

An aerial photograph of a mountainous landscape. The foreground shows a wide, light-colored river valley winding through green, forested slopes. In the background, rugged, brownish mountains rise, with a prominent peak covered in snow and partially obscured by a white cloud. The overall scene is dramatic and scenic, typical of a high-altitude region.

THE HIGH LIFE?

CHANGING STYLES AND A
PIONEERING SPIRIT AROUND IN
CHILE'S WINEMAKING INDUSTRY.
IS THIS CHILE'S TIME TO SHINE?
ALISTAIR COOPER REPORTS



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AFTER YEARS OF being labelled as dull and predictable, Chile may finally be breaking free from its stereotyped shackles.

The past decade has seen producers planting new areas from Atacama to Patagonia and the Pacific to the Andes, in search of new terroirs, soils and altitudes. In large, this has been a quest for quality as well as fresher, lighter and more elegant wines – led by a deeper understanding of climate and soil types. However, it is not just the emergence of these new regions that has transformed Chile's image from dependable to dynamic. A concurrent re-evaluation and reappraisal of its traditional varieties and regions has reinvigorated the industry.

Could this be the moment that Chile manages to finally crack the elusive premium and on trade market?

I DIDN'T ENJOY DRINKING THESE WINES – THEY WERE TOO HEAVY. I DON'T MAKE ANY WINES NOW THAT ARE ABOVE 13.5% ALCOHOL

Chile became the fifth best selling wine origin in the UK in 2016, with an increase in both volume and value. The largest gains were in the convenience sector, the traditional stronghold of Chile's major brands. Encouragingly, figures also show that Chile enjoyed 3% value growth in the on-trade – an area where it has traditionally been weak. Ben Gordon, chief executive of Bodegas Volcanes de Chile, says: "Chile continues to be seen as a reliable supplier of more entry-level wines, but the emergence of such an array of options at a more premium price point will only help the category." He adds: "Bodega Volcanes de Chile was established in 2009, focused on wines made purely from volcanic soils – Chile boasts 2,900 volcanoes, of which 90 are active. Volcanes de Chile is linked to soil influence, which meant immediately this was a project that must be focused on the more premium segment."

A drive towards higher quality, premium wines and the search for ideal site selection has seen producers planting new areas. Dennis Murray, export director of Montes Wines, says: "When Montes started in 1998, the fine terroirs were there and unexplored – mainly due to lack of funding to invest in them. Because Chile was producing such low-priced wines, it could not afford big R&D budgets." He adds: "Pioneering new areas is key to maintaining this category growth. These new terroirs

are developed because they may produce better quality and more distinct wines. They can then be linked to the country of origin – think Casablanca Valley Sauvignon Blanc as very Chilean in essence, as Marlborough Valley is to New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.'

One of the new areas planted by Montes is Zapallar in the Aconcagua Valley. Here 45ha of Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir are planted, just 7km from the cool Pacific coast. The wines form part of its Outer Limits range, created specifically to showcase premium wines from sites that hadn't previously been planted. "Montes Outer Limits is a more adventurous line of products," says Murray. "It allows us to do the terroir research without changing the essence of our more well-known and loved wines, such as Montes Alpha. This is less confusing for consumers."

Innovation can come at considerable cost, and is not always a guaranteed success. Discussing Miguel Torres' 370ha Escaleras de Empedrado site, on slate soils in Maule, winemaker Fernando Almeda says: "Initially we were looking for a site to replicate the slate soils of Priorat, so we planted 15ha with Grenache, Carignan and a small amount of Tempranillo in 1999. These varieties didn't work as hoped, so we replanted with Pinot Noir and other grapes in 2005." The first release of the ultra premium Empedrado Pinot Noir 2012 was released in 2015 with a hefty £90 per bottle price tag. This can be partly explained by the sizeable investment costs of over US\$4m. "It was by far the most expensive per hectare planting in Chile," says Almeda. "However, we believe the quality is certainly there, especially given the infancy of the project."

SHIFTING STYLE

A shift towards fresher and lighter wines led Maipo-based producer De Martino to adjust its winemaking style and philosophy. "In Chile around the turn of the century, we were all making wines with lots of extraction, alcohol and oak. I realised I didn't enjoy drinking these wines, they were too heavy. We decided to change many things. I don't make any wines now that are above 13.5% alcohol," says winemaker Marcelo Retamal. "Harvesting earlier and eliminating new oak is key to achieving more drinkable wines. I want wines with typicity and moderate alcohol, refreshing wines, and so do many of today's discerning wine drinkers."

This changing style is not exclusive to Chile's premium wines. Marcelo Papa, head winemaker of Concha y Toro, adds. "Over the



past few years we have aimed for more drinkability in the Casillero del Diablo range. We are harvesting the grapes earlier to achieve lower alcohols and we are using less oak." With annual global sales of more than 5m cases, it could be argued that changing a successful formula might be risky. "I don't think so at all. A wine with lower alcohol is more drinkable and easier for people to enjoy," says Papa.

