

4 GOOD REASONS TO DRINK CHILEAN WINE

BY MICHAEL SCHACHNER

PHOTOS BY MEG BAGGOTT

In Chile, where a commitment to making terroir-driven fine wine has existed for only about a quarter-century, the learning curve has been steep—especially for Chilean winemakers. Eventually, however, expertise takes over. That's where Chile is today: Years spent identifying the best vineyard sites and ideal harvest times combined with exploring various winemaking techniques and blends have resulted in Chile's best wines ever. Here's a look at four key Chilean wine categories and what to drink from each.



COOL-CLIMATE QUALITY

In the 19th century, when European immigrants started planting Chile's first commercial vineyards with varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot (later identified mostly as Carmenère) and Sauvignon Blanc, it was the fertile Central Valley they seized on. Access to the capital city of Santiago and easy-to-irrigate, large valley-floor parcels was the formula for seminal wineries like Concha y Toro, Santa Carolina and San Pedro.

And while volume continues to pave the way for Chile, during the 1990s, a cadre of Chileans realized that the terroir of their country shared much in common with that of California. Led by former Concha y Toro winemaker Pablo Morandé, vintners began sizing up cool regions close to the Pacific Ocean for plantings of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc.

Initially, these pioneers struggled to find water in coastal-influenced places like the Casablanca, Leyda, San Antonio and Limarí valleys. But over time, rivers were tapped, wells were dug and vines went into the ground.

Fast-forward to the early 2000s and these groundbreaking cool-climate winemakers faced another major challenge: Many of the original plantings included the wrong clones for locations that run 10–20°F cooler than inland areas. Out went the bad vines, and in came the new.

Today, these newer vineyards are nearing maturity, says Rafael Urrejola, winemaker at Undurruga, whose Terroir Hunter series focuses on small-production wines from specific terroirs. One of its best wines is a Pinot Noir from Leyda Valley, located less than seven miles from the chilly Pacific.

“Good clonal material from Davis and Dijon that was planted from 2000 to 2007 is starting to deliver more consistency,” says Urrejola. “Soil character is also showing up in our Pinot Noirs. Pinot is working well in granite. Also interesting are the wines from chalk, partial schist formations, even alluvial soils.”

Relying on more appropriate clones has no doubt helped, but Urrejola says the most important advancement Chilean winemakers have made with cool-climate wines is learning when to harvest.

“Those who have been working with Pinot Noir for years now realize that old Cabernet recipes don't fit with what we're doing,” he says. “I'm searching for more freshness, a red-fruit character and length to the wines.”



RECOMMENDED WINES

90 Undurruga 2013 T.H. Pinot Noir (Leyda Valley). Racy, acidic and full of energy across the palate, this coastal Pinot delivers snappy beams of red plum and raspberry flavors before a lightly spiced finish. Testa Wines Of The World. abv: 13.5% Price: \$24

90 Lomas del Valle 2014 Coastal Cool Climate Pinot Noir (Casablanca Valley). There's energy to the palate, which is slightly jammy and creamy. Ripe plum and cherry flavors show mild oak notes, while the finish is bright. W. Direct. abv: 14.5% Price: \$19

89 Montes 2015 Spring Harvest Sauvignon Blanc (Leyda Valley). Zesty, and super fresh on the palate, with blazing acidity, this tastes of passion fruit, green herbs and grass, especially on a racy, slightly pithy finish. Guarachi Wine Partners. abv: 13% Price: \$16



Chile is renowned for its powerful Cabernets, but in warm regions it's not all Cabernet, all the time.

93 Viu Manent 2011 Viu 1 (Colchagua Valley). Balanced despite being ripe and generous. Flavors of toasty, blackened spice, lush blackberry and cassis finish rich and smoky. Baystate Wine & Spirits. *Editors' Choice*. abv: 14.5% Price: \$70

92 Lagar de Bezana 2013 Aluvi3n Ensamblaje (Cachapoal Valley). A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Carmenère, this features flavors of blackberry and plum. Vino del Sol. *Editors' Choice*. abv: 14% Price: \$26

90 Kuyen 2012 Red (Maipo Valley). Plum, cassis, floral hints and spicy, charred aromas open this Syrah-led blend. This is jammy, dense and full in body, with olive and herbs on the finish. Global Vineyard Importers. abv: 14.5% Price: \$40

2 UNIQUE VARIETAL WINES & INTRIGUING BLENDS

Chile is renowned for its powerful, soft-tannin Cabernet Sauvignons, but in warm, established regions like the Colchagua, Cachapoal and Maipo valleys, it's not all Cabernet, all the time.

One wine that's worthy of a callout is Viu Manent's Viu 1, a Malbec that hails from an 80-year-old vineyard in the Cunaco section of Colchagua, about 100 miles south of Santiago. Called San Carlos, this unirrigated vineyard planted atop a deep base of clay produces Chile's best Malbec. Given that the popularity of Malbec from neighboring Argentina isn't waning, this style of wine, now in its 13th edition, should be familiar.

Viu 1 was long about extraction, maximum ripeness and alcohol levels well above 15%. But current winemaker Patricio Celed3n, who took over in 2010, has been downscaling the wine to fit what he and owner Jos3 Miguel Viu perceive as an emerging global palate, one that values freshness over weight and ripeness.

To get more elegance in a warm-climate Malbec, Celed3n is harvesting seven to 10 days earlier than in the past. He's also reducing the wine's time in oak, while dropping the percentage of new oak from 100% to about 80%.

