

# THE HISTORY OF MALBEC

## Argentina's flagship grape

By Pablo Lacoste

The history of Malbec reflects the cultural itinerary of a grape on its intercontinental journey. It is a return trip from Europe to The Americas, and finally back the Old World, enriched with the force of nature, the climates and soils of the Southern Cone.

It is a journey full of vitality and dramatic tension, marked by human passions, the power struggles and utopias, the victories and defeats. Kings and nobles, Templars and musketeers, soldiers and marines, British, French, Spanish and other nations' forces all played their part. On an uncertain path, with stretches of darkness and silence, alternating with those of brightness and sounds of music and joy. To truly understand the success of this grape, all this must be taken into consideration, since Malbec is embedded in world history.

### 1. MALBEC AND ITS ORIGINS

The historical centre of Malbec production was originally in Cahors, a town located in southwest France near the Pyrenees. It is found close to the major wine regions of France: Bordeaux is 200 miles east of Cahors.



*Location of Cahors, first Malbec growing area*

According to the current research on the subject, Cahors is where Malbec was originally grown, and according to tradition the vine entered the region in the second century of this era (circa 150

AD), from Italy, introduced by the Romans. Although, we also have to consider that it may have come from other parts of Europe, what is clear is that this variety was cultivated in Cahors, and that it acquired considerable prestige and was recognised by writers and kings.

During the Roman Empire, the wine of Cahors, was appreciated by the elite. This is reflected in the works of classical authors, especially Horace and Virgil. After the fall of the Roman Empire, which, in turn, caused the collapse of political power and institutions; the wine of Cahors maintained its prestige. During the High Middle Ages, it was recognised by the Bishop of Verdun. Subsequently, a prominent woman from the region, Eleanor of Aquitaine, contributed to the expansion of the wines of Cahors, especially in the UK market.

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) was one of the most prominent European women in the High Middle Ages. She had considerable power as the Duchess of Aquitaine, and her control extended from the Loire to the Pyrenees. Liberal and intense, she was a wife, a mother and a grandmother of kings. She shared her love with the king of France and the first King of England after that. Her first marriage was to King Louis VII of France, after their separation she became engaged to King Henry II of England; but her second marriage was as stormy as the first, and she was imprisoned by her husband, although was later released.

An energetic mother, she had several children, including the legendary Richard the Lionheart, King of England. One of the granddaughters of Eleanor was Blanche, daughter of the king of Spain, wife of the king of France, several times in charge of the regency of that State; known as la Reine Blanche. Eleanor crossed Europe to participate in the Crusades; later, when she was 80, she crossed the Pyrenees to find her granddaughter and accompany her to her marriage to the king of France.

Eleanor of Aquitaine was a symbol of the woman who makes her own decisions and lives life to the full. A fascinating character, she caught the attention of the chroniclers of her time, both lay and ecclesiastical. Her life was rescued by literature and history, especially in the recurrently published work of French historian Régine Pernoud, *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (1969); it was also a film, *The Lion in Winter* (1968), with masterful performances from Peter O'Toole and Katherine Hepburn.

The life of Eleanor of Aquitaine intersects with the history of Malbec at a key point: her marriage to Henry Plantagenet (1152) established a close link between the duchy and the British Isles. Initially, the wedding was a dynastic and political agreement; but on this institutional base, other conditions were generated to also establish economic and trade connections.

This oiled the mechanisms of exchange of goods and services between the two regions, and within this context came the arrival of the wine from Cahors to the English markets. This was the beginning of the process of building a culture of appreciation of Malbec among British consumers. Unwin explains the phenomenon as follows:

England provided the bulk of the demand for wine entering international trade during the medieval period, with much of the English demand being met by the wines of western France. The establishment of formal English links with Gascony dates from Eleanor of Aquitaine's divorce from Louis VII of France, and her marriage in 1152 to Henry, Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou, Maine and Touraine, who in 1154 became King of England. As part of her dowry, Eleanor brought with her the Duchy of Aquitaine, which included Poitou, Guyenne and Gascony, and rather than buying wines from the annual fair at Rouen as had been the previous practice, the English thereafter turned to the ports of Nantes, La Rochelle and Bordeaux for their wine. It is also from this period that wine production in

England declined, and it seems that the more regular, reliable and easier production of wine in south-west France gradually made it increasingly uneconomic for English wine producers to compete (Unwin, 2001: 249). For three centuries, the English “harvested the grapes of Aquitaine” (Soyez, 1978).

