

Chilean value

WINE TALK

by Michael Tabone

WHICHEVER way you look at the Chilean wine industry, there is no denying that it is a huge success. Both the quality and popularity of wines from this South American country have leaped forward and today, some of the best so-called 'New World' wines originate here.

What is extremely interesting and encouraging for many wine lovers is that the Chileans achieved this huge success without the ongoing promotional 'tsunami' of other New World countries and that in the last three years or so, quality has been achieved across the full spectrum of varying price ranges and tastes. From the clean, easy and early drinking stuff to the more complex intriguing, long-lived wines, Chile is truly offering value for money.

I have a soft spot for these wines. Not only because I enjoy drinking them but also because, although the character is very 'New World' the feel of the best wines is more European than that of most other 'New World' countries.

There are a number of reasons for this. The growing practice of blending varieties and clones as well as planting sites with *terroir* in mind and restrained use of oak are just some reasons why the best Chilean wines have achieved a degree of complexity and food friendliness that I look for in wines.

The popularity of Chilean wines in Malta has also grown rapidly. It was about 10 years ago that Chilean wines started their journey to success over here when Wands introduced the wines of Vina Errazuris and P. Bonnici imported wines from the Chilean estates of Spain's Torres. A few years later they were complemented by San Pedro, Concha y Toro and Montes, respectively imported by Attard & Co, Anthony Farrugia and Cleland & Souchet.

Since May last year the demand for these wines has grown by an estimated 40 per cent; in fact both the wines from Torres (Santa Digna) and San Pedro (35 South) are now imported by the container-load.

Before I tell you about some of my favourite Chilean offerings, let me give you a brief outline of the history and geography that gave birth to these wines.

History

Chile, a long, exceptionally narrow country along almost the entire west coast of South America, is blessed with near perfect climatic and geological conditions to grow a wide range of healthy and abundant grape varieties.



Although some vine diseases exist, there is no phylloxera and no oidium. This gives the country a huge advantage in the worldwide interest in organic viticulture. Although trends are changing, fine wine drinking has largely been practised by a few rich families with most of Chile's population drinking Chile's national drink Pisco, a distilled spirit from the red grape variety Pais, or rustic wines also from the same variety.

Since the 1960s, wine consumption in Chile has dropped considerably and the success of the modern Chilean wine industry is based on exports (65 per cent of production is exported).

The first wine vines were planted by the Spanish conquistadores in the 16th century mainly so that Christians could celebrate the Eucharist. Within a few years many vineyards were planted but in the 17th century, under pressure from Spanish winemakers, Spain attempted to ban new plantings to protect its wine exports to South America. This ban had very little success. Indeed the Chilean governor encouraged more plantings and by the 18th century, Chile had acquired a reputation for cheap and quaffable wine, much to the dismay of Spanish wine producers.

Viticulture and methods of vinification were rather primitive and it had to be a Frenchman, Claudio Gay, who brought Chilean viticulture into the modern era. In the 1830s he persuaded the government to set up an experimental botanic nursery for, among other plants, European vines. This meant that when oidium and phylloxera ravaged European vineyards, Chile had a supply of healthy vines from which a modern wine industry could be spurred.

Now independent of Spain, rich Chileans began to travel to Europe, especially France from where they imported the culture for fine wine. Owing a vineyard gained social standing. Many vineyards were planted, some by French people escaping from phylloxera in France.

Chile's wine industry flourished right up till the political and economic upheavals of the Pinochet era (1973-89). Heavy taxes were imposed on wine, which resulted in low demand, lower prices and eventually the ripping up of vines which included some of the best sited. The return of free market economics and political stability in the late 1980s brought about new investments and a change to export-oriented wines.

Geography and climate

In the wine regions, Chile is only 120 km wide at most, so the climate is influenced by the very high Andes to the east and the Pacific to the west. This explains why although the wine regions are between 32s and 38s latitudes the climate is somewhat cooler.

Most of Chile's wines come from the central valley which has a Mediterranean climate with little or no rainfall during the growing season. It has a fairly regular, warm growing season but benefits from a huge variation between day and night temperatures with cold air descending from the mountains and cool breezes from the sea. This facilitates the build-up of aromas, flavours and acidity in the grapes. Most Chilean vineyards are irrigated with snow melt from the Andes.

Aconcagua is Chile's most northerly wine region and Santiago is situated here. The Aconcagua valley is Chile's hottest and driest where some good red wine is produced. Nearer the coast is Casablanca, one of the coolest sub-regions. This is right in the Pacific's icy Humboldt current which gives very cool conditions where spring frosts are a big problem. It is relatively a new area. The first plantings were in the 1980s, mostly dedicated to white grapes.

The Southern Region includes Bio-Bio. The Andes here are quite low, so not much protection is given. There is more rainfall and the climate is generally cooler.

Although hillside plantings are on the increase, most of Chile's vineyards are planted on flat, fertile land. Alluvial soils predominate in the Aconcagua and are also found in Maipo further south.

Main grape varieties

Chile is a red wine country with around 85,000 hectares planted with red varieties as opposed to 25,000 with white. The most planted grape variety is the ordinary Pais, largely used for distillation into Pisco or vinified into rustic country wines.

Cabernet Sauvignon is the most planted classic variety with Merlot and Syrah gaining in popularity.

Malbec, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Carmenere and Zinfandel are also found. Some of the Merlot planted is now known to be a strain of Carmenere, an old Bordeaux variety. Carmenere ripens much later than Merlot and can give over-herbaceous flavours if handled wrongly. Older vineyards remain mixed between the two but newer ones have separate plantings.

