



Chile's Terroir-Driven Wines Are Shifting the Narrative

April 20, 2018 By Michelle Williams

Chile is one of the oldest and most productive wine regions in the New World, thanks to the missionaries who introduced viticulture there in the 16th century. But although Chile's wines have stormed the global market, they haven't always enjoyed a reputation for quality or complexity.

Today that story's shifting, thanks to a loosely affiliated group of winemakers in the country's northern reaches. Rodrigo Soto is one of them. Wine director at Veramonte, in the Casablanca Valley, Soto believes the key to shifting Chile's reputation lies in emphasizing quality and site expression — a message that may be well-worn for the Old World but is all-new for Chile. "Today, we realize the value of Chile is its regionality," Soto told me. "We haven't communicated our geography and regionality effectively. We have promoted brands over the regions. That's a problem."

Soto and a small group of like-minded winemakers have decided to take the message of Chile's sub-regions to the masses in the best possibly way — through the wine glass.

In a recent visit to the Leyda Valley, San Antonio, Casablanca, and Limarí, I discovered that these visionaries have a unified ambition: To produce high quality Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs that are truly expressive of place. Below I share my findings.

Casablanca Valley

Casablanca is slightly farther inland, so the winds are more subdued and the temperatures warmer. Veramonte was the first to plant in Casablanca, in 1984, but now there are 50 producers with approximately 5,500 hectares of vineyards. The soil is deposited from the old coastal mountain range, which is much older and more decomposed than the Andes. The crumbled granite is the key to the region; fracturable, it allows the roots of the vines to grow through it, interact with it.

In 2012, Veramonte head winemaker Rodrigo Soto shifted all of their vineyards to organic viticulture, and his next goal is to transition to biodynamics, a practice he believes is particularly suited to expressing site. "How can we capture decomposed granite in grapes?" he asked, hypothetically. "How can we get the soil into the wine?" For Soto the answer is to close the fertility cycle of the vineyard through biodynamics, allowing a unique expression of region into the wines.

Veramonte started their Ritual label as a vineyard-designate project, and vineyard practices and winemaking techniques are employed to emphasize the characteristics of each place. I found the wines expressed fresh fruit and minerality with depth and complexity, including 2017 Veramonte Chardonnay, 2016 Ritual Chardonnay, 2016 Supertuga Single Vineyard Chardonnay, 2016 Veramonte Pinot Noir, 2016 Ritual Pinot Noir, and 2016 Monster Block Single Vineyard Pinot Noir.

Conveying — and Communicating — a Sense of Place(s)

Over my week of site visits and tastings, it became clear that these winemakers are not just striving to produce wines of place, they're succeeding.

"We have not been good storytellers of our country," Rodrigo Soto, of Veramonte, said. But through loose team effort these winemakers are trying to shift the narrative. "This project is about believing in the regions," he said; an organic movement started by those who have their hands in the dirt.



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