The English not only bought wines from this region, but there was a significant flow of capital and investment to southwestern French viticulture, which contributed to the weakening and ultimate demise of the English viticulture business. (Unwin, 2001: 222).

The English began to regularly import Cahors wine from the thirteenth century. This process culminated in the following century: the period 1308-1309 was a record year for the Cahors wine trade, with 850,000 hectolitres being imported. The peak period continued with the coming to power of King Henry III (1312), which started the expression “dark wine of Cahors”. However, expectations of prosperity were dashed by the outbreak of the Hundred Years War (1337): thereafter, the region was ravaged by opposing armies, mercenaries and armed gangs. This resulted in a sharp decline in the production and marketing of these wines.

The fifteenth century saw the reconstruction of the vineyards and trade routes. The prosperity of France in this period led to a marked improvement in transport infrastructure. There were improvements in the navigability of the rivers, as well as in ports.

In 1531 the ingress of the wine of Cahors is celebrated in the court of the king of France: the promotion of Cahors born poet, Clément Marot (1495-1544) helped to capture the attention of Francis I; as a result, the monarch ordered a vineyard be planted with Cahors wine (probably Malbec) in the castle and palace of Fontainebleau.

The power of the monarchy to drive fashion and prestige, remained close to the wines from Cahors for a long time. During the religious wars of the late sixteenth century, Henry of Navarre (later King Henry IV), conquered the city of Cahors, and made a positive assessment of their wines.

Maybe Henry IV’s bond with the wine of Cahors influenced later political measures. Particularly in the freedom granted to La Rochelle, the port for wines from Cahors, by the Edict of Nantes. Through this measure, they sought to seize this enclave of religious wars, securing a stronghold of the Huguenots, guaranteed by the king as a pledge of peace to maintain peaceful coexistence within France. For many unorthodox Frenchmen, La Rochelle emerged as an area of freedom and tolerance within a kingdom still marked by tension and violence of the wars of religion.

## **La Rochelle**

One of the most mysterious aspects of this story is the relationship between Malbec and La Rochelle. As noted, this was the key point of connection between the wine of Cahors and the English market. It played a pivotal role in the process of trade, transport, market supply and the building of a culture of appreciation of this wine.

The port of La Rochelle kept its routes open and became a story of legend. It was the main port of the Templars in the Atlantic, home to its headquarters, and point of contact of the trade which they ran between northern Europe and the Mediterranean. Moreover, La Rochelle was, in its time, a symbol of freedom of thought and pluralism: many Frenchmen, persecuted for their ideas, found tolerance there during the relentless religious wars. Meanwhile, La Rochelle was a critical point in the power struggles between the Great Powers. The fleets and armies of France, Spain, England and other kingdoms faced each other there. The site of La Rochelle (1627), saw major military action during the reign of

Louis XIII, and spent much time as a cultural landmark of French history. Alexander Dumas chose it as the setting for his action novels. There were the Three Musketeers, who lived for moments of strong dramatic tension. D'Artagnan was shot by a bullet through his hat that nearly cost him his life: the attempt to poison D'Artagnan with his wine of choice; the conspiracy of My Lady, the death of the Duke of Buckingham, and the recovery of the Queen's diamond studs. (Dumas, 1844).

In La Rochelle was the scene of the bastion of Saint-Gervais, the most notable tactical diversion of the Musketeers in a military scenario, a masterful blend of courage, skill, humour and boldness (Dumas, 1844: chapter 46). This was the episode that built the reputation of the Three Musketeers in the eyes of the French armed forces in general, and the other Musketeers (they would never enter into formal combat with such intensity to the site of Maastricht, where the death of D'Artagnan took place, just at the moment of receiving the palms of Marshal of France). Turning back to the facts of La Rochelle, the focal point of Malbec history, it is important to note that this was the episode that drove them thirty years later, when they had reached the age, to face a situation of confinement from which there was no possible escape. This they thought, would save their lives, in *The Viscount of Bragelonne* (1848-1850), the third volume of Dumas. In the movie *The Man in the Iron Mask*, the public saw the scene in which the old musketeers, dressed in their traditional uniforms, are facing a large group of young musketeers, receiving the order to open fire and kill them. Supported by their prestige, the four are released, running into bullets to certain death, only to reappear, alive amidst a cloud of smoke. As the fog of gunpowder dissipates, intact silhouettes of the musketeers appear, dressed in their traditional robes, "blue coat with silver braid, adorned on the sleeves, with the fleur-de-lis on all four sides and shoulders and a large silver cross on the back" (Praviel, 1933: 57).

