

SOUTHERN brave

Chile's future looks brighter than ever, with forgotten regions and sustainable innovations putting the rest of the world in the shade, says *Sarah Neish*

LIKE A Magic Eye print, what looks to be the case when it comes to Chile's terroir is rarely quite so linear or straightforward. Just when you think you've got a handle on it, you round a corner and it reveals another complex pattern, hidden in plain sight. Climb up one side of a hill, for instance, and you might find yourself dodging five-foot tall cactus plants, while just over its peak, the other side tumbles down with lush evergreens that wouldn't look amiss in the Swiss Alps. It's not uncommon for half a valley to bake under the hot Chilean sun, while the other half bathes in the cool, moist air blowing in from the Pacific Ocean. The climatic conditions can be so diverse and in such close proximity that as Koyle winemaker, Cristobal Undurraga, puts it: "We pick our Carmenère between the middle of March and the first week of April, while

'There are very few places in the world that can make really good, consistent Sauvignon Blanc, and Chile is one of them'

our nearest neighbour often starts picking 30 days later."

It's not hard to see why winemaking here can be fascinating, frustrating and utterly captivating. But in many respects the country's patchwork quilted terroir is what has kept Chile's wine industry going during the past 12 months.

While it's been a challenging year for most of the world in terms of delays, materials and spiralling costs, Chile has had its own particular issues to contend with. Severe drought has left the country and much of its vines as dry as a llama's hoof. To take the most extreme example, the Atacama desert in the country's north,

which usually receives an average annual rainfall of 20mm, welcomed a grand total of 0mm last year. Fortunately, things are starting to look up, with recent periodic spells of generous precipitation offering up a plentiful 40mm of rainfall across the desert, but there is still a long way to go to make up for an almost two-year-long dry patch. One winemaker described the recent spells of much-needed rain as little more than "an aspirin", which has provided only temporary relief from a far bigger climatic issue that is affecting all of Chile.

SEARCH FOR WATER

This desperate search for water has played out against a backdrop of political uncertainty, with Chile plunged into unease over the potential rewriting of the country's legal Constitution, which sets out the parameters for education, social rights, and tackling climate change, among other things. On 4 September, 2022, Chileans will be asked to vote on whether or not they want to replace the original, Pinochet-era Constitution document with a newly drafted ruling, which will for the first time recognise Chile's indigenous population. It is impossible to over-stress the impact this decision will have on the country, following protests

and bitter disputes that have rumbled on since July 2021. "Whenever a country is unstable, either for political or economic reasons, it makes things difficult," says Rodrigo Blasquez, winemaker at Santa Ema, of doing business in this vortex.

However, despite Chile's politics, which, rather like Brexit, seem to have cleaved the country down the middle, there are many things that its winemakers are happy to agree on. One of these is that their Sauvignon Blanc is shifting at a phenomenal rate overseas – the white variety is by far the country's biggest vinous export, accounting for 24% of volume sales (1,435,751 9-litre cases), and

Feature findings

- Chile's Sauvignon Blanc has rocketed to take the largest share of the country's total exports by both volume (24%) and value (22%), superseding Cabernet Sauvignon.
- Winemakers recognise the need to premiumise their product with the average price per 9-litre case standing at US\$26.75 in June 2022.
- Chile is cementing its fine wine nous, with Santa Rita, and now Maquis, launching wines on La Place de Bordeaux in the last year.
- A lack of rain is pushing producers further south in the country, resulting in the mass exit of vineyards in Casablanca Valley.
- Forgotten regions are returning to the fore, including Itata, where small growers are commanding sky-high prices for their grapes.

22% of value, according to the latest Wines of Chile report (June 2021 to July 2022). In comparison, Cabernet Sauvignon makes up 17% of exports in volume and value, despite the red variety having almost three times the plantings as Sauvignon Blanc. One need only glance at the house white wine on offer at almost every pub, bar and restaurant in the UK to see that it has become a Chilean Sauvignon Blanc. And with prices of Marlborough wines jumping up a price segment due to the low yields in New Zealand, Chile has deftly slid into the gap this has created.

Chile sold 172,500 more cases of Sauvignon Blanc in the first six months of this year than it did in the same period last year, and raked in an additional US\$4,301,868 (£3,710,339) from the white variety. It's no small change considering the various hurdles that the industry has had to overcome, and is testament to the outstanding quality of the wine.

