

## Chile – a Case of Mistaken Identity

Grape growers in Chile don't know they are born. This lean lanky strip of a country is enclosed by natural barriers - sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the snow-capped Andes and protected to the north by the Atacama Desert. For a Latin American country, the economy is remarkably stable and while the culture may lack the loud flamboyance of its neighbours, an attitude of actually getting on with the job prevails. Chilean wines have quietly established a reputation for sheer drinkability, with their generous fruit flavours and rounded velvety tannins and now have a market share of around 6.3% in the UK and still growing.

### It's a Chile Wind

The style of Chilean wines owes a lot to the climate. It may only be a few hours drive over the Andes to the major vineyards in Argentina but the two countries are remarkably different. Cool ocean breezes alternate with chilly winds dropping off the snowy Andes, keeping fungal disease and most insect pests at bay. Rainfall is mostly confined to winter and days are sunny and warm, while evenings round the barbecue are distinctly nippy. This all combines to slow down ripening, so grapes can hang on the vine for 150 days or more, compared to the 100 days typical in most grape growing regions. This means extra time to build up the colours and flavours in the grapes, along with low acidity and soft, friendly, ripe tannins. This long ripening may also explain the high levels of compounds called flavonols which several studies have linked to health benefits in red wine.

### The Phylloxera Mystery

One of Chile's great claims to uniqueness is that Phylloxera has never infested the vineyards, so the wines perhaps reflect European wine as it might have been before this devastating louse munched its way through the Europe's vineyards. It's close relative of the greenfly and feeds by sucking on vine roots and killing the vine. There is no cure and the only solution is to graft onto resistant rootstocks – a slow and pricy option, whereas the Chileans are mostly free to layer or take cuttings from their own vines.

There are all sorts of theories as to why Phylloxera has not appeared in Chile, even though it's rampant just over the Andes in Argentina. The geographical barriers of mountains and desert frequently get the credit – though these have failed to stop other insect pests like the European fruit fly (and that had an ocean to cross). The widespread use of flood irrigation is another theory, as flooding was used historically in Europe to drown the beasties, but drip irrigation has made no difference. There's nothing particularly unique about Chile's soils either and Phylloxera is found elsewhere in the world in similar ground. Top candidate theory at the moment is low air humidity keeping the louse at bay – though the really honest answer is no one knows. Most of the big producers are experimenting with rootstocks, apparently for controlling yield and nematodes, but off the record, there's a big element of "just in case".

### The Great White Muddle

The Chileans have known for some time that much of what they call Sauvignon Blanc is really a lesser variety called Sauvignonasse, which some researchers believe may even be Tocai from North East Italy. This is the major reason why many Chilean so-called Sauvignons have a reputation for not actually tasting

much like the grape as we have come to know it – at best vaguely green and fresh, but prone to fading fast. It's a puzzle why such an uninteresting variety has become so significant, though it does yield generous crops. One theory suggests that Sauvignonasse is much more able to cope with water-logging (which is a hazard of the traditional flood irrigation systems). As it survived better, it was these vines which were chosen for cuttings for the next generation of plants and so on. Today there is a lot more genuine Sauvignon Blanc available and some decent wines appearing, though you should still stick to the youngest wines (2001 now and shortly 2002). Look out for the fresh grassy Santa Ines (£4.49 Tesco); the crunchy gooseberry fruit of Casablanca (£4.99 Sainsbury) and their single estate Santa Isabel (£6.49 Thresher/Wine Rack/Bottoms Up) and for a mouth-watering treat Terrunyo Sauvignon Blanc (£7.99 Thresher/Wine Rack/Bottoms Up).

## Mix up among the Merlot

As if one varietal mix up wasn't enough, it has come to light more recently that much of Chile's Merlot is actually an ancient Bordeaux variety called Carmenère. It's virtually extinct in Bordeaux as it is a rogue to grow, sets fruit very unevenly and is late to ripen (apparently there is just 1 hectare of Carmenère in a research vineyard in Bordeaux).