This was one of the most beautiful scenes in cinema history. Thanks to the creativity of the filmmaker, who developed the scene based on what Dumas wrote, when he pointed out the emotion felt by the young Musketeers on command to kill the elders as they "were revered because they held the sword, as in ancient times so the names of Hercules, Theseus, Castor and Pollux" were revered (Dumas, 1848 to 1850: 1998). With this in mind, the director of the film managed to enhance the story, and thus carried the scene of the bastion of Saint-Gervais, during the siege of La Rochelle to the extreme.

Now the important thing for us to understand, is that that was the key to the history of the export of wines from Gascony to England, and the process of building a culture of appreciation for Malbec. The prominent role that Dumas granted La Rochelle as the scene of his most popular novel, serves to reflect the strategic importance of this enclave in the power struggles of modern European history. This role was derived, precisely, for the function of depicting to La Rochelle as a dynamic trading port linking southwest France with foreign markets, a process in which wine played an important role, including of course the wines of Cahors.

At this point a remarkable paradox between the two D'Artagnan occurs. Because while the literary D'Artagnan of Dumas unfolded his story in La Rochelle, his alter ego, the historical D'Artagnan had another perspective. The D'Artagnan of history studied by Praviel (1933), could not have participated in the siege of La Rochelle, because he would have been just four years old. But, given his status in Gascony, it is very likely he would have known and tasted the wine of Cahors, not only during his youth, but throughout his hectic life as a Musketeer on the accomplishment of the tasks that Louis XIV entrusted him with.

Amid the struggles of ideas and prestige, the inhabitants of La Rochelle remained constant in the task of shipping the wines of Cahors to keep the UK market stocked up. This is a less colourful story than the one of the Musketeers; but with a deep socio-cultural sense, because through their quiet and effective work, the growers, transporters and traders built,

slowly but surely, a tradition that has survived to this day.

In the second half of the seventeenth and eighteenth century the march of Cahors wine resumed force, driven by the prosperity of France, which was at the height of its power. The reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV marked the apogee of France as a first world power. In this context, important infrastructure that favoured the production and marketing of wine was introduced; locks, canals, roads and port improvements helped to ease the task of winemakers, especially to better market their wines.

The wine of Cahors arrived with ease to the markets of northern Europe (England, Germany, Netherlands), as well as conquering the West (USA) and the East (Russia). The Russian Orthodox Church adopted these wines to celebrate mass. the Tsar, Peter the Great (1672-1725) took special interest in the wine of Cahors, which helped him heal from a stomach ulcer.

On his initiative, Malbec vines were introduced into the Russian Empire, particularly in the region of Crimea. This trend was continued by one of his successors, Catherine the Great (1729-1796). She gave a strong impetus to the movement of strains of Malbec from France. This process culminated in 1828 with the implementation of his estate in Crimea, in which Prince Vorontsov cultivated thousands of French grape vines, including Malbec.

The nineteenth century marked the decline of the wine of Cahors in France and England. Bordeaux merchants barred the way to the British market. Furthermore, French winemakers prioritised other wine varieties that were better adapted to the characteristics of soils and climates of the region. The prestige of the wines of Cahors, so vigorous in the Middle Ages and in the early centuries of modernity, underwent a period of decline. Cahors wines were left off the lists of wines recognised and valued in the nineteenth century. This was reflected in the works of Alexander Dumas, noted food expert and wine connoisseur. His characters appeared at times marked by good wines, which allowed the author to reflect on the winemaking hierarchy of his time, in which, Cahors wine was not counted: in the saga of the Musketeers 21 varieties of wines are mentioned, excluding the wines of Cahors (Lacoste and Duhart, 2010). Dumas did his best find out the historical background and reconstruct as closely as possible the time told in his novels. But at times he incurred anachronisms, one of which occurred precisely around this wine: the famous writer could not avoid the opinion, that in the nineteenth century, the wine of Cahors was virtually forgotten in France.

The coup de grace for the downturn of Malbec in France was the phylloxera plague. This attacked the vineyards of Cahors from 1877 and wreaked havoc. The 40,000 hectares that had been cultivated up to that point disappeared almost entirely within a few years. From this devastating experience, the Gaul growers lost their last ties with Malbec, a situation that could not be reversed until the second half of the twentieth century.

## **2. MALBEC IN ARGENTINA: INGRESS, PROLIFERATION AND RETURN TO THE WORLD**

The expansion of Malbec, outside of France, began in the eighteenth century, towards the east. In the following century it would be westward to reach the Southern Cone of America: indeed, in the 1840s and 1850s, Malbec strains began to grow in the Quintas Normales de Santiago de Chile and Mendoza.