The most planted white variety is Chardonnay, with Sauvignon a close second. Even here there is a bit of confusion with some 'Sauvignon' plantings actually being strains of the lesser Sauvignon vert or Sauvignonasse. Semillon, Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Viognier are also found.

Chile has recently established an appellation system. As already established there are 3 main regions which are from north to south. The Aconcagua region, the Central Valley region, which is the most important, and the Southern region. There are two unimportant regions (Atacama and Coquimbo) in the north. All these are further divided into sub-regions and zones. Here are the most important.

Casablanca - Very cool area where white wines dominate. Chardonnay does very well. Concha y Toro have a lot of vineyards here. Some interesting Pinot Noir.

Maipo - This is Chile's most famous region and one of the smallest. Both reds and whites are produced mainly from Cabernet Sauvignon and Semillon. Sauvignon is popular too.

Rapel - This has two sub-zones: Cachapoal and the more important Colchagua. Red grapes pre dominate here with Cabernet Sauvignon making particularly full flavoured wine. It is a warm region and a number of important wineries are here. They include Los Vascos which is partly owned by Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, Santa Rita, and Montes.

Maule - This includes Curico and Lontue amongst others. This is a cool and cloudy region. Pais is dominant in the rain fed areas but Semillon, Sauvignon and Cabernet Sauvignon are very important. Curico shot to fame when Torres purchased a huge tract of land in 1979. Also the home of San Pedro (35 South)

Bio-Bio - The most southerly and most extensive wine region. Pais is widely planted but the area is gaining a lot of attention from foreign investors as prices for land are still quite cheap.

Recommended wines

Torres (Paolo Bonnici Ltd) - Torres were one of the first international companies to recognize the potential of Chile when in 1979 they bought an estate in the Curico valley. The basic range of Santa Digna especially the Sauvignon Blanc offers good varietal flavours and value. Don Miguel Gewurztraminer/Riesling is a spicy offering with a different approach to these varietal's homelands, Alsace and Germany.

At the very top there are two wines. Manso de Velasco is an aromatic and fruity Cabernet Sauvignon with very ripe tannins whilst Cordillera comes from very old, high altitude Carinena blended with Syrah and Merlot. Dense and spicy with a smokey touch. Both excellent value.

San Pedro (Attard & Co) - This is one of the largest wineries in South America with 2500 Hectares. A number of wines are produced grouped into four or five ranges, nearly all with varietal labelling. At the basic level there is the Gato Negro and 35 South ranges. The latter enjoying huge popularity, especially the Sauvignon Blanc.

The 'Castello de Molina' and '1865' offer better quality, especially the '1865 Carmenere'. This is a rich spicy, oaky wine with a lot of tannins that will please the lovers of concentrated wines. The place of honour in San Pedro's wines is reserved for 'Cabo de Hornos'. This is intense, ripe Cabernet Sauvignon with rich dark fruits. A huge body with intense coffee and well integrated oaky flavours.

Concha y Toro (Anthony Farrugia & Co) - With vineyards all over Chile, as with other Chilean giants, these produce a number of ranges. Casillero del Diablo offers good, easy drinking varietals. Terrunyo is a range with specific sites. Try the Chardonnay. An interesting range is Trio. These are wines made from blends of three varieties or three vineyards. Of particular interest in the one labelled Sauvignon Blanc from three sites. Don Melchor is a classy Cabernet Sauvignon. Almaviva is the expensive, Bordeaux-style wine which is made in collaboration with the Rothschilds of France

Errazuris (Wands Ltd) - This is the historic winery which dates back to the early 19th century and one of the pioneers in bringing Chilean wines to the world's attention. At the top of the range, Don Maximiliano is a beautiful wine that every wine lover should experience. It is not terribly expensive, around Lm15, but offers truly great flavours. The 1998 is quite mature and ready to drink. It is hugely complex and a very good drink. At the more down to earth prices there is a range of varietals. The Syrah is particularly interesting showing the potential for this variety in Chile.

In partnership with the Mondavis of California they also own Caliterra. At the basic level a number of inexpensive, varietal wines are produced. The Malbec and Carmenere are both solid, easy drinking wines whilst the very expensive 'Sena' is the flagship of the joint venture. This is a rather majestic blend of Cab Sauv/Merlot and Carmenere. Worth trying.

Montes (Cleland & Souchet) - A fine selection of wines. Very popular in the UK and the USA. At the top they have the Alpha range.

Casa Lapostolle - A fine, expensive range of wines under the baton of the world's most famous flying winemaker, Michel Rolland. Interestingly, Rolland's contract with Lapostolle prohibits him from working for any other Chilean bodega. The Merlot-based Clos Apalta is the jewel in the crown.

Vina Aquitania - This is a very interesting project which dates back to 1984. It is owned by Bruno Prats (Cos D'Estournell), Paul Pontallier (Margaux), Felipe de Solminihac (Chilean oenologist) and Mr de Montgolfier from Champagne. Four wines are produced. Sol de Sol is an elegant Chardonnay grown in Traiguén, which is the southern most vineyard in Chile. Paul Bruno is a Cab Sauv/Carmenere blend while Lazuli and Agapanto are Cab Sauv. The reds come from Maipo.

There are a number of other interesting wines. Vina Organica Emiliana by Bodega Coyam is a blend of Carmenere, Syrah, Cab Sauv, Merlot and Mourvedre and vinified by Alvaro Espinosa. In a recent tasting of 500 Chilean wines, the 2001 vintage was acknowledged as the best in the show. Cheval des Andes is owned and managed by the team at Cheval Blanc in Bordeaux. Also look out for Terra Mater and Vina Carmen.

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