

In a New World, Less Can Mean More



AND A DOLLAR BUYS A LOT Harvesting malbec grapes in the Mendoza region of Argentina.

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CHEAPNESS has many manifestations. A perfect example is the 1950s monster movie cheapness that [Frank Zappa](#) once sang about, with creatures that looked like giant poodles and “visible nylon strings attached to the jaw of a giant spider.” I love that sort of “cheepnis,” as Zappa put it. Who doesn’t? The schlock and the camp were appealing precisely because they were an affront to pomposity and pretension.

I have a different theory of cheapness as it applies to wine: Often in New World regions and increasingly in the Old World, a producer’s most expensive red wines are also the most done up — spiffed and polished and reeking of oaken vanilla and chocolate like too much makeup or hair pomade. Alternatively, the wines are made from grapes so overripe that the prevailing flavors are of baked fruit and jam. Either way, creating a flavor profile to fit a preconceived notion of an expensive wine diminishes any sense of place and individuality.

That’s why I’m often more interested in a producer’s less expensive wines. If you can dodge the minefields of oak substitutes and other winemaking tricks that are intended to imitate expensive wines — “true cheepnis,” in the monster movie sense — you just might find some wines in which you can taste simple essences rather than fancy mock-ups.

I love this kind of cheapness, too. It’s sincerity rather than camp, but it’s likewise an affront to pretension because you’re not playing the game. Let others spend the extra money; you get the more enjoyable wine.

That’s the theory, anyway. Obviously, not every producer is pretentious, nor is every expensive wine tricked up. But you’d be surprised how often it works out that way.

In an effort to examine one part of this equation, the wine panel recently tasted 25 bottles of malbec from Argentina that cost no more than \$25 each. This is a particularly rich vein to mine, as Argentina’s currency is one of the few in the wine-producing world against which the dollar still retains good value. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Laura Maniec, director of wine and spirits for B. R. Guest Restaurants; and Jean-Luc Le Dû, owner of Le Dû’s Wines in the West Village.

Malbec, as you’ve no doubt heard, is Argentina’s great success story. It came to Argentina in the 19th century from France, where nowadays it’s the leading grape in Cahors and a minor variety in Bordeaux and the Loire. But in Argentina it has found a home and become the country’s all-important signature wine, setting Argentina apart from other New World producers.

We were all pleased by the quality of the winemaking we found. Those we liked most showed balance, liveliness and structure and were characterized by attractive aromas and flavors of plum, flowers, dark fruit, mint and licorice. Few were exaggerated in terms of size or sweetness. Jean-Luc called them amicable and Florence modest.

On the down side was a certain amount of uniformity, although, paradoxically, Laura said, that is a significant source of its popularity in the restaurant trade.

“We sell so much malbec,” she said. “It plays the medium card — it’s middle of the road but not especially distinctive. Everybody likes it because it’s not displeasing.”

If that’s damning with faint praise, so be it. But if you’re looking for a red wine that can play comfortably in a supporting role and that goes well with meats on the grill and with other summer cookout staples, many of these inexpensive malbecs would make fine choices. Four of our top five wines, in fact, were \$12 or less, which, in a sense, demonstrated my cheapness theory in microcosm, as only six of the 25 wines in the tasting were in that price range. Of the 11 wines in the tasting that were \$15 and under, five made the list, while the remaining five were from the 14 wines that were \$16 to \$25.

Our favorite wine, the 2004 Zagal from Hacienda del Plata, at \$12 was also our best value, dense and fruity yet well balanced and structured, avoiding the too common pitfalls of sweetness and flabbiness. Hacienda del Plata is a fairly new winery, one we were unfamiliar with, but the rest of our top five comprised fairly well-known Argentine names. The 2005 Trapiche Broquel, also \$12, offered winning aromas of violets, lavender, licorice and berries, while our No. 3 wine, the 2005 Ox Gran Reserva from Sur — just \$10 — seemed, like many of these wines, to scream out for grilled beef.

The best Argentine wines, including nine of our top 10, come from the Mendoza province at the foot of the Andes range, which forms a natural border with Chile. The exception was our No. 7, the 2004 Grand Reserve from Graffigna in San Juan, an area better known for table grapes, raisins and wines used for brandies. The Graffigna was lively and pleasing, though at \$18 it was one of the more expensive bottles in our top 10.

The wine that came closest to straying into the “expensive wannabe” category was, fittingly, at \$25, the most expensive wine we tasted, the 2005 Mendel. The problem was the powerful oak flavors transmitted to the wine through aging in new barrels; luckily, the wine’s sturdy flavors of licorice and eucalyptus were able to stand up well to the oak. It’s not a wine for every taste, but if you don’t mind a significant oak component, it’s a good bottle.

The cheapness theory doesn’t always fit, but it is occasionally useful: I like to apply it to Italian barberas, to some Riojas and occasionally to [California wines](#). I think it works with Argentine malbecs, too, where more expensive bottles do tend to take on the polished veneer of expensive international-style wines. Such wines are fine if your tastes run that way, but for me, throw some fangs and a few tentacles on one of those new oak barrels and you’ve got the perfect movie monster. Run!

Tasting Report: Balanced, Lively and Structured Argentine Malbecs

BEST VALUE

Hacienda del Plata Mendoza Zagal 2004

\$12

Dense, aromatic and full of fruit; beautifully balanced and dry. (Importer: Cana Selections, New York)

Trapiche Mendoza Broquel 2005

\$12

Balanced and well structured with aromas of violets, lavender, licorice and berries. (Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

Sur Mendoza Ox Gran Reserva 2005

\$10

** 1/2

Big and tannic yet pure with well-balanced fruit and herbal flavors. (Mediterranean Wine Company, Dover, N.J.)

Viña Cobos El Felino Mendoza 2006

\$17

** 1/2

Balanced, lingering flavors of plums, licorice and oak with an earthy edge. (Paul Hobbs Imports, Napa, Calif.)

Catena Zapata Mendoza Alamos 2006

\$11

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Inviting and easy to drink with attractive wild cherry, anise and plum aromas. (Billington Imports, Springfield, Va.)

Pedro y Jorge Cecchin Mendoza Esencias de la Tierra 2006

\$15

**

Light-bodied and well balanced with sedate, subtle aromas and flavors. (Southern Grapes, Wilmington, Del.)

Graffigna San Juan Grand Reserve 2004

\$18

**

Lively and balanced with cherry, berry and licorice flavors. (Pernod Ricard, Purchase, N.Y.)

Mendel Mendoza 2005

\$25

**

Structured but oaky with licorice and eucalyptus flavors. (Vine Connections, Sausalito, Calif.)

Familia Cassone Mendoza Obra Prima Reserva 2005

\$17

**

Nice structure with flavors of black cherry and mint. (Don Cano Wine Import, Woodside, N.Y.)

Luigi Bosca Luján de Cuyo Single Vineyard 2004

\$18

**

Soft yet attractive with flavors of sour cherries and licorice. (Testa Wines of the World, Oyster Bay, N.Y.)