

## Sampling Malbecs...in France



Please note: the following are not published articles. They are informal entries from a blog I kept while traveling through France two summers ago.

Part 1: Malbecs of Cahors, “Fiesty and Powerful”! In which two tourists who like wine but have no expertise set out to learn about the local productions

Part 2: Malbec update

Malbecs of Cahors, “Fiesty and Powerful”! In which two tourists who like wine but have no expertise set out to learn about the local productions

### CHAPTER 1: History

So upon arriving in and further exploring this part of central France, we learn that the local wine is called Malbec, “the Black Wine.” We become curious and do some investigating. We must ‘drink local’! Research must be done!

I have heard of and indeed enjoyed this type of wine before; it is the favorite of my friend Steve Golding. I thought it was from Argentina. It is, but...

The first thing we learn is that the Malbec grape is indigenous to this area. Al and I have observed that this area of France is reminiscent of California wine country—a sunny, rather dry climate, with rolling hills punctuated by tree-lined lanes and scrubby native plants; the soil is alkaline (white dusty limestone on the hilltops, we observe). Presumably the section of Argentina devoted to grape-growing is similar.

Malbec has a dramatic history. It arrived with the Romans over 2000 years ago. “Within no time, the wines of the region were recognized for their quality, thereby causing detriment to the production from Italy. In the year AD 92, the Emperor ordered that all vines in Cahors be pulled out. He was disobeyed...”

The Black Wine continued to be favored. It was featured at the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry Plantagenet. (Cue scenes from “A Lion in Winter.”) Its popularity spread throughout France and indeed all of Europe. Peter the Great “imposed it upon the Orthodox Church.” Heavens.

A ferocious rivalry between this area and Bordeaux ensued, including unfair export taxes! Then, in the 1865 growing season, disaster struck in the form of the dreaded phylloxera. Cahors vines were wiped out.

It wasn't until 1947 that a revival was suggested and worked towards. Local proponents—oh! the humiliation!—appealed to an estate grower in rival Bordeaux for plants, and began. A devastating frost in 1956 caused a setback, but, we are assured that the Cahors-area growers, “none of them despaired and all got quickly back to work.”

Now the task continues to put this area back on the map, and take back the Malbec flag, so to speak, from Argentina.

## CHAPTER 2: Shopping

We've noticed signage about Malbec wines throughout the area, for wineries as well as “caves” (which are wine shops). When in the city of Cahors yesterday, we could not fail to notice the abundance of tourist literature, posters, signs, and attractions related to this regional wine renaissance. (The story I recount here is cobbled from some brochures and booklets.)

Right downtown, adjacent to the Tourist Bureau, is the swanky Cahors Malbec Lounge, a combination of bar and cave that welcomes, educates, and seduces visitors. We learn that 2005 was a banner year, but that 2009 is also very wonderful.

Our hostess at this little hilltop B&B urged us to get a bottle of her favorite, Chateau de Haute-Serre, 2009. The vintner there, one Georges Vigouroux, is evidently a rock star around here.



But a charming man at a Cave near the Pont Valentré urged on us a bottle of Chateau de Cayx, 2009, explaining that the rich owners of that property, Queen Margarethe and Prince Henrik of Denmark (!), had hired their own rock star winemaker and we would be “very delighted.” We also got a rare 2005 bottle from yet another source, Chateau de Chambert. Please note that we spent between 10 and 20 euros per bottle: bargains.

In addition, we have a bottle or two purchased more locally, du Quercy blends that are not as fancy. Then, of course, there are the very popular “gas-pump” varieties. (For more on those, scroll down.)

### CHAPTER 3: Flavors

Tasting and comparing these Malbecs will require patience, fortitude, and good will, we decide. We will bring them with us tomorrow when we go to visit Al’s good friend to the south of here, Jean-Louis. We get by with a little help from our friends. We will report back.

