Alta Tierra Carmen□re 2004 Vi□a Falernia, Elqui, Chile

27 Sep 2005 by JR

Is this name long enough for you? It's certainly a wine with quite a story to tell so much to communicate. It is made in Chile's northernmost winery just 30 degrees south of the equator (same latitude as Cairo) on the edge of the Atacama Desert. Until recently this region, Elqui, grew grapes principally for pisco, Chile's great gift to the drinking world, the Moscato-based clear spirit that makes unparalleled sours when diluted with the juice of Chilean citrus. But grape grower Aldo Olivier, with his cousin Giorgio Flessati who lives near Verona and makes wine in Trento, saw there was exciting potential for table wines here. They set up Viña Falernia (good Roman name) in 1995.

It's even further north than Limari where Francisco de Aguirre and Viña Tabali have had such success, and yet manages to grow interesting fruit thanks to the cool air that descends from the Andes every night to reduce average overnight temperatures to 12 to 14 deg C when daytime temperatures are closer to 30 deg C. One vineyard is at 350 m but another, newer one is closer to 2000 m altitude which should inject some very different flavours. Their early releases, notably an inexpensive **Viña Falernia Pedro Ximenez/Sauvignon Blanc** blend, were well received in northern Europe and now they have some superior wines, the Alta Tierra range, to show us. It would be logical to assume these are all from the new high-altitude vineyard and I'm trying to confirm this. (Perhaps our well-versed Santiago correspondent Max Eyzaguirre will add some more background.)

Certainly this **Alta Tierre Carmenère 2004** was a fascinating wine and shows that I am not entirely blinkered against high-alcohol wines. At 15.4 per cent, it's a sort of Chilean Amarone, with a little dried grape *ripasso* element in it, a technique with which Flassati is very familiar from back home in the Veneto. (Long-term visitors to this site may see the parallels with **Masi Passo Doble 1999 Tupungato**, a wine of the week from Argentina a couple of years ago. This techniques adds much-needed richness to Chile's signature grape variety Carmenère which can be a bit angular (and shows purple pager Carol Horton that indeed there is life after 2002 for those who like Chilean Merlot and Carmenère). What I liked about this wine was its combination of intensity and balance – it's truly refreshing for all its sweetness and body and would make a great wine to sip with a hard cheese such as good old Montgomery cheddar, or a well-aged parmesan.

So far I have been able to track this wine down only via the UK mail order giant Laithwaites (0870 1600 524, product code 37465) at just £7.99, despite the fact that their **Alta Tierra Syrah 2002** (which they spell Sirah on www.falernia.com) won Best in Show at the second annual Wines of Chile Awards last December. Click here for a list of all the award winners, a list which does indeed confirms this achievement. (It is not always the case that wineries' website boasts bear as close a relationship to reality.)

I haven't tasted this Syrah but was very taken by the admirably dense and true less expensive **Viña Falernia Syrah 2004** which Laithwaites should be selling soon. They are about to offer the Alta Tierra Syrah 2004 at £7.39. Don't ask me what has happened to the 2003s.

I'm sorry I can't find any stockists of this particular wine in the US although I'm told that Empson imports some other wines from this producer's range. I maybe wrong but I get the impression that, despite the best efforts of the estimable *Wine & Spirits* magazine which publishes many fascinating articles about the current Chilean wine scene, the American market is better for cheap and cheerful Chilean wines than the really interesting ones. Please prove me wrong.