Carmenère has a distinctive raspberry, red pepper and soy sauce character when ripe (which sounds weird but if you taste a good one you should see what I mean) but is inclined to be lean, green and herbaceous if picked too early. It's almost certainly responsible for the personality of Chilean Merlot that has been so successful over here, with its deep colour, vivid fruit and soft velvety tannins. Official records now show around 4,700 hectares of Carmenère and 12,880 of Merlot, but unofficial estimates suggest that around 60% of the total is really Carmenère. It's still fairly safe bet that most of the Merlot you can buy is a mix of some sort and the key question for any grower is "is it Merlot Merlot?" (In the same way you have to ask for "coffee coffee", otherwise you get instant).

The challenge in the vineyard is that Merlot ripens up to 3 weeks before Carmenère and the average vineyard worker can't tell the two vines apart, let alone a harvesting machine. In a mixed vineyard there has to be a compromise between picking Merlot when jammy and over-ripe or picking Carmenère under-ripe and herbaceous. The best way of telling the vines apart is in spring, as Carmenère has red tinges to the new shoots, so vines can be labelled. Most growers are trying to separate out the two varieties completely, though this takes time. It is possible to cross graft Carmenère onto Merlot roots, but not the other way round as Carmenère has a weedy root system.

Marketing Carmenère is a challenge too, as many producers are nervous of putting this unknown name on their labels. Merlot is a much safer bet as it is so well known by consumers. A few brave souls see Carmenère as Chile's great red hope – like California's Zinfandel or South Africa's Pinotage and there are certainly more and more wines being labelled Carmenère appearing on wine store shelves. Look out for Gracia Carmenère Reserva (Co-op £5.99), Caliterra (Thresher/Wine Rack/Bottoms Up £5.99) Santa Ines and best of all (though pricey for Chile) is the gorgeous Terrunyo Carmenère (Oddbins £12.99).

As for Merlot, while Cabernet is by far the most planted red variety (covering more than 35,000 hectares), it's Merlot that has put Chile firmly on the wine map and good ones to look out for are lush rounded Cono Sur Vision Merlot Tesco £7.99 and for a special occasion try the stylish, pure black cherry fruit of Cono Sur 20 Barrels Merlot (Sainsbury £10.99). Concha y Toro Casillero Del Diablo Merlot is a real bargain with its silky, raspberry and bramble fruit (£4.99

Sainsbury, Thresher/Wine Rack/Bottoms Up, and Oddbins). Santa Rita Merlot Reserva is a rich, dark, chocolate and blackberry wine (£6.99 Majestic, Oddbins) while Errazuriz Merlot (£6.49 widely stocked) is widely regarded as the benchmark for this variety.

## Qué Syrah

Everyone knows Chile for the big 4 international hard hitters (Cab, Merlot, Sauvignon and Chardie) but there's a long list of other varieties being grown. At Errazuriz, they reckon the climate has more in common with Tuscany and Rhone than Bordeaux and are growing Sangiovese, Nebbiolo and, perhaps most successfully, Syrah.

One of the complexities of EU wine law is that non EU (or Third) countries have to register a list of permitted grape varieties and acceptable synonyms. Short sighted officialdom in Chile only registered the name Syrah, so the Chileans can't use Shiraz – even though it's accepted as the same grape variety (by virtually everyone except the French). One major supermarket buyer has just admitted that sales of a certain French wine dropped by 40% when the label was changed from Shiraz to Syrah. A lot of drinkers clearly believe that Shiraz by any other name does not taste as sweet!

Errazuriz's original intention in 1993 was to bring in Shiraz from Australia, after a trip Down Under, but plant quarantine restrictions made that impossible, so they turned to France for help. The first French cuttings were planted after two years quarantine and since then Errazuriz have sold over 1 million cuttings and young vines to other producers. As Pedro Izquierdo says "we share in Chile" – a refreshing approach. Nevertheless, this makes the oldest Syrah vines just 7 years old – so there should be a lot more potential to come as the vines get older. Look out for Errazuriz Syrah (£7.99 Safeway, Budgens, Thresher/Wine Rack, and Waitrose) and their Syrah Reserva (£9.99 Tesco).

