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Mendel Unus - an exceptional Argentine red

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Winemaker Roberto de la Mota and his business partner Anabelle Sielecki have been making their flagship Mendel Unus for 10 years now and at the end of last year I had the chance to taste the first nine vintages of this, one of my favourite Argentinian reds, which consistently manages to be both vibrant and refined, as elegant as it is intense. (The Mendel Malbec and their oaked old-vine Sémillon are also excellent wines.)



Roberto explained that the blend was practically the same from the first vintage in 2004 until 2009. Since then he has started to include a small percentage (currently about 10%) of Petit Verdot in the blend. When I asked about this change, he enthused: 'I love this variety. I discovered it when visiting Château Margaux in 1988 during my studies in France. A week after that, my father happened to spend a day with his friend Emile Peynaud and he told me about one so special barrel of Petit Verdot that they tasted. I imported this variety into Argentina in 1989 but we had only one clone certified in France. The clone 400 was good but with huge yields. For this reason I later brought some massal selection vines from Ch Margaux. I grafted those buds onto old Malbec vines here in Mendel's vineyard in Luján.' (See Jancis's recently expressed enthusiasm for Argentine Petit Verdot too.)

Their ungrafted, low-vigour vineyards, at an elevation of between 900 and 1,100 metres (2,950-3,600 ft) in Luján de Cuyo, were planted in 1928. The Malbec comes from Finca Mendel in Mayor Drummond and Finca de los Andes in Perdriel, the Cabernet from Finca de los Andes. The Petit Verdot is also from Mayor Drummond. The wine is aged in new Taransaud barrels for 14-16 months. The vintage summaries in the notes below were provided by Roberto after I had tasted the wines but I absolutely agree with him about the excellence of the 2010.



When I tasted the vintages described below, the 2013 was not yet in bottle but I did get a chance to taste the delicious components that are the raw materials for Roberto's blending skill. The samples were seriously impressive and I imagine many would be tempted to bottle them separately but if the older vintages are anything to go by, the sum

is far greater than the parts. He describes the vintage as similar to 2010, with excellent potential. For Roberto's experience of 2014, see this vintage report.

Malbec 2013 barrel sample: Black core with deep glossy cherry rim. Sweet blueberry and cherry fruit, touch of vanilla but not as sweet as that sounds, perhaps a little peppery, slight char/mocha flavour. Very ripe. Intense purity and depth, lifted hint of violets. Amazingly velvety on the palate given its youth, rounded and generous but dense too, with fine freshness. Scented mid palate. (17.5)

Petit Verdot 2013 barrel sample: Inky black at the core. Dark fruited and not as perfumed as I had expected but there is a slight red-fruit lift. Massively but not aggressively tannic. Compact and chalky in texture. Like essence of Petit Verdot. Seems a little dusty. Dry, dark, savoury finish, rather unforgiving on its own. I can see why it is only a small part of the blend. Very dry, compact, savoury aftertaste. (17++)

Cabernet Sauvignon 2013 barrel sample: Very dark black cherry colour. Fabulous pure, dark Cabernet. No leafiness, no cedar but no excess sweetness. Stunning. Creamy and juicy and fresh, the tannins firm but beautifully ripe. Dark and savoury on the finish. Elegantissimo. (18)

Mendel, Unus 2004 Mendoza

17.5

2004 was warm (cooler than 2003, which was the year of the canicule in France), very dry and the wines were concentrated, ripe and a little closed. They needed time to be open and express all the aromas. The first vintage of Unus. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak.

Very dark ruby, still with so much depth of colour. Incredibly complex aroma that combines the very beginning of undergrowth, sweet dark small berries – blackberry and blueberry. Liquorice too and oak's sweet spice. So much fruit. Still seems so young in texture with a compact firmness that is polished and rounded. More savoury and dark on the palate, finely dry, quite a grip on the finish. Almost nothing sweet on the finish and the after-effect is beautifully fresh.

(JH) 14.2%

Drink 2012-2024

Mendel, Unus 2005 Mendoza

17

2005 was very fresh and wet too. We had some rains and wines were less concentrated, but very elegant and with good freshness and acidity. Wines with great evolution in bottle. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak.

Deep garnet. The nose is very different from that of the 2004 – more red fruited and fragrant, more expressive, with a slight herbal note and cherries. Very inviting. On the palate too it is more open and lighter, tannins are

still compact but more silky. Overall less savoury, more charm and scented on the mid palate, tastes more than a year older than the 2006. Overall fresher than the 2004. Hard to believe it has been in 100% new oak.

