

Good drinking

Wine Huon Hooke

On a wing

An airline pilot is introducing Argentinian malbec to Australia.

Imagine you're an airline pilot, flying international routes for Qantas, and you find yourself in Buenos Aires regularly, with time on your hands. What do you do? Start a business importing Argentine wines to Australia, of course.

The question of whether or not Australians will buy them doesn't deter Sydney/sider Juan Cameron. Argentina is the fifth biggest wine producer in the world – but we don't buy much of its wine and what we do is cheap.

Malbec is the grape variety in which Argentina specialises and to which Cameron has decided to restrict himself at this early stage. Do Australians drink malbec? Again, the answer is precious little. But this is the wine business: you never really know if people will buy something different until you offer it to them.

Cameron named his business Departure Lounge and on the cover of his catalogue is an old black-and-white photo of wine being served to passengers on a 1930s Sunderland flying boat. There are just seven wines to kick off, all malbec. And they're good – at least the six I've tried are. And he's managed to get them into some serious shops in Sydney: Best Cellars, Campedown Cellars, John Brown, Ultimo Wine Centre, Porter's Roseville and North Shore Liquor to name a few.

Cameron is on a path that's been trodden before. Gary Steel of Domaine Wine Shippers and Grahame Lance of the now-defunct Cellarcraft both launched full-time wine importing businesses using the opportunities afforded by their flying careers. Cameron has been honing his palate in wine bars around the world for some years.

I confess to draining a bottle of the Dolium 2001 with dinner, after the tasting. It not only stood up well in my blind tasting but was one of those reds that you just keep sipping because it slips down so well.



with food and without. So why isn't malbec more popular here? Viticulturally, it's difficult because it tends to be an unreliable cropper and much of our vine stock is virus affected. In cool climates it can be difficult to ripen and there are few wines quite as awful as "green" malbec.

It has gradually fallen out of favour in Bordeaux as well, although still a permitted variety, but in the southern French region of Cahors, where it's called cot, it's revered as the backbone of their dark-coloured, tannic, heavy reds. In Cahors, it's the most commonly cultivated variety – as it is in Argentina.

In Australia, the best examples have tended to come from warmer climates, especially Bleasdale's from Langhorne Creek, South Australia. An exception is the Frankland River region of Western Australia, where Alkoomi and Ferragrove grow it. Last year Ferragrove produced a mightily impressive varietal: the 2001 King Malbec. I was asked to nominate some Aussie malbecs for an annual wine industry tasting in Argentina last year and immediately put the Ferragrove forward. This is the reply that eventually arrived. (Names have been withheld at risk of starting a diplomatic incident.) "The Ferragrove came out towards the end of the tasting and the winemakers were all starting to feel a bit smug about the local product. The Ferragrove came as a genuine shock, with the general feeling that the Aussies were leading the world yet again. X didn't tell

them how hard it was to find a good example, or that we are pulling out the tiny bit of malbec we have. He reckons a feeling of depression fell over the tasting."

It is true that malbecs of this calibre are extremely rare in Australia and you have to like raw, over-the-top, 15 per cent alcohol, ultra-ripe, sweet-fruity reds to enjoy the Ferragrove. As good as it is, and promising for

the variety, in the hands of a new producer, I actually prefer the Dolium wines that Cameron is importing. They are more elegant and savoury, more complex and balanced for drinkability.

All Cameron's wines are from Mendoza, Argentina's best-known wine region. From Dolium there's a 2002 rose (\$22; 14.5 per cent alcohol), dry, savoury, unsweetened, very hot on the palate), a regular 2001 malbec (\$25; smoky, characteric aromas, nice mellowing savoury complexity and good balance), a 2000 Reserva (\$43; concentrated, very clean and deep with stacks of fruit but also a lot of burnt-coconut oak), all very good and fairly priced. From other makers, there's a 2002 Los Cardos (\$19; simple, grapey and raw but fair value), 2002 Serrera (\$26; plummy, fruit-driven, slightly raw but quite well-flavoured) and 2000 Ricardo Santos (\$34). This is somewhat pruned and poorly, suggesting raisined fruit, with coconut oak and lots of firm tannin and acid, and some nice fruit sweetness buried deep. Lots of people like this sort of wine better than I do. It comes from a vineyard perched at 900 metres, so I suspect they had to let the grapes hang for a long time to get them ripe and bring the acidity down. And finally there's the \$66 Dona Paula Selección de Bodega 1999, which I haven't tasted. So why not grab a bottle from one of the retailers listed, buckle your safety belt, put your tray-table up and enjoy the ride?

Flying high: wine bars such as La Finca in Buenos Aires are booming in Argentina and now the country's malbec wines are being exported to Australia.

Photo: Natacha Pisarenko