and sophisticated wines. Although Mendoza is the largest producing region at over 60%, San Juan, La Rioja, and Salta produce outstanding wines. Salta in the North is said to have the highest altitude vineyards in the world. And now Argentina is the fifth largest producer of wine (after Italy, France, Spain and USA).



So it seems that the Andes foothills of Argentina and the Malbec grape are a perfect marriage. The wine is complete without need to blend in juice from any of Malbec’s cousins. Oh, yes, the grapes we call the Bordeaux varieties are related, and perhaps that is why in a terroir where one of the grapes yields wine lacking something, blends of several of them tends to round out and make a complete and well balanced wine. For instance, one of Malbec’s parent grapes is Prunelard, and it shares its other parent, the little known grape, Magdeleine Noire, with Merlot. And Merlot’s other parent, Cabernet Franc, is also a parent of Cabernet Sauvignon, whose other parent is Sauvignon Blanc.

Is Malbec the wine for you? To find out, pick up a few Malbec wines from different areas of Argentina and maybe a couple from Cahours, it’s original home. You could also throw in a Bordeaux blend or two where Malbec is part of the mix. Have a few friends over and try them out with a grilled steak, leg of lamb or a brisket and see for yourself. And if not sure at first keep repeating until clarity comes to you.

#### References:

- 1) Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding, Jose Vouillamoz, WINE GRAPES, first edition, pp 272 – 274, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2012.
- 2) Hugh Johnson’s Modern Encyclopedia of Wine, pp 216- 218, 490 Simon & Schuster, New York, 1983.
- 3) Forbes.com, Lifestyle, Per & Britt Karlson, “Malbec the French Grape that Conquered Argentina”, Feb 24, 2022.
- 4) Personal notes from travel in Southwest France including Lot river valley and Cahors.