

Rangemaster

Argentina may have made its mark with Malbec, but the country has a wealth of other unusual grape varieties that could reach great heights, as Kate Ennis discovers

There is nothing Argentinians love more than a good slab of meat on their plate, so in the run-up to my first trip to Argentina I was warned to expect to be fed roughly half a cow for every day of my stay. I expected this steakfest to be washed down with the meaty Malbec wines with which Argentina's winemakers have made a name for themselves in recent years, as well as some international grape varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. What I was not expecting was the sheer wealth of more unusual wines made from a myriad other varieties.

Malbec may have been adopted as the country's indigenous red, but there are intriguing interpretations of a whole host of other Italian, French and Spanish grapes. These include Bonarda, Barbera, Tannat and Tempranillo, introduced by the large number of Spanish and Italian immigrants who settled here at the end of the 19th century and which are not commonly found outside their native countries. These quirkier wines are not restricted to reds; Argentina has its own indigenous white grape in the form of Torrontés, which produces an unusual, aromatic, Muscat-style wine. These lesser-known vinous assets, along with Malbec, show that Argentina is really starting to assert its own distinct wine identity. Previously Argentina was often lumped together with Chile as 'South America', sharing a common role as a source of low-cost New World wines. Chile has been pulling ahead with an impressive display of better-quality wines, but with the recent installation of a UK office and its first national wine awards, the Argentinian industry is rapidly catching up.

Argentina is the 'grape bowl' of South America and the fifth largest wine-producing country in the world, yet economic instability and high domestic consumption had kept much of its wine from being exported. Then again, the wine wasn't good enough to inspire the world's wine drinkers. It is only in recent years that many winemakers have made the transition from quantity to quality, with increased investment and experimentation. Now things are looking up, literally. More winemakers are moving to higher-altitude vineyards in the foothills of the Andes, to source top-quality fruit that ripens slowly with the bright sunshine, tempered by cool nights. The country has the biggest concentration of high-altitude vineyards in the world, with sites commonly at around 1,000 metres above sea level – and some reaching dizzying heights of 3,000 metres. Argentina can also boast breadth as well as height; its sheer size means it spans 22 degrees to 42 degrees latitude, giving it diverse climates and soils to pair with the eclectic mix of grapes.

Winemakers are now using global positioning systems (GPS) and aerial imaging to study leaf vigour, angle of the sun and row direction to protect the berries from the hottest sun. Argentina has some of the sunniest and driest vineyards in the world, receiving just 200 millimetres of rainfall per year, but the dry scrubland is transformed into a green oasis thanks to effective irrigation from the Andes, with a channel system inherited from the Incas. In fact, in Argentina's wine capital, Mendoza city, you have to watch you don't twist your

ankle in one of these gorge-like channels along the pavement.

The province of Mendoza is the heartland of Argentinian wine production, hugging the Andes about halfway down the country and directly west of Buenos Aires; 80 per cent of the country's wine is produced here. The sub-regions of Maipu, Luján de Cuyo and Tupungato in the Uco Valley are emerging as the best regional names for quality wines. Other wine regions include Rio Negro on the fringes of Patagonia to the south, and La Rioja and San Juan to the north. The very highest vineyards are up in the north-west region of Salta, close to the Bolivian border, where the flagship white Torrontés thrives, particularly in the sub-region of Cafayate. This flowery scented grape, thought to originate from Spain, smells sweet but gives a spicy, bone-dry wine. It is aromatic, like Gewürztraminer, and musky like Muscat, but has more crisp acidity and should be drunk young. It blends well with Chardonnay to give an aromatic lift in place of Viognier, and also makes delicious sweet wines. The Cafayate locals are so proud of this grape that they make ice-cream from it.

