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## Malbec: Taking Vodka to the Next Level

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By Joel Chusid

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Consider yourself a connoisseur of fine vodka? I'll bet you've not tried vodka distilled from Malbec grapes! And you'll be hard pressed to find it, no pun intended. Forget all those fruit infused bottles on Manhattan bars; this luxury vodka is going to surprise you.



On a recent trip to Mendoza, the epicenter of Argentine wine country, I came across an article by Helga Trim in *Wine Republic*, a local English language publication aimed at tourists. It introduced Primo Vodka, which is produced locally yet virtually unknown. Malbec grapes from vineyards in Maipú are harvested, fermented, and distilled three times in small batches. Trim claims that after she tasted it and she was very impressed. While purists will insist that vodka must be made from potatoes, this one is distilled from those famous Argentine Malbec grapes. Other distillers have produced vodka from grapes mixed with wheat, but not from grapes alone. Primo plans to introduce a Chardonnay and then a Cabernet Sauvignon vodka next.

Only 50,000 bottles are hand-produced by a very small staff and bottled in tall, clear wine bottles with an elegant, simple look. The company is

composed of two Americans, Emil de Balthazar and his partner, Lindsay Davidson, New Yorkers who came to Mendoza for a vacation and like many, fell in love with the place and decided to stay. While it is common for people to do this and either invest in or start their own vineyard, this is probably the first time someone has done it for vodka.

Indeed, finding the vodka is another story. The distillery, where the vodka can be purchased, is open weekdays from 10 to 5 and welcomes visitors. But I discovered the magazine article on a Sunday and was leaving early the next day. Even the wine store at the Mendoza Airport didn't know what I was talking about. I proceeded to try several upscale wine and liquor stores in central Buenos Aires, where supposedly you can find anything. No luck. Not one person even had any idea what I was talking about. Finally, I reached Emil on his cell phone while he was at the airport. The article gave the distillery address and his phone number. "Where can I find Primo?" I asked. He said that he was taking some bottles to New York. Outside of the distillery only a few stores in Buenos Aires had it, but his sales person was aggressively trying to place it. He promised to let me know within a half hour where I could find it. The "few" turned out to be only one, a small but upscale wine shop, Vinoble, in the neighborhood of Caballito, a hike across town from my home in Palermo.

Determined to get my hands on a bottle to take back home to Texas, I called the store, and the owner, Andres, indeed acknowledged he had the vodka in stock. "Do you deliver?" I asked, somewhat unabashedly. In Buenos Aires it is not unusual to have a couple of ice cream cones or coffee delivered, although within a neighborhood. He surprisingly agreed to deliver them at no charge, and promptly on Wednesday morning, I finally was the proud owner of two bottles of Primo vodka. The retail price was about \$22, fairly steep for vodka in Argentina. Emil had told me the suggested selling price in the U.S. will be about \$24. One bottle was in Dallas by the following morning, and the other remains in Buenos Aires.

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This is not a flavored vodka, although somehow there's the very slight suggestion of a grape aroma. It made a great vodka and tonic, even without the lime. I was sold.

But with the limited production and until the distribution gets established, finding Primo in most places is going to be nearly impossible. Supposedly it will be available in the United States soon. In Buenos Aires, you can always try Vinoteca Vinoble, which has a nice website complete with a map ([www.vinoble.com.ar](http://www.vinoble.com.ar)), or if in Mendoza, visit the distillery at Perito Moreno 3838. If either of these is not in your plans, you can access the company's rather Spartan but bilingual website, [www.primovodka.com](http://www.primovodka.com), or e-mail the company at [sales@primovodka.com](mailto:sales@primovodka.com). Then again, there's always Emil's cell phone, which is published on the site (011-54-9-261-663-0618), if you're desperate!

*Joel Chusid is a frequent contributor to [www.travellady.com](http://www.travellady.com) on interesting places around the globe and occasionally comes across unusual stories on beverages for [www.cocktailatlas.com](http://www.cocktailatlas.com). A contributing editor and regular columnist in Airliners magazine, he spends his time between Dallas, Texas, Buenos Aires, Argentina and Beijing, China.*

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**Think vodka has to be made from potatoes? Think again, says Joel Chusid. "This is not a flavored vodka, although somehow there's the very slight suggestion of a grape aroma. It made a great vodka and tonic, even without the lime. I was sold."**

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