(JH) 14%

Drink 2010-2020

Mendel, Unus 2006 Mendoza

2006 was warmer than 2005 and 2007 but less so than 2009. It was dry too and wines were well concentrated, with more acidity than 2004. The evolution was good too. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak.

Intense dark-cherry red, glowing with fruit. Vibrant with hedgerow fruit and cassis, a touch of sweet spice and perhaps tar and a light note of mint as it opens up? Certainly more savoury than the 2005. On the palate, perhaps less concentrated in fruit flavour and more marked by the tannins, which are again very fine but in this vintage more chalky. Long, dry but fresh finish.

Elegant in that dry aftertaste. (JH) 14%

Drink 2011-2022

Mendel, Unus 2007 Mendoza

2007 very fresh and a little rainy. A year with big yield in Mendoza in general and not well classified at the beginning. But for me it was excellent, fruity, fresh and elegant with excellent evolution. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak.

Dark cherry red, glowing and vibrant. Just looks so healthy. Initially on the nose the alcohol seems a little more evident and there's a strong aroma of fruit sweetness. Then the warm briary and gently floral dark fruit takes over. Sweetness of blueberry. Texture is firm and chalky, the tannins very fine but ultra compact.

17

17.5

Good concentration, as on all the wines in this vertical. It has so much here – some vanilla sweetness and then all the savouriness of old vines on a great site and low yields and even with all the refined power there's freshness on the finish. Still very youthful. (JH) 14.5%
Drink 2015-2025

Mendel, Unus 2008 Mendoza

17

2008 was a little warmer than 2007, but very dry. The wines were well concentrated and very rich in tannins. They needed time to be open. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak.

Very deeply coloured with a hint of purple at the rim. Seems much more Cabernet-influenced in the aroma – more cassis than the older vintages tasted so far. More cassis on the palate too. More linear without quite enough flesh in the middle. Tannins are unexpectedly gentle, the whole wine is softer than I expected. Then slightly lean on the finish. (JH) 14.4%
Drink 2012-2020

Mendel, Unus 2009 Mendoza

17.5

2009 was hot and dry. Wines were very concentrated, ripe and rich. We have some very good examples of rich Malbec. (Very 'American'.) Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak. This is the first vintage to include Petit Verdot – 5%.

Incredibly dark crimson, like essence of red wine. Lots of dark fruit, small berries and a touch of violets, more fragrant than the 2008. Tannins are dense but the wine is still fluid and fresh. On the palate there's oak spice but very little sweetness. Just dark, coaly intensity and dry, refined texture even though it needs more time. (JH) 14.4%
Drink 2016-2025

Mendel, Unus 2010 Mendoza

18.5

2010 was fresh and dry with some rains but very isolated. Wines are well concentrated, but fresh, fruity, elegant and very well balanced. With good length too. (For me one of the best.) Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak. 10% Petit Verdot.

Dark black cherry colour. Glossy. Smells sweeter fruited than the 2009. Smells purple. Fragrant with cassis and dark plums and that light touch of violets as well as a note of savoury char. The tannins here are supple, silky and fluid – pretty accessible at this young stage. Supple tannins. Rich in fruit but no excess sweetness. Long, fresh, dry finish. Brilliant wine. Manages to be accessible as well as age-worthy. (JH) 14.5%
Drink 2014-2025

Mendel, Unus 2011 Mendoza

18

2011 was a medium year. Not really warm and dry. Wines are rich and a little closed. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 16 months in new French oak. 10% Petit Verdot.

Very deep cherry red with purple rim. Dark plums, cassis, a little dusty on the nose, a little earthy, less scented than the 2010 but such incredible brightness to the fruit. Firm, compact, chalky tannins, not as supple as the 2010. Dry and subtle on the finish. Super-elegant and dark on the palate if not yet expressive. (JH) 14.5%
Drink 2016-2025

Mendel, Unus 2012 Mendoza

18

2012 was a little warmer than 2011 but not too dry. Ripening process was excellent. Wines are really fruity and rich but at same time elegant and well balanced. Ungrafted Malbec and Cabernet Sauvignon

planted in 1928 in Luján de Cujo. 10% Petit Verdot. 16 months in new French oak.

Inky purple/crimson. Cassis and scented mulberry. Sweet spice and, for the first time in this tasting, a hint of chocolate. Bursting with both red and black fruit. Supple like the 2010 but a little more chalky on the finish and some milk chocolate. Still has the Unus hallmark concentration and elegance combined, and a savoury edge. Firm grip on the finish but the tannins seem suffused with fruit in a quite remarkable way.

(JH) 14.5%

Drink 2016-2025