

SKY PINNICK (Director and Producer), *Boom Varietal: The Rise of Argentine Malbec*, Executive Director Kirk Ermisch. Rage Production, Inc. and Southern Wine Group, LLC, 2011, 72 minutes.

Boom Varietal, a full-length documentary about Argentina's Malbec wine, made its debut at the Bend Film Festival in Oregon in October of 2011. Since that time it has been screened at more than twenty indie film festivals throughout the United States. The project is a joint effort of Kirk Ermisch, President of the Southern Wine Group and principal owner of Bodega Calle in Mendoza, Argentina, and Sky Pinnick, owner of Rage Productions. The film was shot on location around Mendoza, Argentina over an eight-week period of time.

Malbec is a wine that we all know a little bit about. Those schooled in French wine will remember it as one of the classic Bordeaux blending grapes. It is a wine produced in a New World style, using Old World grapes, in an emerging wine country. Most restaurants list a single Malbec on their wine menu and, even given their mark-up, these wines often represent a reasonably priced accompaniment to dinner asking for a full-bodied red wine. They are generally neither too robust nor too light when trying to satisfy a mixed array of palates. Many a consumer has stocked a home bar in preparation for a party with Malbec. In brief, Malbec generally fits in a consumer's budget and most red wine drinkers at the table or party will be pleased with the choice.

Malbec was introduced to Argentina by the French agricultural engineer Michel Pouget in 1868. The grape variety is actually known as Cot which originated in the Province of Quercy in France. Production was centered in Cahors and, though production is limited, much of the Cot or Malbec wine coming out of France is labeled and marketed as Cahors (Robinson, Harding, and Vouillamoz, 2012, pp. 272–274). Today it is the most widely planted good-quality grape variety in Argentina with over one third of the red wine produced in Argentina being Malbec (*Wines of Argentina Website*, 2012).

When one thinks of wine movies, the list of memorable films is not that long. There are two well-known fictional movies that do come to mind. The first of these is *Sideways* (2004) that really put California Pinot Noir on the map. The second movie is *Bottle Shock* (2008). *Bottle Shock* is loosely based on the American point of view of events leading up to the 1976 Judgment of Paris. On the documentary side the film that comes to mind is *Mondovino* (2004). The film, *Mondovino*, is probably most remembered for its length and its poor film quality. The theme of *Mondovino* is a look at the globalization and corporatization of the wine industry. Though *Boom Varietal* is also a documentary, its entertainment value is much closer to *Sideways* and *Bottle Shock* than it is to *Mondovino*. At seventy-two minutes in length, it provides for comfortable documentary viewing.

Truth in reviewing requires that this writer mention that he enjoyed a bottle of the Ca de Calle Reserva 2010 Malbec Blend from Bodega Calle while first

screening the film. The bottle was provided by the Southern Wine Group. Since the reviewer was obviously going to enjoy a glass (or more) of Malbec while reviewing the film, this should only be considered a distributional issue and not one that affects the efficiency of this review. The Southern Wine Group just happened to answer the question of what Malbec to enjoy when they set the price of their bottle at zero.

The movie itself is quite easy to describe: breath-taking cinematography, easy-listening music, informative interviews, and a story of family. The cinematography is provided by the vineyards and topography of Argentina. The instrumental music is provided by Franchot Tone. The interviews are provided by thirty-eight individuals having a connection to the Argentinian Malbec industry. The story of family and tradition comes out in many of these interviews. Though the film's executive producer is a wine distributor and winery owner, one never gets the feeling during the film that the marketing people are tapping you on the shoulder whispering, "Buy more Malbec," in your ear.

Through the interviews with various individuals connected to the Argentinian wine industry one learns about the history of Malbec and gets a glimpse at what the future might hold for the wine. As mentioned above, the cast of interviewees is both large and diverse including: producers, wine shop managers, field workers, vineyard owners, winemakers, wine economists, wine investors, wine critics, and wine drinkers. The movie is appropriately named *Boom Varietal*. As the film opens we learn from Kirk Ermisch about the story of Malbec that is similar in nature to the rise and eventual decline of Merlot and Australian Shiraz. Initially both wines were available in modest quantity and high quality. Their popularity, however, caused an increase in production to supply consumer demand at the cost of quality. This is an issue that wine economist, author, and blogger, Mike Veseth, returns us to later in the film. If and when the popularity of Malbec begins to fade is yet to be determined and one of the points of this documentary.

