Wines of South America

Chile
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Introduction

Previewing this book?

Please check out our enhanced preview, which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

The wines of South America continue to garner global recognition, fueled by ongoing quality improvements and continued attractive price points. As part of our series dedicated to South America, we take a comprehensive look at the wines of Chile. Our goal is to provide wine enthusiasts with the critical information required to make informed wine selections.

This Approach Guide begins with a review of Chile’s primary red and white grape varieties, covering the country’s signatures cabernet sauvignon and carmenère to rising stars sauvignon blanc and syrah. For each grape, we touch on its unique character in Chile and the areas in which it reaches its highest expression.

We continue with detailed profiles of the country’s winemaking regions. Each regional profile offers valuable insights into the prevailing terroir — geography, climate, soil type — and the influence it has on the resulting wines. With the fundamentals in place, we profile its red and white wines, pointing out the best bets and explaining what makes them distinctive.

Finally, we conclude by offering a straightforward vintage ratings table, which affords high-level perspective on the best and most challenging years for wine production in Chile.

This guidebook’s approach, based on that of our wine app for the iPhone and iPad (www.agwine.com), is unique: rather than tell you what specific bottle of wine to order by providing individual producer or bottle reviews, this Approach Guide gives you the information you require to make informed wine choices on any list.

* Look for the asterisks. We mark each of our favorite appellations and grape varieties with an asterisk (*) — they have established records for providing quality, consistency, and good values.

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We hope you enjoy what we believe is a totally unique guide to the wines of Chile.

Salud!

David and Jennifer Raezer
The Rising Tide of Chilean Wines

From bulk to quality

Although Chile’s cultivation of wine grapes goes back to the mid-sixteenth century, modern wine production dates from the 1970s, reinvigorated by foreign investment from leading international estates: France’s Lafite Rothschild, America’s Robert Mondavi, and Spain’s Miguel Torres. This initial investment sowed the seeds for Chile’s explosion onto the global wine scene in the 1990s. The first wave of offerings — favoring international varieties cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and chardonnay — were generally of acceptable quality and bargain priced.

The Chilean wine scene has matured considerably over the last twenty years. Leading winemakers have undertaken careful soil and climate analysis, matching varieties to locations that are best suited to bringing out their most terroir-expressive characters. This has yielded pronounced improvements in quality levels and many wines now compete head-to-head with the best the world has to offer. And what makes Chile’s wines particularly attractive is that, despite the step-up in quality, wines still carry attractive price points.

Tremendous range in styles

To say that Chile has tremendous geographic diversity is an understatement. The country extends a staggering 4,300 kilometers (2,600 miles) along the Pacific Ocean, from dry deserts in the north to freezing polar expanses in the south. Even the country’s narrow profile — it is, on average, only 180 kilometers (112 miles) wide — does not introduce consistency at fixed latitudes, as the Pacific Ocean exerts a strong influence on the western side and the soaring Andes on the eastern side. The inherent variability in climates and soil types across this dynamic landscape creates the potential for Chile to feature wines that span myriad styles and grape varieties.

Another point worth highlighting: Unlike most other parts of the world, Chile has remained unaffected by phylloxera, the louse that destroyed much of the world’s vineyards. This has given Chile an extremely appealing asset that is only recently been tapped to make exceptional, incomparably complex wines: ungrafted old vines that date back 75-150 years.

More than just cabernet sauvignon

The country’s quality improvements have not been confined to the international benchmarks, cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay. They have revealed a suite of world-class varieties that achieve unique expression in Chile and are worth seeking out: the country’s trademark red, carmenère; enticing, complex sauvignon blanc; Old World style pinot noir; and all-around tasty syrah.
Primary Grape Varieties

Cabernet Sauvignon *

The Chilean wine industry strongly favors red over white grapes, with vineyard planted area split 73% to 27%, respectively. The dominant grape variety, by a large margin, is cabernet sauvignon, representing 43% of red grapes and 33% of total.

Wines exhibit cabernet sauvignon’s typical firm structure and classic flavors: black cherries, black-currents, tobacco, bell peppers, and plums. However, Chilean versions do have some unique qualities: softer, fruitier, and slightly more alcoholic than their Bordeaux counterparts, they exhibit pronounced notes of dried fruit accented with eucalyptus and/or mint.

- **The best of the best.** The Maipo Valley, specifically the Puente Alto and Pirque sub-areas, has led the way with full-bodied, fruit-forward versions; they are the country’s best.
- **Cool-climate style.** There are also good cabernet-based wines coming out of cooler zones, such as Casablanca, Curicó, Elqui, Limarí, San Antonio, and the coastal area of Colchagua; they offer more intense profiles, favoring earth and mineral flavors over abundant fruit.
- **Warm-climate style.** Cabs from Cachapoal, Maule, and the warmer inland areas of Colchagua (especially Apalta) are full bodied and fruit forward.

Keep in mind, many of Chile’s cabernets are blends (up to 15 percent), incorporating small amounts of other varieties — typically carmenère, syrah, or merlot — to add aromatic complexity and body.

