

Chilean wine comes of age

13 Feb 2004 by JR

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The single event that conferred international respectability on California wine was a wine tasting in Paris in 1976 at which well-versed French oenophiles, at that stage inexperienced in these matters, gave higher marks to some California wines than to their own most revered burgundies and bordeaux.

One enterprising Chilean wine producer, Eduardo Chadwick of Viña Errázuriz, has managed to organise a similar evolutionary milestone for the Chilean wine industry - or at least for his own wines.

In Berlin last month, 36 respected European wine tasters, including Steven Spurrier who organised the Paris event in 1976, were presented with 16 (very young) top Cabernets from Chile, Bordeaux and Italy and managed to award the top two places to Viñedo Chadwick 2000 and the Mondavi joint venture Seña 2000, both made by Errázuriz, ahead of Châteaux Lafite, Latour and Margaux from both 2000 and 2001 vintages.

(Bordeaux enthusiasts may be interested to know that the two best-performing French wines were Lafite 2000 and then Margaux 2001. General wine enthusiasts may be interested to know that I have subsequently tasted the **Viñedo Chadwick 2000** and found it well made but very sweet and heady.)

I suspect that if non-Errázuriz wines had been included, notably the joint venture between Concha y Toro and Mouton-Rothschild Almaviva, Chile might have performed even better at what will doubtless come to be known in the history of Chilean wine as 'the Berlin tasting' - which could hardly have happened at a better time.

Chileans have doubled their total vineyard area since 1995 and have one of the world's more dramatic imbalances between production and domestic consumption of wine. Furthermore, only 55 per cent of wine exported from Chile leaves the country in anything as smart as a bottle. To survive, the wine industry really, really needs to export, to polish its image, and to shrink the proportion of wine shipped in bulk.

Since Britain is only just behind the US as Chile's most important market for wine, and has the most obvious potential for growth, Chileans are finally making a serious generic investment in the UK. It is no coincidence that the man chosen as UK Director of Wines of Chile spent the last 13 years helping to drive the Australian wine juggernaut to number one position in Britain.

One of the first things he did was convince the Chileans to hold a serious wine judging along the lines of Australia's famous wine shows. Accordingly I found myself with eight fellow judges, only three of them Chilean, in Santiago at the end of last year, trawling through hundreds of entries from almost all commercially significant bodegas, in the first-ever Wines of Chile Awards.

I must confess that I approached the task expecting to be thoroughly bored by a succession of identically uninspiring Merlots and Cabernets, Chile having earned itself a reputation as provider of reliable but hardly exciting bargain reds. The organisers of the Awards tactfully spared us any wine retailing at under £4.99 however - in fact entries were strictly limited to those retailing in the UK at between £4.99 and £15 (no Viñedo Chadwick or Almaviva then), and each class was split into two price categories, under £7 and £7-15.

When we got down to it, however, we judges were pleasantly surprised by the variety of styles and flavours available. These were my main conclusions.

- Chile's strongest suit is the quality and vivacity of her **Cabernet Sauvignon**, all bursting with vibrant life and fruit, the sort of wines that should send a tremor down many a spine in Bordeaux.

- **Over-oaking** or poor quality oak is a common problem. We often preferred wines in the cheaper category of reds, for example, which seemed to have been made from much the same fruit as those in the more expensive category but had not been smothered by aggressive oak tannins or the green notes of oak that has not been properly seasoned. This was especially true of Cabernets and Syrahs.

- I was told by my fellow judges that **Merlot** was by far the most disappointing category and that the few wines that showed any spark tasted as though they were not Merlot at all but the more aromatic, angular old Bordeaux grape Carmenère which was for long mistaken for Merlot in Chile. Since so few of the flights I was called on to judge were Merlots, I cannot comment on this but it would certainly fit with my general experience that Chilean Merlot suffers particularly from over-production and can lack the structure and refreshment factor of Chilean Cabernet.

- There were far more **Syrahs** than I was expecting, 32 in all, of which a very creditable two won a gold medal, both of them in the cheaper category.

- **Red blends** constituted another promising if extremely diverse category - in fact the Wine of the Show, VOE's Coyam 2001, turned out to be a blend of Carmenère with Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet.

- This winning wine, which I saw on the wine list of the Century Club on Shaftesbury Avenue in London for just £21.50 recently, is also **organic**. Chileans must be mad not to be making more of this potential trump card. They enjoy an ideal climate for viticulture with little rain, few fungal diseases but ample (for the moment) irrigation water from the Andes and usefully cool nights. New Zealand may play the green card but Chile should really use it.

- Chile is making increasing quantities of a wine style that barely exists anywhere else in the world - affordable and appetising **Pinot Noir** - and not just from the relatively cool Casablanca Valley. Wines from Leyda, San Antonio, Chimbarongo and Rancagua also showed promise.

- Slowly, slowly, Chile is offering us **wider choice** than just Cabernet, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. We tasted convincing examples of Viognier, Riesling, Malbec, a Carignan better than most in the Languedoc and a Zinfandel better than the California average.

- Although the Chilean wine industry has in the past tended to be dominated by a handful of families dominant in other areas of commerce in Chile, there is now a rash of new investment, **new names** and even new wine regions. Of these, particularly impressive were the brand new Tabalí in fog-cooled Limarí, hundreds of kilometres north of Santiago, a joint venture between San Pedro de Chile and Guillermo Luksic which managed to win two out of the 11 available trophies with its Chardonnay Reserve 2003 and Reserve Shiraz 2002. Another fine newcomer is Chocalán founded by the Toro family more famous for crystal in Chile in the coastal range 65 km west of Santiago near Melipilla. Their baby Bordeaux blend Viña Chocalán 2003 made by a Chilean who has also worked in St-Emilion, managed to wrest the Cabernet trophy from scores of long-established bodegas. Ventisquero, founded only in 1998 by businessman Gonzalo Vial, is another newcomer to have walked off with a trophy, for its Yali Sauvignon Blanc Reserve 2003 from Casablanca Valley in this case.

- **White wines** still lag some way behind reds in Chile. They will presumably start to catch up significantly as newer plantings from cooler areas such as Bío-Bío and San Antonio come on stream but white wines are in general less forgiving of Chile's besetting sin, yields that are too high, often because of over-enthusiastic irrigation. This is particularly true of wines made from bought-in grapes, i.e. the vast majority.

- The forward-looking big companies such as Concha y Toro have been laying plans to depend less and less on bought-in grapes, with the result that **grape prices** in Chile have been falling significantly. The quality gap between Chile's best and her everyday wines is likely to widen over the next few years - but as a supplier of serious wine, and serious value in the £5-10 bracket, she clearly should not be ignored.

For specific recommended wines, see [purple pages](#).