## Green Fingered Growers

Grape growers in Chile really have things rather easy. Most years, the major problems are a little mildew (easily controlled by 2 or 3 sulphur applications) and occasional grey rot (which can be limited by canopy management and copper-based products). Other problems include red spider mite (controlled either by rather nasty chemicals or preferably by predatory mites which can be found on Avocado trees or even bought commercially) and weeds (which are often killed with Roundup, but can be tilled). It's obvious that it would be easy to go completely organic and indeed many producers are heading that way.

Carmen is one of the leaders and is farming 50 ha organically, with another 120 ha in conversion. Habitat breaks to encourage beneficial insects, mineral sprays, biodynamic compost, predatory mites to control red spider mite and home-made herbal brews to provide nutrients are all part of the armoury. Brassicas are grown as cover crops for their nematode repelling effects. Geese graze among the vines and Alpacas provide manure, but are penned in as they appear to have a taste for grapes. Managing vineyards organically involves serious ecological science and great care and attention to detail, which generally shows through in the grape quality (personally, I draw the line at anything that relies on faith, like homeopathic treatments for vines). At Carmen, they reckon it costs 10 to 20% extra to farm organically (though with 10% increase in yield), but hope to sell the wines at a premium (Carmen wines are available at Oddbins). Veramonte also have an organic block and swear by plenty of compost - they even take tea waste from a nearby instant tea factory to make it. (Try Veramonte's impressive

Primus, a blend of Carmenère, Cab and Merlot £9.99 Thresher/Wine Rack/Bottoms Up).

For those wineries not yet brave enough to go the whole way, IPM (integrated pest management) is widely talked about - in other words limiting artificial inputs to just the minimum needed to cure specific problems (a snappier name for this would really help with the marketing). According to Alexandre Marnier-Lapostolle, the real problem with going organic in Chile is attitude. She finds it is difficult for growers to understand the idea of producing lower yields for quality. At Casa Lapostolle, they get round this problem by paying their long-term growers per hectare (based on average yields over the last 10 years), instead of per kilo, so they can cut yields right back.

## Fungus Wars

Using one fungus to fight another one may sound like cannibalism, but is good example of an eco-friendly approach. This seems to be a first for Chile, at least on any commercial scale. A naturally occurring soil fungus called *Trichoderma harzianum* attacks other fungi especially *Botrytis cinerea* which causes grey rot. This fungus can be huge problem at any time of year but especially if rain falls near harvest – a significant problem in the south of the country in 2002. Errazuriz and Caliterra have both moved away from chemical fungicides and spray spores of *Trichoderma* instead.

## Chilean Waves

So where next for Chile? Her wines have a great starting point in being predominantly red; produced from consumers' favourite grapes; appealing to drink without food and still pretty good value for money. The leading producers are dynamic and constantly improving, and with a stable economy behind them, outside investment is likely to continue. They are starting to achieve international recognition for their superstar wines, which by any standard are serious contenders (Seña, Almaviva, Don Maximiano, Clos Apalta and Montes M) and this should rub off on the reputation for Chilean wines as a whole.

What Chile lacks, though, is a united marketing effort as there is no real generic representation in this country (the Chilean authorities bizarrely decided that the UK is an established market with no further need of support – though you don't see the Aussies resting on their laurels like this). Regional differences in Chile, and even within the whole South American continent, mean nothing to most wine drinkers (with the possible exception of the romantically named Casablanca), yet no one would dream of lumping say Alsace with Bordeaux. Chile also lacks any strong cultural imagery or great culinary tradition - all of which need to be tackled, if she is to build serious credibility beyond the cheap and cheerful. In the meantime keep taking the medicine – just in case all those flavonols turn out to be good for you.

© Caroline Gilby

Originally published Wine World August 2002