WE WANTED TO MAKE A LIGHT AND FRESH CARBONIC STYLE. IT'S IMPORTANT TO EXPERIMENT TO ADVANCE

An emphasis on fresher wines led De Martino to explore more southerly regions, such as Itata, the historic heartland of Chile's winemaking industry. Here, extremely old Cinsault and Muscat vines dominate, on granite soils with a maritime climate. Sebastian de Martino says: "Itata has incredible history, high rainfall and bush vines that are well over 150 years old. The fruity, nervy wines are full of vibrancy and freshness and are distinct to wines from the Central Valley." On the marketplace for these wines he says: "The Cinsault is similar in style to the cru wines from Beaujolais, such as Morgon. They are crunchy, fresh, gastronomic wines that need to be hand sold. They are a perfect fit for the on-trade, where they are performing really well."

EXPERIMENTATION

A renaissance for Chile's patrimonial varieties, specifically País, has seen producers innovate and experiment. Julio Bouchon of Bouchon wines in Maule says: "The new Chile is led by a new generation of winemakers, looking for identity and sense of expression. This means looking at what we have in our own back yard, and that is the hitherto neglected País grape. We wanted to make a light and fresh carbonic style. It's important to experiment to advance." Bouchon's País Salvaje, launched in 2015, is a wine made from vines that grow wild among native trees, on its Maule estate, harvested on ladders to reach branches 5m above ground. "In more than 15 years visiting the UK wine trade, I have never had such positive and interesting feedback than with the País Salvaje," says Bouchon.

So what of Carmenère, often touted as potentially Chile's signature grape and USP? First officially identified in Chile's vineyards in 1994, it is the second most planted red grape variety, with 11,300ha nationally. A flurry of



(Right) Cinsault bush vines in Itata

(Below) Old País vines



excitement saw many producers plant Carmenère extensively around the turn of the century, often with little consideration for site selection.

"Carmenère is a really tricky grape to grow, the greenness can be a real issue," says Marcelo Papa. "It is important to harvest a little earlier, and you need to be really careful with oak. Too much and it becomes overpowering."

On its potential as Chile's signature grape, Papa is unequivocal: "Carmenère cannot be the flagship variety in Chile as it only grows well in certain areas, such as Apalta and Peumo. It isn't like Malbec in Argentina or Tempranillo in Spain, that can grow well in many sites. Carmenère is extremely site specific."

María del Pilar Díaz, >>



winemaker at Volcanes de Chile, says: “Carmenère is a great option for wine beginners. It’s soft, juicy and easy to understand. However it is tricky, and harvesting at the correct time, a little earlier than we used to, is vital.” And what of its potential as a monovarietal wine? “It can perform well on its own. However, I believe it is more successful as a blending component. Cabernet Sauvignon can add some vibrancy and much-needed firmness to the structure of Carmenère,” says Díaz.

MONOARIETAL POSSIBILITY

Commercial director of Casa Silva, Arnaud Frennet, is more upbeat: “We firmly believe in Carmenère as a monovarietal. It has the ability to age beautifully and it has become synonymous with Chile, which offers a great marketing opportunity.”

Are consumers prepared to invest in Chile’s more premium wines?

David Murphy, purchasing director of Bancroft Wines, discusses the UK market: “There is a great deal of interest in the newer, more esoteric wines,

Atacama is one of the new areas under planting

such as País, or Carignan blends, or other more unusual styles. However, at entry level it is still a massive challenge. Getting people to trade up from what they know and a price point they are comfortable with is the hard part. So getting someone to pay £9 for a Chilean Sauvignon Blanc is more of a challenge than getting someone to pay £16 for a bottle of wild-grown País.”

THE CURRENCY SITUATION WE ARE CONFRONTING IN THE UK AFTER BREXIT SAW US TAKE THE DECISION OF INCREASING OUR PRICES BY 5%

Some believe Chile’s advantage in the premium market is its cost effectiveness. “People talk about premium from Chile but it’s still a very affordable price bracket that many of these wines are available at,” says Bodegas Volcanes de Chile’s Gordon. “With the right approach I am convinced that consumers are already treating Chile with more interest than before.”

Montes’ Dennis Murray says: “Chile

has a high value ratio compared to other countries, land is still reasonably priced and labour is less expensive than other wine-producing countries. Therefore we can produce a high quality wine at an attainable price.”

On Brexit and its implications for Chilean exports to the UK, Murray says: “The currency situation we are confronting in the UK after Brexit saw us take the decision of increasing our prices by 5%. Although in the short term this situation could lead us to lose some volume, in the long term Brexit could be an opportunity to increase our exports to the UK, as we may see import duties on EU wines rise.”

Things are certainly changing in Chile as we see innovation and experimentation in both the vineyard and winery. The opening up of new areas, and a pragmatic approach to the country’s traditional winemaking culture, may finally give Chile the opportunity to compete in the mid to premium price bracket.

Perhaps Chile has finally cracked it? Let’s see what 2017 brings. **DI**