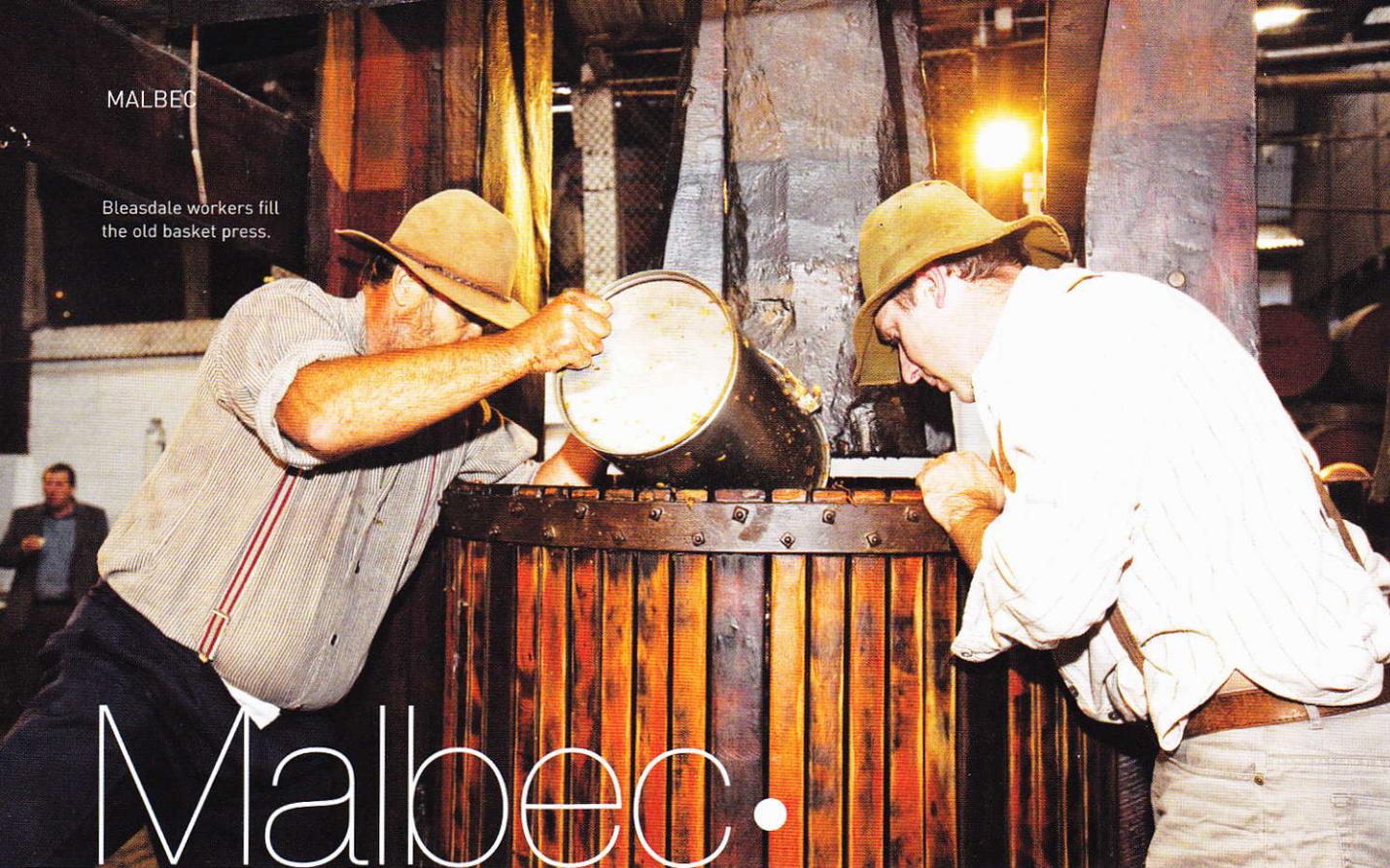


Bleasdale workers fill the old basket press.



Malbec.

MUSINGS

WORDS DAN TRAUCKI

If you think Merlot gets a bad rap, spare a thought for poor old, hard-done-by Malbec. In Argentina, Malbec is lauded as its 'national variety' in the same way that Shiraz is here in Australia. It makes the pinnacle of Argentina's red wines and at the same time it is its workhorse, making everyday quaffers just like Shiraz does here.