Here are the wine-snob, er, wine-expert descriptions of Malbec that so intrigue and seduce us in this worthy quest:

<http://www.wine-pages.com/features/wine-cahors-malbec.htm>

#### Château de Haute-Serre 2009

A little paler in colour and a bright and primary nose of red fruits, but there’s a leathery and gamy note too, a touch of the barnyard suggesting a light bretty character. Chocolate and sweet fruit on the palate is mouth-filling and rich, but the finish just a touch short and showing that slight drying quality.

#### Chateau de Cayx 2009

Notes of cherry and kirsch aromas with a delicate roasted flavour. A truly majestic Cahors with silky tannins. This exceptional wine was created in honor of Her Majesty, Queen Margrethe of Denmark, to celebrate the occasion of her 70th birthday.

#### Chateau de Chambert 2005

This is the modern face of Cahors; big, bright black/blueberry fruit, chunky and chocolatey and really showing off its Malbec characteristics. When you get great Malbec like this from its homeland, it doesn’t seem quite so different from the very best Argentinian Malbecs, perhaps drier and more structured but still with a similar core of intense fruit.

For now, however, we can report on our research on the non-bottled “country” Malbecs, purchased—really and truly—from what looks for all the world like a gas pump. We have been drinking these with our meals, usually in the back garden here at the B&B.

### CHAPTER 4: The Battle of the Bulks: Tasting the “country” (“gas pump”) Malbecs

I will let my sommelier Al tell this part....

American connoisseurs tend to endlessly discuss particular vineyards and particular vintages and set great store by a particular bottle in their cellar. The French do that as well. For example, here in Cahors, it is generally conceded



that 2005 was a marvelous year, but the 2009 will, in the due course of time, age better and will be even better. However, if you are looking for a year to open up a bottle for supper tonight, probably 2008 in the year to look for. I've noticed that while a bottle of 2005 is hard to find, and will go from 10 Euro to 45 Euro, the 2007 vintage is widely available at anywhere from 3 to 12 Euro tops. Presumably for good reason.

A little research on the internet confirms my observation that 60% or so of the locally produced wine is sold in bulk, out of gas pumps. The local folk drink it daily, drink it at Bastille Day festivals, and if you go out to a local restaurant and have a glass of wine with your meal (did I write "if?"), you're drinking the gas pump wine, too. It's been aged in a steel tank for hours. The notion of drinking a wine that isn't really dark red but actually is almost black, straight fresh with little or no aging might be either daunting or appalling to most Americans, but indeed this is how the people who make this stuff mostly drink it, so a wine tasting comparison of these rough and hardy table wines is pertinent...The Battle of the Bulks.

Bulk wine can be purchased locally in two broad types....First, a type called "Quercy" named after the local region. This tends to be a blend upon a base of roughly 50% Cabernet Franc, I think, with various percentages of Sauvignon, Malbec, and Merlot comprising the rest. The other bulk available locally is the 100% Malbec. Now, bottled and labeled Malbec comes in three broad ratings, Traditional, which must be at least 70% Malbec, Superior, which must be at least 85%, and Prestige, which must be at 100% Malbec.

Modes of dispensing "country wine." You can bring any container you wish, recycled water bottle, jug, barrel, whatever.



Now, the bulk Malbec we are testing is a 100% as well, but, again, a gas-pump bulk wine, 1.50 Euro per liter at the pump, BYOB, or barrel or keg, as the case may be. Clearly not the same as the Prestige stuff.

Alors.

Color. Indistinguishable. Both almost entirely black with just the slightest hint of purple shading. To call either of them Red would be incorrect. Mouton-Cadet is dark red. This stuff is, truly, almost black.

Nose. Huge difference. The Quercy blend smells just like you might expect. Very strong, very acidic, very in-your-face. The 100% Malbec almost is unscented in comparison. Grapes, yes, but also, well, earth. Le Terrior. But very subtle.



Taste...both were opened and aired for over an hour. Even so, both hit you like a ton of bricks with their acidic taste (FWIW, I generally prefer whites for this very reason). But they are very different. The 100% Malbec has a very high pitched acidity, which is extremely strong at first but fades away after a few seconds on the tongue, and the taste that remains is more earthy than fruity.

