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Chile Has Become the Rising Star of South America's Food Scene — Here's Why

The rich, volcanic soil of central Chile has nourished a food and wine legacy that bridges cultures, from Indigenous cooks to globe-trotting vintners.

By [Jeff Chu](#) | Published on August 21, 2024



The infinity pool at the hotel Vik Chile, in the Millahue Valley. PHOTO: CRISTÓBAL PALMA

Mapuche, Chile's largest Indigenous group, have a word that defies concise translation. In English, *peumayen* is often rendered "place of dreams," but that underplays the importance of dreaming to the Mapuche. To them, a dream can be a wish, a hope, or a prophecy. It can be an idyll visited in slumber, or a fantasyland that stirs the imagination. Sometimes, you don't even know a *peumayen* until you're in it.

As I stepped into the forecourt of the Vik winery, in a fertile valley that the Mapuche call a “golden place,” I found myself in a sweeping, water-filled plaza. Boulders and rocks gathered by the Chilean sculptor Marcela Correa and her architect husband, Smiljan Radić, had been scattered across the shallow pool. The installation, *water mirror*, serves as both a subtle nod to terroir and a grand welcome. It’s also a feat of sustainable engineering: as water flows across the plaza, it cools the wine cellar beneath.

The winery building, designed by Radić, is no less remarkable. It looks as if a glowing spaceship had landed on the fertile soil. A translucent-white canopy bathes the interior in natural light. Glass façades offer clear views through the whole structure, to the vineyards and Andes mountains beyond. The winery complex telegraphs modernity, while the surrounding foothills testify to the passage of time.

On this ancient land that has fed countless generations, and which now gives rise to modern architecture and new wine, I glimpsed the Chile I was seeking: *peumayen*.

Chile is among the richest countries in [South America](#), as measured by per-capita GDP. But this 2,672-mile-long sliver of Pacific coast is wealthy in other ways. In his inaugural address in 2022, Chile’s youngest-ever president, Gabriel Boric, then 36, nodded to Chile’s history — not just its colonial past but also its gaping inequality — and voiced hope for “a dignified future,” while also lauding its magical landscapes and agricultural bounty.

That is the Chile my husband and I hoped to experience — history and modernity, country and city, wine and food. We asked *Travel + Leisure* A-List advisor Jean Sanz to create a nine-day itinerary that would show off the country’s heritage and abundance and to book local guides.

It seemed apt to begin at Vik. In 2006, the billionaire investor Alex Vik and his wife, Carrie, who also own hotels in Uruguay and Italy, bought 17 square miles in the Millahue Valley, two hours south of Santiago, where the colluvial sands of the Andes meet the loam of the coastal hills — the perfect terroir, they believed, to produce world-class wine. They planted vines, and eight years later, the winery opened, along with a 22-room hilltop hotel.



A Japanese-inspired garden at the Vik Chile hotel. PHOTO: CRISTÓBAL PALMA

Designed by the architect Marcelo Daglio, the hotel could be a Bond villain's aerie, with a shimmering bronzed-titanium roof that echoes the surrounding hills. In 2019, Vik added seven bungalows, which, like the rest of the hotel, showcase contemporary art from the Viks' collection. Ours was decorated with 10 blown-glass works by Dale Chihuly.

Guests are encouraged to roam the grounds. Well-marked trails wind through the hills, and a guided horseback ride is offered with every stay (rider beware: my mount was aptly named Trampista, Spanish for “trickster”). Tasting grapes off the vine is encouraged (unlike the sweet carmenère, the tannic cabernet sauvignon grapes have a mouth-puckering astringency).

The vines’ very presence speaks to change: grapes are not native to this country. “The story of wine in Chile is a story of colonization and evangelization,” said Andrea Garcia, our guide at Vik. In the 1540s, the Spanish imported vines — mostly the Pais variety — to make communion wine. Subsequent grapes were introduced, including carmenère, which was originally mislabeled as merlot. In the late 1800s, phylloxera, an aphid-like, root-devouring insect, decimated carmenère throughout Europe. But thanks to Chile’s relative geographic isolation, the imported vines endured. It wasn’t until the early 1990s that DNA testing confirmed the Chilean grapes’ true identity.

After we toured the winery, Garcia led us to an underground tasting room. She had pulled three 2021 varietals to try: cabernet sauvignon, carmenère, and syrah. The cab was “young but lovely,” she said with relief. “Two weeks ago, we had a sample that was awful.” The syrah was less tannic, much smoother. My favorite was the carmenère — light and dangerously drinkable.

What we tasted would never be bottled as is: Vik sells only blends. During our stay, the winemakers were still creating the 2021 vintages, some of which would be aged in oak harvested from the property and released in the coming years. “We are trying to find the best expression of what is Chilean,” Garcia said.