Argentina has more than 50,000 acres of Malbec planted, compared with just under 15,000 acres in France, 1,500 acres in California and 1,350 acres in Australia.

In its native France, Malbec is known as 'Cot' and while grown in a number of areas, especially in the south-west, it has in the past been an integral component of red Bordeaux, being one of the six varieties allowed to be used in the 'assemblage' of its wines. Its role was to provide fruitiness and colour to the final blended wine. However, in the latter half of last century, Malbec started to be phased out due to its requirement for plenty of sunshine (often not available in Bordeaux) as well as its susceptibility to mildew and frost due to being thin-skinned. Today, it is mainly grown in the warmer Cahors region of southern France, where the AOC rules state that to be called 'Cahors' a wine must contain at least 70 percent Malbec, with Merlot and Tannat usually making up the rest of the blend. These wines are generally very big, rustic, tannic wines, which is why, in the Loire Valley, Malbec is used to add body and character to its Cabernet Franc and Gamay

wines. As an aside, it is interesting to note that some French producers are now labelling their wine as Malbec as a result of the increased popularity of the variety in North America.

In Argentina, the variety produces less rustic and svelter wines with more elegant tannins and smoother flavours. The wines can have a hint of violets on the bouquet with juicy, fruity flavours on the palate. There is still some discussion as to whether the marked differences in wine style between Cahors and Argentina is due to the growing climate or clonal difference as Malbec was introduced to Argentina in the 1860s – before phylloxera destroyed the vineyards of Europe, necessitating replanting on rootstocks.

While there are a few wineries in the USA such as Geysler Peak that produce a Malbec varietal wine, most of the Malbec produced there is used in 'Meritage' blends to enhance the colour and add acidity to the blend. Meritage is the US trademarked wine name for blended wine using two or more of the six varieties permitted in red Bordeaux. These varieties are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Carmenere. The name *Meritage* was created so as not to upset the French, who strongly objected to people calling or describing their wines as being a 'Bordeaux blend'.

There are about 120 wineries producing wines made from Malbec in Australia, however there are very few straight

varietal Malbec wines available for sale in bottle shops, and thus most wine drinkers have either not heard of the variety or are not cognisant of it. The highest profile wines containing Malbec would probably be Leasingham Bin 56 Cabernet Malbec, and the Wendouree Cabernet Malbec and Shiraz Malbec, both from the Clare Valley. The other region that has used Malbec to good effect is Langhorne Creek, where Bleasdale has been producing Australia's best known Malbec since 1961, now under its Second Innings label.

Malbec makes wines that are dark and inky. Although not quite as deeply coloured as Saperavi or Tannat, they have nonetheless consistently made some of the more deeply coloured red wines. It is their flavour that varies quite considerably around the world. Having just tasted varietal Malbec from Langhorne Creek, Clare Valley and Margaret River, I found them all to be a bit simple with considerable amounts of stewed mulberry characters on the palate. Whereas with the Argentine wines I tasted, the mulberry characters were much more subdued and the wines were considerably more elegant and sophisticated. They seemed to have been matured for longer before release – probably matured in larger oak vessels – and the tannins were finer and less obvious. The single Cahors example I was able to get

my hands on – Chateau du Cedre Le Prestige – was in a class of its own. World class. It was more akin to a well made, sophisticated Petit Verdot in style, deeply coloured and having much greater body depth while at the same time being the lowest alcohol wine (13.5 percent) of all the wines tried. This wine has smoky aromas leading to sour cherries, blueberries, cassis and black olives on the palate. A huge wine that requires decanting, it is rich and complex with silky fine tannins, and for me sets the global benchmark for Malbec (Cot) wines. Perhaps it lends credence to the argument that France grows different clones of the variety than the rest of the world, or perhaps it could be that the Chateau du Cedre Le Prestige could legally have anywhere up to 30 percent of Tannat in it, adding structure and depth to the resultant wine.

I would love to see an Aussie example of this blend to see how it would stack up against the wines of Cahors. Either way, it has led me to believe that the handling of this variety has a way to go in Australia to be able to produce elegant and sophisticated varietal wines such as the Argentineans do. In the short to medium term, Malbec's place will be as a blender, enhancing wines the way Wendouree and Leasingham have done over last half a century or so. ■