"There are very few places in the world that can make really good, consistent Sauvignon Blanc, and Chile is one of them," says Meinard Bloem, winemaker for Los Boldos, in Cachapoal. The next >



Total exports (July 2021 to June 2022)

Source: Wines of Chile

Variety	Volume (9l cases)	Value
Sauvignon Blanc	1,435,751	US\$35,868,051
Cabernet Sauvignon	1,008,851	US\$28,487,389
Merlot	853,637	US\$19,969,688
Chardonnay	501,356	US\$13,932,310
Pinot Noir	164,022	US\$6,203,650
Carmenère	100,933	US\$3,890,414

Range days: the Andes

step of the journey must be to show markets that Chilean Sauvignon Blanc can transcend the value category. For this reason, many producers are offering three quality and price tiers for the variety; an introductory level, a Reserva, and a Gran Reserva. The strategy is paying off, with Morandé, for one, reporting a 30% leap in sales for wines made from the crowd-pleasing grape in the first half of this year.

Chile's winemakers want to surf the success of its Sauvignon Blanc and persuade consumers to pay more for it.

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But they are also keen to use its growing popularity as a gateway into other whites. Few dispute that while Sauvignon Blanc is their bread and butter at export, Chile's real treasure when it comes to white wine is Chardonnay (though a smattering of old vine Semillon is getting critics hot under the collar).

Chile has seen an interesting evolution of Chardonnay during the past few years, with the latest expressions offering a mouthwatering salinity and texture, rather than pure fruit. "While Sauvignon Blanc is our best seller – we sell twice as much of it as we do Chardonnay – there is more scope to make a complex wine with Chardonnay," says Ricardo Baettig, winemaker for Morandé. He pinpoints the key difference between a Chilean Chardonnay and one from any other winemaking nation as being a "noticeable absence of fruitiness". Regardless of the grape variety, winemakers

unanimously recognise the need to premiumise their product. And they are succeeding, up to a point. According to Wines of Chile, the average price per case for exports to the UK in 2020 was US\$ 25.23. A year later, in 2021, this figure shot up to US\$28.45 per case. However, as of June 2022, the average case price had dropped to US\$26.75. It proves that it is possible to demand a more premium price for Chilean wine, but suggests that holding that price may be the real task. As Baettig says: "Making wine is easy. It's selling wine that's difficult."

According to some, Chile is on the cusp of a second golden age, which may soon see its price issues fade away. "Chilean wine entered a golden age in the 1990s, and peaked around 2005, after which time it dropped in quality and reputation,"

Wine tourism in Chile

Chilean wineries are split between those that fiercely assert that they are "not Napa" and "never will be", and those that believe Chile has the potential to become the next wine-tourism hotspot.

According to Guillermo Calderon, export director, Casas de Bosque, some Chilean producers see Napa valley as "a Disneyland for wine", and are not rushing to pursue such a mainstream, commercial approach. "In Chile there are many small winemakers producing amazing, obscure, experimental wines in extremely limited productions," he says. "They're a hit with critics and sommeliers, and they want to keep that sense of exclusivity." With the country's winemakers wanting to override the 'high volume, low value' perception that formed when Chilean wine flooded export markets in the 1980s and 1990s, some are worried that an overtly tourist offering could underline the very reputation they are trying to squash.

The challenge, therefore, is to take the learnings of successful wine tourism regions around the globe, and give these a distinctly Chilean flavour, tapping into what makes this beautiful country so unique. Here's our pick of the best wine tourism experiences in Chile.

Casa Silva: Based in Colchagua, known as "the heartland of the cowboys" for its equestrian prowess, Casa Silva pairs wine with horses for an unforgettable experience. Guests can watch Chile's elite polo teams practise on its playing field from the comfort of the winery's Clubhouse restaurant, glass of Carmenère in hand. Its historic boutique guesthouse boasts seven comfortable rooms (US\$150-US\$300 per night), kitted out with four-poster beds.

Viu Manent: This one-stop shop, also in Colchagua, has two restaurants and a café, offering some of the best dining we found in Chile. "We had record numbers of diners in our restaurants as soon as the Covid ban lifted," says owner José Miguel Viu, whose obsession with



oysters led to him building an on-site saltwater pool to keep the molluscs fresh ahead of service. Construction is under way for a handful of guest lodges (US\$200 per night) set among the vineyard, with outdoor baths, hot tubs, and a swimming pool. A stable with 30 horses offers horseback tours, and guests can book in for riding lessons. Don't miss the well-stocked shop, selling excellent handicrafts from local artisans.

