

Why malbec is the new shiraz (and blows merlot away)

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If they made a sequel to *Sideways*, details would have to be updated. The salaries of Thomas Haden Church and Virginia Madsen would be renegotiated thanks to their Oscar-nominated performances the first time around. Scenes shot at the Hitching Post would, for realism's sake, have to depict hordes of tourists now that the California restaurant/winery has become a hot spot. And that famous diatribe against merlot ("If anyone orders merlot, I'm leaving") would have to be reaimed, at malbec.

It might be a slight exaggeration, but malbec is looking like the new merlot, the smooth-drinking red so popular with former beer drinkers that connoisseurs tend to regard it with derision.

Inky, juicy, fat and hearty, malbec, notably from Argentina, is a wine for the times. It has, however, serious advantages over merlot. For dependable value in the \$10-to-\$15 range, malbec has few equals. Even when expensive - say, \$25 - malbec is very often worth the money, not something one can say of many other grapes.

And unlike merlot, it occasionally yields a monster bargain. That's the case with **Michel Torino Don David Reserve Malbec 2006**, just released today through Vintages stores in Ontario (\$12.95, No. 0681197; available in B.C. for \$15.99 and Alberta for a typical price of \$13.80). The Ontario price is remarkable. The same wine generally sells for more \$15 to \$16 in the United States and England, not including sales taxes. Tell someone south of the border we can buy wines like that through the Ontario liquor board for considerably less than they do in the U.S. and they will roll their eyes in disbelief.

The Don David, not to be confused with the less-expensive Michel Torino Malbec, is lots of wine for the money. The colour is inky-purple, the flavour brilliantly fresh, with notes of pure blackberry and plum-like fruit playing on a silky frame. The tannins are smooth and nicely integrated into the fruit, and the finish is juicy, spicy and warm.

Wines like this are just one reason "Argentina is on fire," according to Darryl Weinbren, Vancouver-based president of the Western Canada division of Authentic Wine & Spirits Merchants, which distributes Michel Torino wines in Alberta. He also may have a better analogy than mine for malbec. "Argentina malbec is becoming to wine consumers what shiraz was four or five years ago. Suddenly everybody's looking for malbec."

Speaking of shiraz, today's Vintages release in Ontario features a few other good buys from Tango-land, some available in other provinces, including a shiraz blend.

Finca Flichman Expressiones Reserve Shiraz Cabernet Sauvignon 2006 (\$15.95, No. 0017111) is not your typical Australian shiraz, though. A blend of 60-per-cent shiraz and 40-per-cent cabernet, this red is built around a chewy, slightly astringent backbone of tannins that make it a good candidate for three to five years of cellaring. Full-bodied and powerful, it reveals dark fruits, chocolate and a hint of smoke. For current drinking, consider pairing it with grilled or roasted red meat.

Other decent malbecs include **Tomero Malbec 2005** (\$12.75, No. 0057943), which shows the grape's slightly herbal side in addition to ripe fruit and chocolate, and **Del Fin Del Mundo Reserva Malbec 2005** (\$12.95, No. 0681197), super-concentrated and a little bit raisin-like, with a green, leafy note.

And more widely available across the country is **Pascual Toso Malbec 2006** (\$12.85 in Ontario, 035170; \$12.99 in B.C.). It has more of that crowd-pleasingly subtle sweetness and creamy texture, with notes of Kahlua and plums. How crowd-pleasing? It placed No. 1 in Wine Enthusiast magazine's "Top 100 Best Buys of 2007." For that all-important Midas-touch factor, it's got respected California vintner Paul Hobbs as its consulting winemaker.

Collectors in Ontario will surely want to line up for a chance at **Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe** Châteauneuf-du-Pape La Crau 2005 (\$67.95, No. 0951475). The 2005 was great in the southern Rhone and this consistent top performer is very nicely structured though quite astringent at this young stage. Very concentrated and tannic, it shows dark fruits, dark chocolate, licorice and pepper. It could use five to seven years to soften and could last another 15 easily if stored properly.

Also in the release and owned by the same family, the Bruniers, is **Domaine de La Roquette** Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2005 (\$38.95, No. 0070862), with a liqueur-like concentration and much more supple tannins.

The bargain choice for shoppers fond of those same southern-France flavours, there's **Château Planères Cuvee Prestige 2005** from the Roussillon region (\$14.95, No. 0070748). Full-bodied, it starts with a velvety texture and hints of blackberries, lavender and herbs, then finishes crisp and spicy.

Another top red of the release is **Cabutto Barolo Tenuta La Volta 2003** (\$55.95, No. 0586354), full and rich with dark fruit flavours and a slightly creamy texture unusual for Barolo (but likely due in part to the ripe vintage). Lots of fruit here as well as mouth-parching, tea-like tannins. Give it seven to nine years in the cellar if you can.

The Niagara standouts include **Malivoire Pinot Noir 2005** (\$32, No. 0996777), showing the masculine side of pinot noir, with plum, cranberry-cherry fruit and firm tannins.

Among whites, a pricier standout is **Hidden Bench Estate Chardonnay 2005** (\$35, No. 0068817). It's full-bodied and silky, showing ripe pineapple and butter balanced by vigorous acidity.

Also nicely made is **Château des Charmes St. David's Bench Gewurztraminer 2006** (\$19.95, No. 0453472), offering up classically aromatic notes of rose petal and lychee on a round, dry frame.

The New Zealand Wine Fair touches down in Ontario this week with stops in Ottawa (Tuesday, May 13, 7 p.m., Government Conference Centre, 2 Rideau St.) and Toronto (Thursday, May 15, 7 p.m., Design Exchange, 235 Bay St.). Visit <http://www.nzwine-events.ca> for details or call 1-888-993-9927.

Pick of the week

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Alberta for a typical price of \$13.80) contains notes of pure blackberry and plum-like fruit playing on a silky frame.

Photo courtesy of Vintages

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