The Quercy blend, on the other hand, has a lower pitch of acidity, but it remains there the entire time, not going away, but the background is more fruity, with hints of plums, currants, and yes, even grapes.

Teri and I both preferred the Quercy blend.

I guess wine isn't like whisky. I tend to prefer unblended whisky, and do not drink blends. With wine, I suspect that insisting upon 100% of a certain grape does not give the winemaker room and leeway to experiment and do their thing, to mix and hopefully make a bit of magic happen. Buzz. Both wines produced a nice pleasant, happy cheerful buzz. And that, is, in my opinion as your Surveyor, the best recommendation I can give.

## MALBEC UPDATE



We humbly ask the great god Bacchus to bless this post. We met him in the beautiful city of Nîmes, not far from the ruins of the temple in Diana. Per usual, he looked robust and cheerful, despite his debauched lifestyle.

As you might recall, we discovered when in the Cahors area that we were at the European epicenter of Malbec wine and, indeed, local vignobles were laboring to produce good and plenty and “recapture the flag from Argentina.”

We drank the rough, intense gas-pump Malbec while there, and purchased three highly recommended bottles of Cahors Malbec to share with our friends in the days and miles ahead. While visiting Jean-Louis and Elaine, we opened one: the Cayx 2009. Here is the official description:

Chateau de Cayx 2009

Notes of cherry and kirsch aromas with a delicate roasted flavour. A truly majestic Cahors with silky tannins. This exceptional wine was created in honor of Her Majesty, Queen Margrethe of Denmark, to celebrate the occasion of her 70th

birthday. It was surpassingly wonderful to our uninitiated but eager palates. Rich, dark, fruity, deep.

Because we had a longer visit with Robert, the other two bottles were opened at his Montpellier home. He was willing to assist in our research.



#### Chateau de Chambert 2005

This is the modern face of Cahors; big, bright black/blueberry fruit, chunky and chocolatey and really showing off its Malbec characteristics. When you get great Malbec like this from its homeland, it doesn't seem quite so different from the very best Argentinian Malbecs, perhaps drier and more structured but still with a similar core of intense fruit.

This highly touted wine was okay, but lacking in substance and heft after the Cayx. Robert, who also preferred the 2009 Haute Serre, enjoyed this 2005 vintage more than we did, explaining that the French tend to prefer lighter wines. It was indeed delicious with the strong Roquefort cheese we also brought along and happy, contemplative moments ensued.

Next and last was this bottle, 2009 Haute Serre, is widely acknowledged to be representative and excellent—our B&B hostess in the Cahors area had insisted we try it, declared it her absolute favorite.

#### Château de Haute-Serre 2009

A little paler in colour and a bright and primary nose of red fruits, but there's a leathery and gamy note too, a touch of the barnyard suggesting a light bretty character. Chocolate and sweet fruit on the palate is mouth-filling and rich, but the finish just a touch short and showing that slight drying quality.



We enjoyed it last night with pasta (sweet summer tomatoes, fresh basil, prosciutto, mozzarella, hot red pepper over bowties with olive oil and balsamico, if you must know). This one was in between the other two in power and quality: more robust and darker, but not as intense as the Cayx. It was made by the celebrity vintner, Georges Vigouroux, who also released to the public the much more inexpensive and heavy-duty unadulterated “gas-pump Malbec.” In the end, we Americans find first one we tried, the Cayx 2009, the Cahors Malbec made for the Queen of Denmark's birthday to be superior, memorable, the most ,best good excellent yummy woouoooo oui oui oui.

Amen, Bacchus, Bless Us Tout le Monde! Voilà.\*

\* I have noticed that many French people end long and short speeches and statements in this fashion. It's like, "Okay. That's it. I'm done. Voilà!"

Alan adds:

"Chapeau" to Georges Vigouroux, however. He is a famous local star, perhaps the best known winemaker in Lot. If you've got some extra cash, and want to spend a few Euros, he has a good bottle for you. But if you've not got much, or just want a bottle every night with your supper, Georges is not above making something decent for that range of the market as well. Whoever you are, and whatever your budget, Georges has got you covered.