Malbec came to Chile in the 1840s. Within the framework of political and cultural openness generated from independence, the Chilean ruling class began to look to France with growing interest, with ambitions to excel. In this context, one of the aspects that they sought to incorporate, was the French wine industry, including its varieties and winemaking techniques.

With this in mind, French specialists, René Lefevre, Claudio Gay and Michel Aimé Pouget arrived with the intention of making important changes in the national wine industry, with emphasis on the French trends (Briones, 2006). Along with them, there were also other Frenchmen who made significant contributions. Their proposals were disseminated through the new institutions created precisely for this purpose, such as the National Agricultural Society (founded in 1838) and the Quinta Normal de Santiago (1841). Under these conditions came the arrival of European strains to Chilean soil.

"By 1845 a Frenchman living in Chile, Nourrichet had introduced strains of his country at the site of another Frenchman, Vigoroux, owner of Viña La Luisa, which was incorporated into the Quinta Normal. In 1848 Pierre Poutays, also French, created Villa La Aguada, which he abandoned in 1856 to set up the much bigger, Santa Teresa. Claudio Gay had also participated in this process by bringing vines to Quinta Normal "(Del Pozo, 1999: 70).

At an institutional level, the most important place in this process was the Quinta Normal de Santiago. Founded in 1841 on the initiative of the exiled Argentine Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, its name was inspired by the *Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris*, where different crops were grown, especially vines. La Quinta Normal de Santiago operated as an experimental station in the sense of introducing new species and varieties of European plants adapted to American soils and climates, and then distributing them in the region to improve agricultural production and the agribusiness.

While Chile progressed with its institutions and its technological innovations, Argentina remained in a state of stagnation due to political problems. After independence, the provinces of Rio de la Plata sank into civil war for decades. It was not possible to establish a national state: on the contrary, power was fragmented among the leaders of the various provinces that fought each other. When a local army invaded a town, it quickly descended into pillage and looting. Productive infrastructure, slowly built over centuries of work was lost overnight. Many intellectuals and businessmen chose exile, like Sarmiento, Tomás Godoy Cruz and others. An atmosphere of tension prevailed, in which the wine industry of Mendoza and San Juan suffered a period of stagnation and relative decline.

After Rosas fall from power and the institutional normalisation of Argentina, conditions were generated to make up for lost time. Sarmiento returned home and promoted the founding of the Quinta Normal de Mendoza. Modelled on France and Chile, this Quinta Normal was proposed to incorporate new varieties, as a means to enhance the national wine industry. This initiative was welcomed by the governor of Mendoza, Pedro Pascual Segura, and government minister, Gil Vicente.

On April 17, 1853 the project was presented to the Provincial Legislature, with a view to founding a Quinta Normal and Agricultural School. The House of Representatives were aboard and approved it into law (Girini, 2006: 23-24). From then on the process by which, after its long journey around the world, Malbec would be undeniably rooted in Mendoza, had begun. It adapted to its vineyards, and suited its new soils and climates, it took strength in its new homeland, to be able, a century and a half later, to be re-projected to world markets, strengthened now with the introduction of the new world. Once enacted into law, the plan was fulfilled, step by step, but with the slip-ups of a country that was still in the

process of formation, that is to say, with uncertainty, unexpected problems, and ups and downs. The management of the Agricultural Quinta de Mendoza was entrusted to the Frenchman Michel Aimé Pouget (1821-1875). Qualified from the *Horticultural Society of Paris*, Pouget was forced into exile due to the coup d'état of Napoleon III. To continue the practice of his profession, he settled in Chile. There he served as head of the Quinta Normal, as well as in private estates of Viluco and especially in Peñaflor, 40 kilometres west of Santiago, properties of Don Jose Larraín Gandarillas

In the area of Peñaflor there was a strong tradition of respect in the process of growing fruit plants in general and in particular vines, as well as in the elaboration of wine with equipment marked by care and hygiene. Here, Jose Patricio Larraín carried out an innovation and incorporation project of new species and varieties in rural Chilean farming. With these experiences, Pouget was able to adapt to the customs and the natural and cultural environment of the Southern Cone, while achieving his goal of continuing with his job and promoting the innovation of regional agriculture. Under these conditions he received and accepted an offer of the government of Mendoza and took charge of the Quinta Normal de Mendoza. Pouget arrived in Mendoza in 1853, at the age of 32, he brought with him contributions from the Quinta Normal de Chile, among those which stood out were "a load of plants and seeds that included strains of various types, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir; one of them was the Malbec grape". (Beezley, 2005: 292)

