

Chile - some interesting midpriced wines at last

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At long last Chilean producers are plugging the gap between their reliable, if rather boring, wines at the basic end of the market and the vanity bottlings at the top that can seem overpriced at tens of dollars/ pounds a bottle. And some of the wines Chile is now producing to retail at between £6 and £12 (US \$10 - US \$20) are really excellent.

Chile's strength is in making succulent reds from Bordeaux grape varieties Cabernet, Merlot and its own speciality Carmenère, long confused with Merlot, that was imported from Bordeaux in the 19th century but is now virtually extinct in France. Carmenère has to be fully ripe to be delicious (cool nights are useful to prolong the ripening season). It can easily taste too vegetal if not. But wines such as Casa Lapostolle's flagship Clos Apalta suggest that even this grape variety is capable of ripening to glorious sumptuousness in Chile's enviably dependable climate.

It is easy to see why so many European winemakers have flocked to this long, narrow country with, thanks to limitless meltwater from the Andes and minimal vine pests and diseases, hardly any viticultural disadvantages.

What has happened in the last few years however has been that this vine paradise has been harnessed to the human will to make even better quality wine. This has meant irrigating much more sparsely to limit yields and concentrate flavours. Vines have increasingly been planted on gentle slopes and in cooler regions rather than the fertile Central Valley floor to coax riper grapes and more interesting wines from them. An ever-widening range of grape varieties is also now being planted, with much more attention paid to matching variety to specific location. Organic wine production is increasing fast in this ideal climate, and Chile's well-trained winemakers are very much more skilled in the use of oak than they were only a few years ago.

All in all then, Chile is of increasing interest not just to bargain hunters but to serious wine fanatics, especially vintages after 1998, generally rather disappointing thanks to El Niño.

These are some of my current favourite Chilean wines that are eloquently filling the quality gap and seem great value to me, especially when compared with many of the French archetypes. They are listed in approximate ascending order of price.

See also my detailed tasting notes on more than 30 [top wines from Chile](#) in purple pages.

Concha y Toro Casillero del Diablo Syrah 2000 Rapel

Almost caricature ripeness but a nice, dry finish to a red that is just as Syrah-like as many wines twice to three times its price.

£4.99 Oddbins, Banfi Vintners of NY (tel 516 626 9200)

Gracia Chardonnay Reserva Ausente 1999 Bío- Bío

Ground-breaking cool-climate Chardonnay from way down south. Delicate, satin-textured, barrel-fermented. Great value. It must have been awfully tart in 2000 though.

£5.99 Waitrose

Casa Silva Carmenère Reserva 2000

Beautifully balanced, supple wine from this dynamic winery's new Los Lingues vineyards. Its Quinta Generacion 2000 barrel-fermented white blend (at £132.54 a dozen) is also very good, as is the marvellously opulent 2000 red.

£82.49 a dozen Jackson Nugent of London, SW19 (tel 020 8947 9722, web www.jnv.co.uk), VindiVino of Chicago (tel 773 334 6700)

Terrunyo Sauvignon Blanc 2001 Casablanca

Dry and minerally - quite a departure for Chilean Sauvignon.

£7.50 The Wine Society of Stevenage (tel 01438 761167, web www.thewinesociety.com), £7.99 Oddbins, Banfi Vintners of NY (tel 516 626 9200)

Marques de Casa Concha Cabernet Sauvignon 1999 Maipo

Stunningly good value ripe Cabernet from Chile's Médoc. The Merlot 1999 and Chardonnay 2000 (£7.99 Bottoms Up and Wine Rack) are great buys too.

£7.70 Tanners of Shrewsbury (tel 01743 234500, web www.tanners-wines.co.uk), Banfi Vintners of NY (tel 516 626 9200)

Santa Rita Medalla Real Cabernet Sauvignon 1999 Maipo

Appalling label (it looks as though it belongs on a bottle half the price) but excellent, well-mannered ripe claret.

£8.99 Oddbins, Vineyard Brands of Birmingham, Alabama (tel 205 980 8802)

Montes Alpha Cabernet Sauvignon 1999 Apalta

Lovely silky texture and ripe tannins. Could be drunk any time over the next three years.

£9.99 Oddbins end June, tesco.com, and Majestic (£8.99 if two bottles bought)

Haras Character Cabernet Sauvignon 2000 Maipo

Very serious, distinctive wine from a new producer who has turned from racehorses to wine. Made by Alvaro Espinoza, late of Carmen and now at his own organic Antiyal.

£10.99 Oddbins soon

Tanao Blanco 2001 Casa Lapostolle

Unusually interesting, tangy, lightly barrel-aged blend of Apalta Semillon, Casablanca Chardonnay and Cachapoal Sauvignon Blanc. Great for drinking with food.

About £11 from July in top London department stores and restaurants, Schieffelin & Somerset of NY (tel 212 251 8200)

Cono Sur 20 Barrels Pinot Noir 2000

Better clones of Pinot, new open-topped fermenters and some input from Burgundy are seriously upgrading quality at this southern offshoot of Concha y Toro. There is real structure in this blend of fruit from Chimbarongo and Bío Bío, and refreshing acidity. Look out too for the exceptional 20 Barrels Cabernet 2001.

£11.99 The Wine Society, and Majestic who are selling it at £10.99 until September.

Terrunyo Carmenère 1999 Rapel

A particularly fine, fully ripe example of this grape with quite enough structure to see it through many a year of drinking pleasure. The Terrunyo Cabernet 1999 is also extremely well-made.

£11.95 The Wine Society of Stevenage, £12.99 Oddbins

Cuvée Alexandre Merlot 1999 Casa Lapostolle

This voluptuary from Colchagua is now a Chilean classic that is utterly hedonistic and has never been ridiculously overpriced. The massive 1999 tastes so full and round it almost slithers over the palate, yet the 1997 is still delicious. The Cuvée Alexandre Cabernet Sauvignon 1999 is also very flattering and should drink well for the next five years. A vertical tasting of both revealed that the 2000s, to be shipped later this year, are even better.

