

# High-quality and Affordable Options in Argentine, Chilean Malbec wines

By: **Pamela S. Busch** | 05/25/12 4:00 Am

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From supermarkets to Michelin star restaurants, Argentine malbecs are all over the place. The grape rose to prominence in the 1990s, thanks in part to winemaker Nicola Catena, who I wrote about last fall. Until then, malbec was a French dominion, presided over by the Southwestern appellation of Cahors, and to a lesser extent the Loire Valley. The wines were rustic, bordering on funky and tannic.

Many of the Argentine versions mirrored the French. While there is nothing wrong with this style, it did not appeal to the growing American market. Catena realized that the high-elevation vineyards in Mendoza were capable of producing fruitier and more polished versions than those that came before. And here we are, in 2012, when I bet if I went to any random hipster wine bar and asked where malbec was originally from, many would say Argentina.

Argentine malbecs come in a broad price range. At the top end, there are wines like Catena Zapata and others, many which are not worth a fraction of their cost. At the other end of the spectrum there is a large choice, but the majority are fair to middling. Some, however, are worth hunting down.

**Apaltagua Malbec “Reserva,” 2010 (Maule Valley, Chile):** OK, here’s a ringer, sort of. This malbec is from Chile, not Argentina, but for the price and quality it is just about as good as anything you will find on the other side of the Andes. It has a signature Chilean Central Valley nose of mint, basil, eucalyptus and coffee and comparatively, is not very tannic. On the palate, its dark, cocoa tinged fruit, says malbec and a very good one indeed. Available at The Wine Club.

**Suggested retail:** \$13

**“Crios de Susana Balbo Malbec,” 2010 (Mendoza, Argentina):** Susana Balbo is one of Argentina’s most celebrated winemakers. Stylistically, her wines stand out from the pack, incorporating old and new world elements. Under the Crios label (Crios meaning offspring), she offers a range of wines that are fruit-driven, accessible and balanced. Fruity yet restrained with faint toast and ripe tannins, this malbec is a great example. Starting with the 2011 vintage, her son, Jose, appropriately took over the winemaking of the Crios. Available at K&L Wine Merchant.

**Suggested retail:** \$14

**Tierra Divina malbec, “Terra Rosa,” 2009 (Mendoza, Argentina):** Patrick Campbell sold his landmark Sonoma estate, Laurel Glen, in 2011 to put all his energy into Tierra Divina Vineyards, which focuses on wines from Mendoza and Lodi. He has been making wine in South America for more than 20 years, in Argentina since 1994, and has been a top producer of Argentine malbec for a good 10 years. This is his most modest rendition of malbec; yet it shows tremendous purity and terroir with cocoa, blackberries and a long, chewy finish. Available at Buddie’s Market.

**Suggested retail:** \$15

*Pamela Busch was the founding partner of Hayes and Vine and CAV Wine Bars, and is a wine educator and writer.*