“Both 2011 and 2013 were very cool years for us,” says Celed3n. “Each year had amplified natural acidity, which in a hot region like Colchagua is beneficial.”

In order to harness that vital acidity, Celed3n harvested in late April in both years rather than in May (the equivalent of November in the Northern Hemisphere), which used to be common.

“We're getting good results with these early harvests,” says Celed3n. “We start picking grapes every week beginning the first week of March, just to see what we have. I think we've achieved a better wine due to more natural acidity, less alcohol and less new oak.”

Closer to Santiago, in the Alto Maipo region, 3lvaro Espinoza has made a delicious Syrah-led blend called Kuyen since 2001. Based on a varying recipe of roughly 50% Syrah, with a Cabernet Sauvignon component of about one-third (the remainder is Carmenère and Petit Verdot), Kuyen functions as a second wine to Espinoza's burlier Antiyal.

Syrah, hardly a household name in Chile, “is such a versatile grape, one that's capable of producing quality wines in a multitude of soils and climates,” says Espinoza.

3 VALUE REDS FOR \$20

The concept of “value” has long been the lifeblood and curse of Chilean wineries.

On one hand, consumers familiar with only inexpensive “fighting varieties,” particularly Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc, have pigeonholed Chile and want nothing more than drinkable wine for under \$12. In response, Chile, with its sprawling Central Valley vineyards, favorable weather and cheap labor costs, has met this demand by producing millions of bottles of these wines.

To offset the perception that their industry is only about value for money, almost every Chilean winery has launched a so-called “icon” wine within the past 10 years. Prices start at about \$50 a bottle and rise into triple figures. However, for a multitude of reasons—snobbery among consumers, retailers and sommeliers chief among them—Chile has had difficulty selling its most expensive wines.

“The grapes are hand-picked, sorted at the wineries and aged in French barrels for up to a year. Wines like this should cost more like \$40.”
—Francisco Baettig

Enter Chile’s strongest suit: Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère priced at about \$20. According to Francisco Baettig, winemaker at Errazuriz, this is where Chile consistently overdelivers.

“Wines like our Max Reserva are made from old vines with low yields,” Baettig says. “The grapes are hand-picked, sorted at the wineries and aged in French barrels for up to a year. Wines like this should cost more like \$40.”

“The dilemma for us is that we don’t have significant local consumption, therefore we are forced to sell in a very competitive global market, one in which we can’t rely on image. We are not France, Italy or Spain. But we do have know-how and great terroirs, especially for Cabernet. We need to develop the gap between \$15 and \$80.”



RECOMMENDED WINES

92 Errazuriz 2013 Max Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon (Aconcagua Valley). Oaky, with coconut and vanilla aromas alongside fast and furious spiced berry scents. Vintus LLC. **Editors’ Choice.**
abv: 14% Price: \$20

90 Caliterra 2013 Tributo Carmenère (Colchagua Valley). Ripe and creamy in feel, with wild berry and peppery flavors, this Carmenère is on the money. Seaview Imports.
abv: 14% Price: \$20

90 Santa Carolina 2013 Reserva de Familia Cabernet Sauvignon (Maipo Valley). Firm tannins provide structure, while plum, currant, spice and herbal notes finish loamy. Carolina Wine Brands USA.
abv: 13.8% Price: \$20

WORLD-CLASS REDS

When it comes to Chile's best wines, it's impossible to take price out of the equation. Among the 10 Chilean red wines rated 93 points or higher in 2015, only one, Polkura's \$40 Block g+i Syrah, retails for less than \$70.

Expand the field to 92 points and higher (23 wines), and six more wines are priced below \$70, including Errazuriz's 2013 Max Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon and Lagar de Bezana's 2013 Aluvi3n.

Wines like these Chilean high-flyers are outstanding bottlings when judged solely on their merits.

However, value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Whether a 94-point, \$135 wine like Lapostolle's Clos Apalta constitutes good value is subjective. Wines like this, along with other Chilean high-flyers, including Almaviva, Santa Rita Casa Real, Concha y Toro Don Melchor, Montes Alpha M and Viña Vik's new Bordeaux-style blend from Cachapoal, are outstanding bottlings when judged solely on their merits.

In the case of Clos Apalta, which hails from a namesake vineyard in the Colchagua Valley, its perennial success is due to a combination of factors. First and foremost, the wine comes from 95-year-old Carmenère and Cabernet Sauvignon vines planted on top of granite bedrock.

"This is the soul of Clos Apalta," says Charles de Bournet, CEO of the estate founded by his parents nearly 20 years ago.

"We can dry-farm these vines because of the exceptional conditions we have at Apalta," he says.

"At almost 100 years old, the vines have reached a level that gives layers of complexity on the nose and a unique combination of concentration yet smooth and open tannins on the palate.

"The fundamental [component] with any icon wine is the vines. Of course, our vineyard management and winemaking techniques are important as well. All the grapes are grown according to biodynamic concepts."



RECOMMENDED WINES

93 Santa Rita 2011 Casa Real (Maipo Valley). This perennially superb Cabernet is focused, intense and balanced. Palm Bay International. *Editors' Choice.* abv: 14% Price: \$85

94 Lapostolle 2012 Clos Apalta (Colchagua Valley). Coconut, charcoal, vanilla and herbs grace blackberry and cassis. Terlato Wines International. *Cellar Selection.* abv: 14.2% Price: \$135

92 Concha y Toro 2012 Don Melchor Puente Alto Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Puente Alto). Black cherry, plum and vanilla with hints of licorice and chocolate. Excelsior Wines. abv: 14.5% Price: \$120