Carignan

At home on the Mediterranean coast of France and Spain, carignan thrives in Chile’s warmer climates. Often disappointing on its own when young, it has traditionally been used as a blending grape, adding acidity, alcohol, extract, and a boost of tannins, coupled with some bright cherry flavors and bitter notes.

This grape variety, however, can shed its coarse qualities and be quite special when it comes from old vines. Winemakers have recently begun to graft younger vines onto older rootstocks to achieve smaller yields and, therefore, more concentrated wines ... what’s old is new again. Look for old-vine versions from the Maule Valley, particularly from Cauquenes, packed with layered fruit and earth; there is also a small amount produced in the Itata Valley.

Carmenère *

Carmenère is Chile’s fifth largest production fine grape variety, comprising 10% of red grape vine-
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Understanding the Landscape

Chile’s generally warm, dry climate is impacted by two moderating influences (see Figure below):

- **Cool sea air.** Chile’s long western coastline is dominated by the icy waters of the Pacific, fed by the Humboldt Current which carries cold water from the southern oceans. Cool breezes — most prominent in the morning — meaningfully impact winegrowing on the western side of the Coastal Range and make their way through east-west running mountain passes to reach the warm Central Valley (Entre Cordilleras). They further serve to minimize daily temperature fluctuations characteristic of the inland areas.

- **Cool mountain air.** Marking out the eastern edge of the country, the Andes Mountains contribute a similar cooling effect, as late day breezes descend from the cool mountaintops into the foothills.

These cooling breezes are critical to Chile’s winemaking success: the temperature moderation preserves natural in acidity the grapes and lengthens the growing season, which afford wines greater balance and more intense flavor profiles. We refer to these dynamics frequently in the profiles of Chile’s winegrowing regions that follow.
San Antonio Valley

Introduction

The San Antonio (sahn ahn-TO-nee-o) Valley, located in undulating hills along the Pacific coastline west of Santiago, is an exceptional area for high quality terroir-driven wines. Often psychologically associated with Casablanca, given the similar cool-climate style of wines produced, there are two important points of differentiation: San Antonio’s production is significantly smaller (roughly one-tenth that of Casablanca); and temperatures are modestly cooler and more stable, due to the region’s greater maritime exposure.

San Antonio’s cooler climate, extended growing season, and ideal soils — generally of rocky, decomposed granite, with small outcroppings of red clay — deliver grapes with an ideal combination of peak ripeness and healthy acidity. Naturally endowed with the characteristics required for great wines, it has become a laboratory for leading winemakers pioneering the best vineyard practices in Chile.

Wines from each of San Antonio’s sub-areas — usually indicated on bottle labels — reveal distinctive qualities, shaped primarily by the degree to which they are influenced by the Pacific Ocean:

- **Lo Abarca.** Lo Abarca (only 4 kilometers / 2.5 miles from the sea), positioned on steep hillsides, is most strongly affected by the sea. The resulting cooler temperatures, coupled with soils of greater clay content, yield delicate, complex wines.

- **Leyda.** Leyda (15 kilometers / 9 miles from the sea) — pronounced LAY-da — is the southernmost and largest sub-area; the sea’s cooling influence is slightly less pronounced, given its modestly more inland position. Its wines are high quality and tend to exhibit good levels of acidity and terroir, with slightly greater body.

- **Rosario.** Rosario (18 kilometers / 11 miles from the sea), the northernmost sub-area, is more protected from the sea’s influence than its neighbors due to its position in a bowl-shaped valley. The resulting warmer temperatures yield wines that are a bit rounder and richer.

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Red Wines

Reds are only just beginning to gain momentum in the cooler temperature San Antonio Valley.

- Wines based on **syrah** are delivering good results and are the region’s premier reds.

- Early results with **pinot noir** are also encouraging and San Antonio is now turning out some of the country’s best versions. As in Casablanca, the other premier area for top flight pinot, they lean stylistically toward Old World versions, favoring earthy complexity over bold fruit.

- Although historically less of focus, cool-climate style wines based **cabernet sauvignon** and **merlot** are also made to a high standard.
White Wines *

As in neighboring Casablanca, impressive white wines — priced to deliver compelling values — are San Antonio’s focus. Plus, the region’s overall low production levels allow leading winemakers to assure that quality remains consistently high.

- Chilean **sauvignon blanc** does not get any better than those from San Antonio — these wines are masterful reflections of terroir. Although there is great variability in the styles of San Antonio’s sauvignon blanc-based wines across sub-areas, some trademark flavors include grapefruit, asparagus, and fennel, coupled with a gentle spiciness. They are typically full-bodied wines with high alcohol levels (over 14%). Overall, compared to those from Casablanca, the other sauvignon blanc powerhouse, San Antonio’s versions perhaps possess slightly more powerful and penetrating palates.

- **Chardonnay** is also grown to a high standard, almost reaching the lofty heights of the region’s sauvignon blanc masterpieces.

- There are lower production wines based on **gewürztraminer**.
Vintages

We provide a simple 1-5 rating for each vintage, 5 being the best and 1 being the worst. For the most part, these vintage evaluations apply broadly throughout the country.

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