

Discover Chile

Chilean winemakers produce world-class wines

While in 1990 Chile drank more than ninety per cent of its own wine, today more than sixty per cent of Chilean wine is being exported. The boom in exports has been the result of a massive increase in the national vineyard area, which has doubled from 54,000 hectares in the early 1990s to 108,000 hectares today. The vast majority of Chile's grapes are grown in the central valley just to the north of Santiago, extending some 400 kilometres to the south. Chile, blessed with abundant sunshine and cool nights, offers an ideal climate for grape growing.

Chile's fine-wine history began in the mid nineteenth century as landowners, rich from the spoils of mining, began to travel. Their return souvenirs included vine cuttings from Europe—Bordeaux in particular. This explains the widespread presence of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Carmenere, and Sauvignon Blanc among others. Chile is predominantly a red-wine-producing country—seventy-six per cent of the vineyard area is planted with red vines.

Cabernet Sauvignon is Chile's favourite grape—it occupies thirty-six per cent of the total vineyard, while Merlot totals thirteen per cent, Chardonnay seven per cent, followed by Sauvignon Blanc with six per cent, and Carmenere at five per cent. In less than a decade, Carmenere has gone from being an unknown to a rising star, both as a blending component and on its own. When, in the 1990s, worldwide interest in Merlot was rising, Chilean winemakers began to notice that some of what they thought was Merlot didn't behave or taste like Merlot. A closer inspection revealed that what the Chilean wine industry had been promoting as distinctive "Chilean Merlot" was, in fact, Carmenere. The first commercial Carmenere became available in 1996; since then, Carmenere has become Chile's favourite son. Syrah, at a mere three per cent, is a minority grape in Chile, but it is being grown with some success—notably by Vine Montes, which first planted it in the early 1990s.

The Casablanca valley is Chile's leading white-wine-growing region, as its cool climate is well suited for white wine grapes. Developed as the great hope for Chilean Chardonnay, Casablanca valley is now demonstrating that it can also produce world-class Sauvignon Blanc, which has risen to the fore recently as Chile's most exciting white variety. Some stunning Sauvignon



Blanc wines are produced not only in Casablanca but also in the new regions of San Antonio and Limari.

Where next for Chile? Quality modern wine production in Chile is a mere fifteen years old. The improvement of Chile's wines is due in large part to wineries that expanded their vineyard bases in the mid 1990s while making a serious financial commitment—introducing high-tech equipment into the winery and modern techniques into the vineyards. Many wineries developed hillside vineyard sites—producing a high-end cuvée (hillside vineyards' lower-yielding sites generally produce better fruit). Across the country, Chilean winemakers are rising to the challenge of learning more about the regions they've already planted and continue their search for new distinctive terroirs. There's a real buzz in the industry as winemakers realize this is just the beginning. —Peter Blattmann

A regular contributing writer to Calgary Living magazine, Peter's Blattmann's full-time duties include conducting gastronomic tours of renowned culinary centers and famous wine regions throughout the world. More information on these pursuits can be found at his website: www.gourmet-experience.com

Cellar Notes

Feature Bottle

Viña Almadiva 2001
CSPC 702988, \$140 GST included

This joint venture between Baron Philippe Rothschild (Château Mouton Rothschild) and Concha y Toro is based at El Tocornal estate. It is one of the most prestigious vineyards of the Maipo valley and is a mecca for all admirers of Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon. Loaded with complex aromas of currant, chocolate, tobacco, and minerals, the rich texture of this powerful vintage is embedded in mature tannins on the harmonious long-lasting finish.

Keep for +/- six years.

Notable Whites

Santa Rita Medalla Sauvignon Blanc 2004
CSPC 211615 \$19

Miguel Torres Maquehua Chardonnay 2003
CSPC 715751 \$22

Notable Reds

Montes Alpha Syrah 2003
CSPC 603548 \$22

Casa Lapostolle Cuvée Alexandre Merlot 2004
CSPC 459206 \$36

Carmen Carmenere 2004
CSPC 638536 \$15