

Chile

9 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Reliable, keenly- priced reds and whites, mainly from well- known international varieties.

Main grapes: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Carmenère (red); Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay (white).

The Old World envies Chile for its low costs, lack of vine pests and diseases and its dependably dry, warm summers. Much of the New World, and Australia in particular, envies its plentiful and regular supply of water from the melted snow of the Andes. But for much of the 20th century, winemakers would not have been tempted to join their Chilean counterparts in what was effectively a wine cultural vacuum. The revolution in the last two decades has been swift and remarkable.

Chile's golden age was the end of the 19th century, when the rest of the wine world had been crippled by downy mildew and [phyloxera](#) but this isolated wine producer could supply almost limitless quantities of healthy, deep- coloured wine, made from familiar vinifera vines that had been imported into Chile earlier in the nineteenth century. The world's most prosperous wine industry was then owned by just 10 Chilean families, many of them still dominant players today. For the next hundred years there were very few changes in the vineyards and cellars of Chile but the return of democracy fuelled extraordinary economic growth throughout Chile in the early 1990s, including a real determination to drag the Chilean wine industry into the modern world.

The vast old *rauli* (evergreen beech) vats have been replaced by oak barriques imported from the US and France. Refrigeration has been installed both for fermentation and maturation. The lazy hazardous technique of irrigation by simply flooding a vineyard and hoping the water will drain down specially dug channels and water each vine equally has been replaced by the use of drip irrigation systems which administer set amounts of water to individual plants. New, cooler wine regions that are more difficult to work than the traditional areas in the hot Central Valley are being developed and are starting to produce wines that are more interesting and have much better balance and greater finesse.

There is still a thriving fruit industry and thousands of acres of mainly Moscatel grapes dedicated to the production of the local spirit pisco, but Chile's dedicated native viticulturists and winemakers, plus outsiders such as the Rothschilds of Bordeaux's Ch Lafite (Los Vascos), Marnier Lapostolle of Grand Marnier fame (Casa Lapostolle) and Miguel Torres from Spain (the first to import oak barrels into Chile) are paying much more attention to matching grape variety to location and developing cooler areas influenced by breezes from the icy Pacific in the west or by the elevation of the Andes in the east. The geography and local climates of Chile's wine regions are arguably determined to a greater extent by proximity to the mountains and ocean influence than by latitude. Fine wine is made as far north as Elqui and as far south as Malleco, closer to the south pole than Bio Bio. As in California, gaps in the coastal range can be crucial.

Chile's brake on progress for much of the 20th century, apart from a lack of investment, was the gap between grape growers and wine producers. Almost all grapes were grown by gentleman farmers who knew very little about wine and cared even less. By not having to use phyloxera- resistant rootstocks, Chileans were denied this tool for controlling excessively vigorous vines and some soil pests. In the 1970s and 1980s, domestic consumption declined, about half of Chile's vineyards were pulled up and producers began to switch their attention to the export market. By the mid 1990s, most exporting wineries were planting heavily or occasionally buying vineyards in order to be more self- sufficient in terms of grape supply, and the quality of fruit has improved almost beyond recognition. This, coupled with investment in modern equipment, has catapulted Chile into a strong position in markets such as those of the UK and Germany, especially on the shelves of price- conscious supermarkets.

Chile's most important red wine variety by far is Cabernet Sauvignon, which accounts for more than a third of all vines planted. Pais, grown mainly in the unirrigated south, ends up in cheap cartons sold on the local market. Merlot still has a very strong presence but less so than before the formal identification in 1994 of the old Bordeaux variety Carmenère. For many years no distinction was made between the two varieties and many vineyards had mixed plantings. A growing pride in what many refer to as Chile's signature variety has resulted in many more high- quality wines labelled Carmenère or comprising Carmenère blends. Syrah represents less than three per cent of the total vineyard area but is growing in stature. Chile's red wines used to be plagued by unripe, green flavours but control of yields and better site selection has to a large extent resolved this, so that most wines that leave the country are full of exuberant fruit, as long as they are not overoaked. Some producers are dedicating considerable energy to Pinot Noir, especially in the cooler parts of Bio Bio in the south and Leyda in the north.

Vine identification has also been important for white varieties. Much of what was once sold as Sauvignon Blanc was in fact Sauvignonasse (also known as Sauvignon Vert or Tocai Friulano). However, thanks to extensive recent plantings of genuine Sauvignon Blanc, particularly in the cooler valleys in the north such as Casablanca, Chile has gained a reputation for this good- value renditions of crisp, zesty variety, and it has overtaken Chardonnay in terms of area under vine. Other aromatic varieties such as Riesling, Viognier and Gewürztraminer are starting to perform well on cooler sites.

Chile has done a good job in promoting its recently created but straightforward appellation system based on the names of the east- west valleys, though it is difficult to generalise about individual valleys since the soils and climate can vary so much within the same valley, even though the country is so narrow. Producers are working hard to identify new and more specific subregions within these valleys.

The **Valle del Maipo** is the most famous Chilean wine region even though it nowhere near the biggest, at least partly because it is so close to Santiago, Chile's capital and centre of wealth and home to many of the most powerful companies such as Concha y Toro and Santa Rita. Reds dominate in this hot spot and the best wines, such as Almaviva, Aurea Domus, Casa Real (Santa Rita) and Viñedo Chadwick come from the Maipo Alto region, higher up in the Andean foothills, which seems to impart a minty or eucalyptus flavour to the reds.

North of Santiago is the broad **Valle de Aconcagua**, home to Errazuriz. Newer plantings tend to be up into the hillsides or towards the coast. North and east of Santiago are the valleys that have been most successful in the last 10 years for Sauvignon Blanc, other aromatic whites and Pinot Noir: **Casablanca**, **Leyda**, **San Antonio**, **Limari** and, furthest north and extremely narrow, **Elqui**, which is also producing some very good Syrah. All these areas are strongly influenced by the cool ocean breezes and fogs and have attracted ambitious pioneers such as Amayna, Casa Marin, de Martino and Matetic. Some of the very big companies such as Concha y Toro have vineyards here too.

Red wines tend to flourish in the valleys south of Santiago, in **Cachapoal**, home to some very fine Cabernet and Syrah, particularly in the subregion of Apalta, and **Colchagua**, which is recognised for its superior Merlot. Blends from these two regions are usually labelled **Rapel**, though this is becoming less common as producers focus more and more closely on regional characteristics.

Continuing south, the **Valle de Curicó** is much warmer and wetter and was where Torres chose to build his winery in 1979. The **Valle del Maule** is Chile's oldest wine region. After a period of relative neglect, it is being rehabilitated, with some parcels of very old vines producing intense, ageworthy red blends, often based on Merlot and/ or Cabernet.

The **Itata**, **Bio Bio** and **Malleco** valleys are still dominated by Pais and Moscatel in the flatter and warmer central stretches but there is currently considerable research and experimentation by the Viña Gracia, Viña Porta and Concha y Toro, among others, focusing on aromatic white varieties such as Riesling and Gewürztraminer as well as with Pinot Noir. Viña Aquitania has had notable success with its Sol de Sol Chardonnay in Malleco, encouraging producers to invest further south.

Some favourite producers: Almaviva, Altaír, Amayna, Anakena, Antiyal, Casa Lapostolle, Casa Marin, Concha y Toro, de Martino, Errazuriz, Faleria, Gillmore, Haras de Pirque, Loma Larga, Matetic, Montes, Pérez Cruz, Veramonte, Viña Leyda, VOE (Viñedos Organicos Emiliana).

See [Wines of Chile](#) for more information on wine in this region.