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Malbecs offer consistent value

By Dave McIntyre, Published: April 12, 2011

What's your "sweet spot" for value wine? Are you a \$10-and-under drinker? Do you love to explore wine's nearly infinite range across grape varieties and continents, maybe inching your price tolerance higher as you become more experienced? Perhaps you're a collector, willing to shell out top dollar for an extraordinary wine that will age gracefully in your temperature-controlled cellar and wow your dinner guests in years to come?

Then I've got a wine for you: Malbec, from Argentina.

Argentine malbec has been the darling of the U.S. wine market for the past seven years, when sales of this appealing red wine began to skyrocket. Last year, Argentina overtook its neighbor Chile in terms of the value of wine exports to the United States, largely because of malbec.

Why has it been so successful? Malbec is easy to say, for one thing. Its tannins tend to be softer than cabernet's or syrah's, so it is easy to drink. But the primary reason is value: Malbec is capable of providing exceptional value at \$5 and at \$100, and every level in between.

"Value" is relative, after all. When I label a wine a "Great Value" in my weekly list of recommendations, I mean it tastes more expensive than it costs. That's easier on the lower end of the price range, of course, but an expensive wine can still offer good value if it shines among its peers.

For example, you might enjoy the juicy, delightful Agua Pedra malbec, widely available at \$8, while someone else may relish the Catena Zapata Malbec Argentino at \$120 a bottle for its Bordeaux-like elegance and a harmony that is more celestial choir than earthy rock band. Aside from "I like malbec from Argentina," the two of you may have little in common. Our personal sweet spots depend on what we can afford and are comfortable paying.

Yet malbec has its own sweet spot. While you can almost pick any bottle at any price off a shelf and be confident that it will be decent, the value and excitement for malbec tends to increase rather notably in the \$15 to \$25 range. Below that sweet spot, quality is consistently good with some notable standouts, while much above \$25 we begin to hit a plateau, with quality still increasing, but less sharply.

You can explore the various expressions of malbec in several ways. Many wineries produce wines of excellent quality along the price spectrum. Catena is a noteworthy example, from its Alamos line at \$13 (often on sale for considerably less), to its Catena (\$24), Catena Alta (\$50) and three super-premium bottlings labeled Catena Zapata, including the Argentino.

Familia Zuccardi is another reliable producer, especially in the bargain range where its Santa Julia label excels. Trapiche and Trivento **also produce a range of good-quality malbecs. And MENDEL is a label that is hard to find but worth seeking out.**

With malbec's great quality range, there are bound to be several wines that will hit your personal sweet spot of value.