Early in the film Santiago Achaval, President of Achaval Ferrer Wines, walks the viewer through the early history of Malbec in Argentina. Malbec came to Argentina in the mid-nineteenth century but Argentina's claim to being the seat of Malbec occurred later in that century when much of the European Malbec crop was wiped out by Phylloxera. From there the story fast forwards to the time period 1950–1980. At this time many of the largest wineries in Argentina were owned by the State. It is at this point in the film that we are given a pictorial tour of the State-owned Giol Winery that at one time was the largest winery in the world. Wine was produced in quantity, not for its quality. In the 1980s the government got out of the wine business, closing the Giol Winery. This opened the door to small boutique wineries that were primarily family undertakings, and much of the current wine production of Argentinian Malbec is a story of family. Part of the story we hear comes from fieldworker Cesar Liberato. Liberato is dedicated to his work. He tells of his family's involvement with vineyards over several generations and how working the fields is in his blood and in his soul. He notes that at one time Malbec was considered a bad

grape, but now he considers it the queen of Argentinian grapes. We also meet brothers Pablo and Hector Durigutti of Familia Durigutti Wine. We learn of their family's history as Italian emigrants who found work in the early vineyards of Argentina. To this day they say that it is the hardworking attitude of their grandparents that drives them. They get up early and work late to produce a product of quality that the world will enjoy.

As noted in the film, several of the current wine growers and winemakers are fourth or fifth- generation producers of wine. It is here in the film that we meet the father and son team of Carlos and Adolfo Basso who own and run Vina Amalia. Carlos discusses his early career working at large corporate run wineries but now also demonstrates the passion that he has for his life, owning with his son, a small family run operation. Through technical improvements in the 1990s, these family run wineries and vineyards began producing a product that satisfied the international consumer, particularly the consumer in the United States. It is this point in time when Malbec began its ascent to that of a boom wine. It is now known in this country as Argentina's signature varietal. Mike Veseth comments in the film, that Argentina is the OPEC of Malbec for the United States.

As was mentioned earlier, the topography of Argentina makes for excellent cinematography in a film. It also, however, presents the perfect climate for growing Malbec that wants a warm dry environment. Angel Mendoza, owner of Domaine St. Diego, explains to the viewer that at 32 to 33 degrees south latitude combined with mountains that allow for a contrast in temperatures during the day and night, Malbec seems to thrive in many parts of Argentina. These same weather patterns that normally allow for Malbec to thrive can quickly turn fickle and produce hail that can wipe out grape crops. Guillermo Donnerstag of Familia Marguery estimates that a five minute hail storm can cause a one million dollar crop loss in his vineyard. British Columbia expatriate and owner of Cantinian Wines, Dana Rothkop, lets us know that changing weather conditions cause both exhilaration and fear at the same time. He likens dealing with the weather to riding a rollercoaster.

The story of family and the enthusiasm that the interviewees in the film show for Argentinian Malbec is a compelling story. It is equally compelling because even though there are few people that drink Malbec exclusively, everyone seems to drink some Malbec. It is an easy drinking wine that is still presented in the market place at a great value. Santiago Achaval puts it well when he uses an analogy provided by his father, a physician, that people catch the wine bug. The wine bug clearly has all the symptoms of a virus. It's contagious, it's incurable, and it does a lot of damage to one's checking account. Carolyn Gallagher, CEO of Uncorking Argentina Wine Tours, points out that the bug for Argentinian wine really took off in about 2005 when people started seeing Argentina as a wine tour destination. They saw Argentina as a place to relax and have fun as opposed to a country of political unrest. She notes that this new perception was greatly aided by the favorable comments by wine media across the world.

Not everything presented in the documentary paints a rosy picture of the rise of the Argentinian Malbec industry. Briefly presented is the story of Canadian investors Chris Rush and Joel Cyr, who attempted to be absentee owners of a vineyard in Argentina. Their idea of getting in on the ground floor of an investment deal by being land owners of grape producing property failed. Likewise, the picture provided by New York City wine bar manager Nicole Ciani is not as positive as other aspects of the film. As a wine bar manager she understands Malbec, but she is really not a big fan and isn't convinced that she needs to push it at her establishment.

The film ends with an unanswered question, "What is the future of Argentinian Malbec?" Several of the interviewees in the film point out that this is a very tenuous question. Santiago Achaval stresses that the international market for a quality wine product is very demanding. Winemakers cannot rest on their past successes. A quality product always needs to be produced. Kirk Ermisch notes that Argentina has always dealt with domestic inflation and inflated prices can very quickly reduce international demand for Argentinian wine. Adolfo Basso is very aware that Argentina has a history of changes in government policy toward business and economic activity and a change in government policy could radically alter the production and sale of wine in Argentina. Mike Veseth notes that wine drinkers go for fads, and he states it's too soon to tell whether Malbec is permanent versus a trend. Dana Rothkop compares what has happened to Malbec to the real estate bubble in the United States. Staying with the theme and title of the film he notes that the story of Malbec is the story of a boom and booms can end. Watch the film and determine for yourself if Argentine Malbec is a *Boom Varietal*, here today and gone tomorrow, or if it is here to stay.

References

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