

# OLD VINES, NEW HOMIES

## Malbec and Zinfandel in the Americas

Today Malbec and Zinfandel are among the oldest and most culturally embedded wines of Argentina and California even though they originated in distant lands, writes *Michèle Shah*



Old-vine Zinfandel with grape clusters: Bedrock Vineyard located in Sonoma Valley is a historic site planted in the 1880s

**W**ine history in the Americas mirrors human history shaped by movement, adaptation, and the persistence of memory. Grapes such as Malbec and Zinfandel arrived from distant shores – one travelling south from France to Argentina, the other crossing the Atlantic from the eastern Mediterranean to California – yet both put down roots so deeply that they came to define their adopted lands. Like the societies that grew around them, these varieties are the result of migration and assimilation, transformed by new landscapes, climates, and cultural conditions.

Today, Malbec and Zinfandel stand among the oldest and most culturally embedded wines of South and North America, sustained by historic vineyards and generations of custodians. Their stories remind us that what we often call “native” is sometimes the result of time, continuity, and belonging – and that identity, in wine as in people, is shaped as much by where one settles as by where one comes from.

### MALBEC: FROM CAHORS TO THE ANDES

Malbec's origins lie in the vineyards of southwest France, particularly Cahors, where it was known as Côt and valued for its deep colour and structural intensity. Long overshadowed by Bordeaux varieties, the grape's defining chapter began in Argentina in the mid-19th century, when it was introduced as part of a national effort to modernise viticulture. In Mendoza and the Andean foothills, Malbec encountered conditions unlike those of its European homeland: intense sunlight, low disease pressure, marked diurnal temperature shifts, and well-drained alluvial soils. Over generations, the grape adapted so completely that it acquired a distinct identity, shaped less by inherited tradition than by altitude, soil, and climate.

Today, Argentina is home to the world's largest and most diverse plantings of Malbec, including numerous old vineyards dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, preserved through massal selection and traditional farming. In this context, Malbec can reasonably be described – if not as indigenous in a strict botanical sense – then as culturally and viticulturally native to Argentina.

Few estates have contributed more to this redefinition than **Catena Zapata**, founded



A fourth-generation vintner and physician, Dr Laura Catena (left) and Michele Shah, hold bottles of what has become Argentina's flagship wine, Malbec



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in 1902 and still run by the same family four generations on. Nicolás Catena Zapata was among the first to recognise that Malbec's most compelling expressions lay in high-altitude, terroir-driven sites, challenging long-held assumptions about Argentine wine. That vision has been deepened by his daughter, **Dr Laura Catena**, through a research-led approach rooted in science, ecology, and long-term stewardship. Founded in 1995, the Catena Institute of Wine has become one of South America's most influential centres for viticultural research, with a particular focus on historic vineyard preservation, clonal diversity, and site expression.

Old vines sit at the heart of Catena's philosophy. "Old vines fascinate me because they're actually stronger than young ones," she explains. "They're more resilient, with deeper root systems, and they've adapted to their environment over decades." Her medical training informs her meticulous approach to vineyard health, particularly in Argentina's many ungrafted old vineyards, which her research suggests can live longer than grafted vines when carefully pruned and managed. "We prune to one side, clean tools carefully, and accept that, like people, vines sometimes still get 'sick.'"

For Catena, old vines are not isolated plants but living ecosystems. "Old vines are part of that balance – communities of microbes, animals, and people," she says. "When you pull out an old vine, you're not just removing a plant; you're destroying a whole web of life and history." This perspective extends beyond viticulture into daily practice. Horses, sheep, and even llamas are integrated into vineyard management, maintaining soil health while preserving traditional methods. "It's like saving a patient," Catena reflects. "If you can save a life, why wouldn't you? The same goes for a plant."

Through this integration of science, tradition, and ecological sensitivity, Malbec has become more than Argentina's flagship variety. It has become a lens through which the country's landscapes, old vines, and accumulated viticultural memory can be read.

#### **ZINFANDEL: FROM DALMATIA TO CALIFORNIA**

Zinfandel's journey mirrors the narrative of American immigration itself: a grape shaped by displacement, adaptation, and reinvention. Genetic research has traced its origins to the Dalmatian coast of present-day Croatia, where it is known as Crljenak Kaštelanski, and later to southern Italy as Primitivo, named for its early ripening. Yet it was in California, following its arrival in the 19th century, that Zinfandel established its deepest roots.

Widely planted during the Gold Rush era, Zinfandel spread across Sonoma, Napa, Mendocino, Lodi, and the Sierra Foothills. Many of those vineyards still survive today – dry-farmed, often field-blended, and among the oldest productive vines in North America.

Few figures are as closely identified with these vineyards as **Joel Peterson**, widely known as the "Godfather of Zin." A winemaker for more than five decades, Peterson founded **Ravenswood** in the 1970s and built it into one of California's most influential Zinfandel-focused wineries, playing a decisive role in elevating the variety from workhorse grape to serious, site-expressive wine. In 2011, his contribution to American wine was recognised with his induction into the Vintners Hall of Fame.

Today, through his small-scale project **Once & Future Wine**, Peterson has come full circle, focusing on handcrafted, single-vineyard old-vine Zinfandels and reviving traditional redwood fermenters to honour the distinctive typicity of site. For him, these historic

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