

VIRTUOSO LIFE

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10 trips that make
a difference
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Seat at the Bar

Carménère Country

This Chilean wine region is ripe for exploration.

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Terrace house:
Clos Apalta.

THE STORY OF CHILE'S MOST FAMOUS grape varietal is a classic tale of duped-by-the-doppelgänger. For more than a century, Chilean farmers believed the distinctive ink-black grapes with green pepper aromas growing in their vineyards were merlot, or *merlot chileno* in Spanish.

Then, in 1991, a visiting French ampelographer (grapevine botanist) discovered that the “merlot” was actually carmenère, a near-extinct grape imported from Bordeaux in the nineteenth century. The wine world was stunned – was this really a long-lost varietal?

Chilean winemakers embraced the rare grape, seeing its reappearance as an opportunity rather than a marketing conundrum. And, as time passed and the learning curve shortened on proper growing and harvesting techniques, the wine's quality improved, balancing the bold vegetal notes typical of a carmenère with more-nuanced, fruit-forward notes. Two decades on, says Rodrigo Soto, winemaker for Neyen and three other Chilean wineries, the drinking public is ready for it: “It coincides with a market that is curious about obscure varieties, that is supportive of native or unique varieties associated with specific regions.”

Today, the varietal is a source of national pride: Chile is at the forefront of global carmenère production, turning it out as a single varietal or as part of a blend, such as cabernet sauvignon, syrah, or malbec. On the world stage, carmenères are elbowing Argentine malbecs off menus and shelves as sommeliers and wine-shop owners look for ways to keep savvy customers stimulated. To boot, it's still a relatively budget-conscious pour.

Although quality carmenère is available in the States, Chileans keep much of the good stuff for themselves. So consider a trip to the source: The Colchagua Valley, located in the center of the country roughly a two-and-a-half-hour drive south of Santiago and bordering the city of Santa Cruz, has textbook growing conditions for red grape varietals. There are Pacific Ocean breezes from the west, the protective Andes Mountains to the east, fresh snowmelt runoff from the Tin-guiririca River, and mineral-rich, volcanic-meets-granite soil. While it's not the country's oldest wine region (head north to Maipo for that), the area is the most visitor friendly. It's home to Chile's first wine trail (with 17 stops), sophisticated boutique hotels, top-notch gas-tronomy, palatial wineries, and plenty of out-door adventure, from surfing to cycling.

“It's like our Napa Valley,” explains Ma-tias Pincheira, winemaker for Casa Silva, a pioneering winery in carmenère clonal research with an excellent single-varietal tasting. “[It's] recognized as the top Chilean appellation, where most of the country's high-end wine brands are located.”

If you go in search of great wine in the world's thinnest country, here are a few Col-chagua Valley highlights: Check out the futuristic, barrel-shaped architecture at Clos Apalta, founded by the French family behind Grand Marnier, and splurge on a wine-paired feast at the winery's restaurant. For premium Bordeaux-style wine, a visit to Los Vascos, owned and operated by the Rothschild family, is a must. Stop in at Neyen for a tasting in Apalta's oldest cellar, dating back to 1890. Like a theme park for wine geeks, Viu Manent offers everything from horse-back rides to cooking classes, while Laura Hartwig is the polar opposite – a boutique operation out of a Spanish colonial abode.

Most wineries here require visitors to take a tour in order to do a tasting, so allow more time than you would visiting a wine region in the States. Wherever you go, make sure to pair your wine with local specialties, such as a churrasco sandwich: thinly sliced grilled meat on fresh bread topped with mayo, tomato, avocado, or cheese. »

THE BOTTLES

Carmenères are full-bodied, with herbal aromas and black-fruit flavors. They are best paired with grilled or cured meats, spicy foods and pungent cheeses.

Lapostolle Clos Apalta 2012, \$119
Vanilla, cassis, and herbs.

TerraNoble Gran Reserva Carménère 2014, \$19
Sensuous dark fruit aromas with a velvety mouthfeel.

Los Vascos Carménère Grande Reserve 2016, \$18
Cocoa and cherry liqueur notes, with lingering tannins.

Casa Silva Los Lingues Carménère 2016, \$20
Spices and red fruits, with an elegantly long finish.

Neyen Espiritu de Apalta 2014, \$4
Raspberry, plum, and pepper.



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