

# Pour Decisions

By Brett Chappell

## Malbec's immigrant journey

To many people's surprise, Malbec is an immigrant grape to Argentina. The grape is native to France's southwest wine region around the Lot and Tarn rivers. In 2019, the grape was the seventh most sold in the United States, and its popularity is probably attributable to its pleasant and easy-going flavors that pair with many foods.

Malbec started as a natural crossing between the grapes Prunelard and Magdaliene Noire des Charentes. This parentage was all but unknown until 2008 or 2009 when DNA testing showed the progeny. Prunelard is still grown in the Garrone and Tarn river valleys, albeit in small quantities. Prunelard fell out of favor because of its low yields, but as of the last decade or so has made a resurgence for its color, structure and spice. Magdaliene Noire des Charentes was nearly lost. In 2009, only five vines were found in existence—four growing in front of farmhouses in Charentes and one vine in a forest in Brittany. The vine has been saved and its importance is great: along with Cabernet Franc, it is a parent of Merlot, the world's second most planted wine grape.

Malbec is known by a thousand names in its home county; Côt (its original and most common), Cahors (same as its major growing region), and Auxerrois are the most popular. A famous pilgrim route cuts through the Malbec's birthplace, and it is believed these pilgrims moved the vine around France back to their own home vineyards. The name Malbec probably came from the grape's being planted and grown by a Monsieur Malbeck. Malbec is still counted among the six major grapes in the Bordeaux blend, although along with Petit Verdot and Carmenère, it comprises only two percent of the Bordelaise acreage.

The reasons for this minor role in Bordeaux will explain Malbec's relative obscurity in its home and its predominance in Argentina. Malbec is highly susceptible to disease and rot. It suffers from coulure, or the lack of fertilization, and, hence, lack of fruit set. This is caused by overcast days and lack of sun. Since the climate in much of France is maritime or continental, sunshine is not guaranteed, thus neither is fruit set. The grape is also subject to rot and does not like cold. Most of Bordeaux's Malbec acreage was destroyed in the freeze of 1956. The vigneron there decided to grub up the cantankerous Malbec and replant with forgiving and prolific Merlot. The area of Cahors suffered the freeze also, but decided to stick with their native grape and replanted Malbec. The grape has become their fame.

In 1853, Argentinian President Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, trying to elevate the country's wine industry, requested French agriculturalist Michel Aimé Pouget to found an agronomy and viticulture school, Quinta Normal de Mendoza, and find vines suitable for the climate and land. Of the vines Pouget selected, Malbec took well to the high desert of Mendoza. Here it found a land of well-draining dry soils, the rain shadow of the Andes Mountains, ample sunlight from altitude, and lowered nighttime temperatures to help the fruit retain refreshing acidity. Here, far from its French home, Malbec could flourish with less chance of coulure, rot and disease.

Malbec is a versatile wine with medium body, acid and tannin. There are bright notes of cherry and raspberry as well as deeper flavors of plum and blackberry. The differences in flavors of the wines from France and Argentina are nuanced and hinge on fruit ripeness. Wines from France often show green, leafy

notes on the nose with tart, slightly underripe plums and currants. They also tend toward a spicy black pepper finish with whiffs of leather. Argentinian wines tend to be more fruit-driven, riper, with notes of darker black cherry, plums and blackberries. Frequently, they carry aromas of bell pepper, violets, smoke and coffee.

While Malbecs require no food for enjoyment, they are great wines to pair with almost anything. Wines from Cahors are great partners for hearty stews. Those from the Loire Valley complement roasted chicken and game birds well. Grilled meats, birds and sausages are well suited for the robust wines from Argentina.

Malbec had a rugged start, but is now firmly rooted, having found its home in the new world. It has become a go-to wine that pleases many palates and usually for a modest price. Expect entry level bottlings to cost about \$12 retail and the blue-chip offerings to top out in the high \$50s. They are great stand-ins for Cabernet Sauvignon at a more pocket-pleasing price.

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## Drought

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For anyone who maintains snakes in captivity, either privately or in an institution where they are typically fed one meal per week, it can be quite a revelation to watch these wild snakes gorging themselves full when the opportunity arises. In truth, wild animals very often do not know where their next meal is coming from, so it can be very important to get it while they can. Should the drought continue to increase in severity, they will be well supplied with food as they retire to their underground refugia to wait it out.

I am more than a bit concerned, however, by the thought that the stranded fish and amphibians I usually see during the normal midsummer drought tend to be much smaller and younger than the adult fish and frogs that were caught by the early drought this spring. I hope that this disruption to the usual cycle did not result in the killing off of too many reproductive adults at a critical time.

To see photos and videos of wild cottonmouths (and other animals) at my field study site, visit science page Cottonmouth Acres on Facebook.

*Frederick Boyce is the staff herpetologist at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.*

## This Month's Puzzle Solutions

O	L	I	V	E	■	D	A	L	E	■	A	B	E	T
T	I	R	O	S	■	E	R	O	S	■	N	E	A	R
I	D	O	L	S	■	E	R	S	T	■	T	A	R	E
C	O	N	S	E	C	R	A	T	E	■	I	N	N	S
■	■	■	S	A	W	N	■	E	M	B	O	S	S	■
T	R	U	E	■	R	E	G	■	M	E	I	■	■	■
O	I	L	Y	■	V	E	E	P	■	N	O	O	S	E
M	O	N	E	Y	E	D	■	H	A	U	T	B	O	Y
S	T	A	G	E	■	S	L	O	G	■	I	O	W	A
■	■	■	L	A	G	■	A	T	E	■	C	E	S	S
S	P	L	A	S	H	■	T	O	N	G	■	■	■	■
T	O	E	S	■	E	L	E	C	T	R	I	C	A	L
A	L	A	S	■	T	O	R	O	■	E	B	O	L	A
L	I	N	E	■	T	R	A	P	■	B	E	T	A	S
L	O	S	S	■	O	N	L	Y	■	E	X	E	R	T

5	1	2	3	4	8	6	9	7
7	8	4	5	6	9	3	2	1
3	9	6	7	1	2	8	5	4
2	3	7	8	9	6	4	1	5
1	4	8	2	5	7	9	6	3
9	6	5	1	3	4	7	8	2
6	7	1	4	8	5	2	3	9
4	5	9	6	2	3	1	7	8
8	2	3	9	7	1	5	4	6