The other exciting development in Argentinian wine at the moment is the experimentation with grapes. The accolade for greatest innovation has to go to the dynamic Familia Zuccardi winery. Under the leadership of forward-thinking pioneer José Alberto Zuccardi, the family firm was the first in Argentina to plant Zinfandel and Viognier, and has an experimental vine nursery. Zuccardi now grows more than 30 different varieties, with Torrontés, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Grigio and Pinot Bianco alongside all the major international grapes. The reds are even more interesting; in addition to grapes such as Malbec, Tempranillo, Bonarda, Sangiovese, Tannat and Barbera, there are also trial plantings of largely unheard-of varieties like Caladoc, Ancellota, Marcellan and Allianico, which you would probably struggle to find even in their native countries.

The first bottling of a Caladoc wine called 'Textual' shows promise for the future, but in the meantime I'll be drinking Zuccardi's wonderful Q Tempranillo that's been subtly aged in oak. Tempranillo, a heat-loving Spanish grape, thrives here, producing rich, ripe, smooth fruit, and Argentina is now the most important grower outside Spain. Tempranillo also melds wonderfully with Malbec, as does the juicy fruit of the Bonarda grape from the Uco Valley. In fact, Bonarda was the widest planted red grape here before Malbec recently overtook it, and Malbec pioneer Catena Zapata produces a great example of single varietal Bonarda under its Alamos label. Like Malbec, Tannat is another lesser-known tannic French grape set to become big over here. Already enjoying success in neighbouring Uruguay, it is now doing well in Argentina's San Juan region. Meanwhile, Portuguese wine company Sogrape, which owns the Finca Flichman winery in Mendoza, plans to plant Touriga Nacional vines this year.

These big, mouth-filling reds bring us back to the question of meat. Sangiovese is perfect with barbecued beef, while Tempranillo and Barbera go well with succulent lamb cutlets. For picnic reds, choose the tangy soft fruit of Bonarda that won't overpower anything and acts as an ideal foil for cold meats and cheeses, as well as meaty pasta. Non-carnivores should not despair; Torrontés is ideal with ceviche, as well as fish, shellfish and chicken. It can also stand up to smoked food, spicy Asian flavours and creamy canapés, so it makes a great summer party wine for just about everyone. □

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Six Argentinian beauties



Crios de Susana Balbo Torrontés 2006, Cafayate (Majestic, £5.99)

This bright and refreshing dry summer white is ideal for fans of Muscat, Viognier or Albariño style wines, with its floral, jasmine-scented nose. There's pear fruit and good acidity on the palate that gives a lingering finish. A good accompaniment to fragrant Thai noodles or ceviche.



Familia Zuccardi Torrontés Tardío 2006 (Oddbins, £6.99)

The Torrontés grape is a real revelation as it can make deliciously aromatic sweeties as well as dry whites. Along with Malamado (port-style wine made with Malbec), Zuccardi has pioneered sweet wines with this late harvest wine that combines honeyed pear fruit and lemony acidity.



Norton Barbera 2006, Mendoza (Waitrose, £4.99)

This has to be the best value Barbera around. From Luján de Cuyo, this ruby-red, medium-bodied wine offers up rich cherry and raspberry fruit. It also has herby notes and a fresh finish. A good light red for summer to go with roast pork or hunter-style chicken with tomatoes and herbs.



Otra Vida Tempranillo 2005 (Oddbins, £4.99)

Made by Trivento, part of Chilean winemaker Concha y Toro, the whole Otra Vida range offers great value. This Tempranillo has the quality and bright plummy fruit of a Spanish Rioja but without any dominating oak. Its herby character would be great with rosemary-infused lamb steaks.



Santa Julia Bonarda Sangiovese 2005 (Waitrose, £4.49)

Santa Julia is another label offering fruity food-friendly wines across its range, but I'm most fond of this 50/50 blend of two Italian grapes. With a fragrant violet hint on the nose, this well-structured wine is packed with spicy black fruit and cherries. A savoury wine to try with meaty pasta dishes.



Trapiche Broquel Bonarda 2005 (longfordwines.co.uk, £8.66)

Trapiche is a leading label in Argentinian wine and its version of this undervalued grape variety is excellent. There's cassia and blueberry fruit in this inky-coloured wine, with peppery tobacco notes from nine months in oak. Its soft tannins and good acidity make it an ideal all-round foodie wine.