

May 13th, 2016

CHILE'S EVOLVING QUALITY WINE WORLD: 600 WINES TASTED

Small wineries making small production, highly rated wines is today's Chile, as well as widely distributed and high quality brands distributed around the world. The diversity and excellence in Chilean winemaking is so impressive and the trend seems to be growing every trip we make to the country. JamesSuckling.com has already visited Chile four times in the last two years.

"It's baby steps," comments Rodrigo Soto, Veramonte's technical director as well as one of Chile's experts on biodynamics. "We can manage it. This is something we can do and then we can make it bigger."

The array and uniqueness of winemaking areas in Chile is equally inspiring, whether producing pinot noir and syrah in the appellations of Aconcagua Costa, Casablanca and San Antonio, cabernet sauvignon and carmenere in Valle de Maipo or carignan and país in Valle de Maule or even Malbec in Malleco.

Chile also has an exceptional heritage of old dry farmed vineyards particularly in the southern regions like Maule and Itata with carignan, país, cinsault, moscatel and even some amazing malbecs. Many producers are also grafting other varieties like garnacha or mourvedre (aka monastrell) to these old vineyards. And most of these wines are produced in a fresh and vivid style giving them a transparency to communicate their best microclimates and terriors.



Rodrigo Soto, technical director Veramonte

HUNEEUS VINTNERS
[THE WINES OF AGUSTIN HUNEEUS]



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“We have only just started, and we now have to, as we say in Chile, sharpen the pencil,” says Ricardo Baettig, winemaker of Casablanca’s Morandé, referring to already established regions like Maule or Casablanca where he believes a lot still needs to be discovered in terms of soils and microclimates.

In addition, the Chilean wine trade includes real personalities who show as much character in themselves as the wines they produce, regardless if it’s handmade pinot and syrah in Casablanca, cinsault in Itata or carignan in Cauquenes. As Marcelo Retamal, winemaker at De Martino, explains, “For me a great wine is the expression of a site and a person; from a rustic and remote place like Itata I don’t expect a wine with great refinement and complexity, I expect a wine full of character, with a pleasant rusticity.”

Adds big wave surfer/vintner Charlie Villard, a Frenchman who grew up in Chile and whose family was one of the first to make top wines in the region of Casablanca about two decades ago, “I do all things with passion.” I scored his tiny production single vineyard syrah 97 points - 2014 Syrah Valle de Casablanca Tanagra.

It’s no wonder the French are so attracted to winemaking in Chile, from the Lurons of Bordeaux to Ostertag, from Alsace to Liger-Belair of Burgundy. The latter is making some of the most exciting pinot noir outside of France at the moment. They compare with the best including America’s Sonoma Coast, New Zealand’s Central Otago or Australia’s Mornington Peninsula. The Aconcagua Costa appellation just north of Casablanca, as well as Casablanca itself, is producing some of the most exciting examples of the variety. Take into account that pinot noir has only begun to take off in Chile, as Francisco Baettig, technical director of Errazuriz, Viñedo Chadwick and Señal concludes, “We have only begun to plant in the right places and with the right plant material.” So the future is exciting for pinot noir in Chile.



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Syrah is also making a lot of noise throughout the country. Examples from Elqui, Casablanca and Colchagua show Chile's capacity of combining quality with regional typicity. Elqui, located 700 km north of Santiago, produces vivid and intense syrahs as well as Rhone blends. San Pedro's Kankana del Elqui and Alcohuaz are two of the more exciting projects there. Casablanca, on the other hand, produces equally delicious syrahs in a more subdued and reserved style. Finally Colchagua, not as extreme as Elqui nor as cool as Casablanca, produces warm yet elegant and delicious syrahs.

"The possibilities are endless here," agrees Francois Lurton who has been making wines in Chile for decades at Hacienda Araucano as well as in Argentina at Bodega Piedra Negra.

Perhaps a sign of Chile truly coming of age is the 100-point rating in this report of the pure cabernet sauvignon 2014 Viñedo Chadwick. This is a wine that defines the greatness of Chile with a purity, structure and finesse that competes with the best reds of the world. And its pedigree is second to none with vineyards next door in the Valle de Maipo to the highly regarded Almaviva and Conch y Toro Don Melchor. "The area has been considered one of the best in Chile since the 1950s," adds Eduardo Chadwick, the owner of the estate who also makes the icon wine of Seña in Chile.

Last month, I tasted more than 600 wines in Santiago, Valpariso and various locations in Casablanca. I was impressed with the quality of so many wines from flinty and bright sauvignon blancs to rich and flavorful syrahs. Even more memorable is the prices most of these wines sell for. The majority of the wines rated 90 points or more – outstanding quality – sell for about \$15 to \$30 a bottle. These are wines that would be selling for two or three times that if they were from France or California.