Sarmiento's background in Chile, especially the generosity with which he had served there, were the basis for the Quinta Normal de Santiago providing the French strains to the Quinta Agronómica de Mendoza. The historian Maurín Navarro explains as follows:

The transfer process of plants from the Quinta Normal de Santiago to the Quinta Agronómica de Mendoza, resulted in eventually being decisive for this story. Subsequently, this effort was extended to San Juan, where a Quinta Agronómica was created. Under the political protection of Sarmiento, these units were able to incorporate thousands of plants to advance the renewal process in general, of agriculture and in particular of viticulture. In a letter of 1862, Sarmiento was aware of the progress they had made and the ground they had covered. This produced the incorporation of French grapes to the Argentine wine business, particularly Malbec.

The management of Sarmiento, Pouget and the Quintas Normales de Santiago, Mendoza and San Juan were decisive parts of this process. Until, finally, they succeeded in growing these varieties on Cuyana lands, despite all the difficulties:

"From the beginning it lacked the essential water and the skilled labor. However, Pouget, with his farming experience, knew how to get through something successfully within the company, until the wasteland of the West had the glory of seeing the first French grape cluster mature". (Dragui Lucero, 1936: 32).

State crisis in Argentina and the discontinuity of public policy in 1858 saw the closure of the Quinta Normal de Mendoza, due to budget cuts. Nevertheless, Pouget sought to continue the project through its own venture, where he experimented in adapting the French strains. This attitude continued with remarkable constancy until his death on November 29, 1875 (Draghi Lucero, 1936: 38).

Malbec adapted very well to the soils and climates of Argentina in general and Mendoza in particular. The vintners welcomed it enthusiastically and it gradually expanded as the main strain of the national viticulture. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the vineyards of Mendoza were already formed by the then called "French grape," which was the way of referring, primarily, to Malbec. Gradually, this variety was appreciated and valued. In the vineyard census of 1962, 58,600 hectares were recorded to be cultivated

with Malbec in Argentina, out of a national total of 259,800. Then came a crisis that led to a strong reduction of the national vineyards and Malbec in particular.

Argentine viticulture began to recover after 1990, with Malbec as its star strain. The area sown to this variety jumped from 10,500 hectares in 1990, to 16,350 in 2000, to 26,900 in 2008, and finally to 28,500 in 2009. Growth in this twenty-year period (1990-2009) was in the order of 173%. Malbec consolidated its position as the emblematic variety of Argentine viticulture for its red wines, and led the national exports, that from 2000, began a steady and unprecedented progress.

It took Argentina 150 years, from receiving the first vines of Malbec, until they were able to produce a decent wine for export. It was a long period of work and interaction between men, plants, soils and climate. It was a silent and invisible feat, perhaps because in America there are no kings, no international wars had destroyed the wine regions at that time, nor had the cinema arrived or the hand of great writers to elevate the local history to the height of legend or myth.

But there were rustic, tough Latin American growers, able to build trust with their plants, to nurture the wine in the quiet of their cellars, and return it to the lovers of Malbec.

The grape growers cultivated Malbec with care and interest and allowed its consolidation as the emblematic grape of Argentina. For nearly a century and a half, Malbec was confined within national boundaries: Argentine winemakers produced their wines exclusively for the domestic market. This situation changed in the late twentieth century, when there was a shift, and it began with the process of exportation.

Argentina began exporting wine in relevant quantities at the beginning of the twenty first century. They had been preparing for it for a hundred and fifty years, and during this time they had been working very hard, growing vines, making the wine, and looking for the most suitable methods for the characteristics of their soils and climates. It was a long process of experimentation, through trial and error, until finally, they achieved the leap they needed to start on the path of exportations.

So Malbec was given the opportunity to rediscover his old friends, those whose companionship he had cultivated in the Middle Ages, in the times of Queen Eleanor and the Templars; or the peasants and kings of modernity: Henry IV, Francis I of France, Peter the Great of Russia, Catherine ... It was a reunion of centuries. In a way, those characters from history and legend come back to life, every day, in each glass of Malbec.

The current world wine reunion with Malbec represents a circle that has been closed again. First it travelled from Europe to South America, and then back, from Argentina to the world. In this cultural itinerary roundtrip, the key point was the arrival of Malbec in Mendoza, with the cohesive force of a law that served to co-ordinate the actions of the State, the private sector and the technicians and professionals. This basic instrument was the law that the government formalized on the April 17, 1853. A date which must naturally be established as Malbec World Day.



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