Click here to see all the Chilean wines I tasted this year with senior editor Jacobo Andrade Garcia Llamas.



Photos from top to bottom: Landscape in Elqui at the vineyards of Alcohuaz; Rodrigo Soto, technical director Veramonte; Clos des Fous 2013; The perfectly scored Viñedo Chadwick Cabernet Sauvignon Valle de Maipo 2014; James with Chile's Movi independent small wine producers; Francisco Baettig & Eduardo Chadwick; and Charlie Villard, one of Chile's best pinot and syrah makers and big wave rider, holding his wine cork.

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RITUAL

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CHARDONNAY VALLE DE CASABLANCA SUPERTUGA BLOCK

What a crazy chardonnay. It is so energized. The length and intensity is fantastic. Medium to full body, citrusy, salty and flinty. Extremely long finish. Zesty and electric. Drink now. Made from biodynamic grapes. 250 cases made.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 96

RITUAL PINOT NOIR VALLE DE CASABLANCA MONSTER BLOCK

Aromas of blueberries, stone and hints of licorice on the nose. Full body, chewy tannins and a tannic finish. Very tight and structured. Needs three or four years to soften but already and classic styled red. From some of the oldest blocks of pinot on the estate. Made from biodynamic grapes. Only 500 cases made. Give it a few years but excellent in every way.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 95

RITUAL SYRAH VALLE DE CASABLANCA ALCAPARRAL BLOCK

The aromas here are transparent with spice, fresh herb and dark berry character. Full to medium body, very refined yet reserved and edgy. Granite, dark fruit-aftertaste. Drink now.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 94

RITUAL CHARDONNAY VALLE DE CASABLANCA

A bright and stoney chardonnay with clarity and beauty. Full body, bright and tangy acidity with lime and green pineapple character. Vertical tension to this. Long and flavorful finish. Drink now. Screw cap.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 93

RITUAL MERLOT VALLE DE CASABLANCA ARROYO BLOCK

Violets and light walnut with hints of chocolate on the nose. Full to medium body, lightly angular tannins, very long finish. Needs a year or two to come together. Exciting future for this wine and merlot in Chile.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 93

RITUAL PINOT NOIR VALLE DE CASABLANCA

A pinot noir with beautiful strawberry and plum aromas and flavors. Full body, fine tannins and a precise ripe fruit and fresh character. Complex with light chocolate, walnut and berry aftertaste. Show a little more ripeness than 2014. Drink now. Made from biodynamic grapes.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 93

RITUAL SAUVIGNON BLANC VALLE DE CASABLANCA

A sauvignon with a beautiful core of ripe fruit showing dried pear, apple and green mango aromas and flavors. Full body, pretty texture without giving away agility and tension. 30% produced in concrete eggs, 40% used barrels and the rest stainless.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 92

RITUAL MERLOT VALLE DE CASABLANCA

A soft and easy merlot with tobacco and tomato leaf aromas and flavors. Full body, soft velvety tannins. Drink now.

Country: Chile Region: Aconcagua Vintage: 2015 Score: 89

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PRIMUS

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CABERNET SAUVIGNON VALLE DE MAIPO

A fine and silky red with fresh mint and herb as well as light currant aromas. Medium to full body, fine tannins and a clean finish. Drink in 2018.

Country: Chile Region: Valle Central Vintage: 2014 **Score: 92**

PRIMUS

CARMENERE VALLE DE COLCHAGUA

Touch of class and refined carmenere with dried herb and blueberry character. Medium body, shows tension and a linear line. Drink now.

Country: Chile Region: Valle Central Vintage: 2014 **Score: 92**

PRIMUS

VALLE DE COLCHAGUA THE BLEND

A firm and slightly chewy wine with light currant and berry character. Medium body, savory fruit and a fresh finish. Slightly austere. A cabernet sauvignon and carmenere based blend with a dash or petit verdot, merlot and cab franc. Drink now.

Country: Chile Region: Valle Central Vintage: 2014 **Score: 91**

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NEYEN

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DE APALTA VALLE DE COLCHAGUA

Aromas of blueberry, sweet Thai basil and spice. Medium body, ultra-fine tannins and incredible depth. Captivating subtle character of plum, blueberry and cloves. It lasts for minutes. Decant two hours in advance. Blend of cabernet sauvignon and carmenere. The cabernet has 130 years of age and it's grown in the Apalta subregion! Decant three hour before serving to open the old vine luster in the wine. Drink or hold.

Country: Chile Region: Valle Central Vintage: 2013 **Score: 96**

NEYEN

DE APALTA MALBEC VALLE DE COLCHAGUA

A refined and fresh malbec on the nose and palate. Medium to light body, light spice and hazelnut aftertaste. Total finesse in a malbec. Drink now.

Country: Chile Region: Valle Central Vintage: 2013 **Score: 93**