Casas de Bosque: With two restaurants, an outdoor lounge area for siestas, picnics, bike tours, and an organic vegetable garden where guests can pick their own produce, Guillermo Calderon says of this Casablanca estate: "We want families to come and spend the day, so we aim for a relaxed approach. We are much more about the experience than the wine score." A private-dining spot with panoramic views of the vineyard is the ideal place to drink in the scenery, with a chilled Sauvignon Blanc, in which the producer specialises.

Montes: Visitors can experience the surreal sounds of the barrel room, where Gregorian chants are played to the wine around-the-clock in a low-lit, churchlike environment. The owner believes in the

energy from the vibrations of the music and has previously welcomed Berlin's Philharmonic Orchestra to play to the barrels. More of an outdoors type? Join a three-hour guided trek, learning about native trees and wildlife as you go. An exceptional steakhouse, Fuegos de Apalta, is ideal for wiling away an afternoon by the fire.

Santa Rita: Based in Maipo, the 19th century Casa Real hotel and its surrounding Centenario Park are like a history lesson brought to life. Horse-drawn carriage rides through the grounds are a treat, trotting past orange trees, stone statuettes and a lake occupied by black-faced Chilean swans. A museum dedicated to Andino culture and a restaurant serving stellar local fare add to the magical experience.

Vik: The ultra-modern design hotel is breathtaking for its striking art, Instagram-worthy infinity pool and astonishing views out over the Millahue valley, which appears almost prehistoric with its mist-shrouded hills. The winery itself wouldn't look out of place in a David Bowie music video; a surreal water feature leads into the sleek, silver enclave, with hidden tasting room.



Column inches: Concha y Toro

says Nicolas Sutil, director of Viña Sutil, which encompasses the La Playa range. “Now we’re back on the upwards curve, and in the next 10 years – by 2030 – we will have hit another golden era.”

It would seem that paving has already begun along this yellow brick road, with Chile inching its way further into the fine wine scene. Last October, Santa Rita’s Casa Real entered La Place de Bordeaux. If any further proof were needed that Chilean fine wine is on the rise, it would be that Maquis has also just joined the French platform, with two expressions launched in July 2022. Four négociants – Descaves, Medocaine, Ginestet, and Veyret Latour - will exclusively distribute the wines throughout Europe, North America and Asia. Ricardo Rivadeneira, executive director, said at the time: “We are proud to have two different vintages for each of the two wines added to the

‘We are proud to have two different vintages for each of the two wines added to the portfolio of the best wines in the world’

portfolio of the best wines in the world. To have both older and younger vintages for each wine on the platform is something really unique.”

GENTLE AND KIND

Rivadeneira describes Maquis Viola as a “powerful” Carmenère, blended with a little Cabernet Franc. He adds that Viola is more open and immediate, whereas Maquis Franco, a Cabernet Franc, rewards patience. “Franco reminds me of my grandfather, who was very gentle and kind, but generous. Not the kind of host who would be waiting for you at the door, but who opens up more the longer you wait, and has so much to give.”

Santa Rita is busy working on a secondary wine to follow Casa Real into La Place, and there are whispers of Vik considering joining the network too.

There can be no doubt that having a story to offer that is distinctly your own is of enormous benefit to sellers, whether that seller is La Place, an indie retailer, or one of the big supermarkets. And Vik has been quietly working away at something that will give its wine that extra edge. A new barrel-making programme, dubbed Barroir, has seen the brand make its barrels on site for the first time this year, using Chilean oak trees grown on its

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Viña Santa Rita

Santa Rita is focusing on its Cabernet Sauvignon from Alto Jahuel, with extensive R&D taking place in the vineyard. “Cabernet Sauvignon, especially from here, has a lot more to deliver,” says head winemaker Sebastian Labbé. “In 2021 we made Cabernet from just 30 plots and microvinifications. In 2022, we upped it to 41, and we aim to double this again by next year. The palate range is incredible.” Santa Rita currently has 80,000 baby vines in one nursery and 150,000 in another, and Labbé plans to use these to plant an additional 12ha-15ha in Alto Jahuel. According to Labbé, the 2022 harvest may rival Chile’s hit 2018 vintage. “I think 2022, with its cooler temperatures and lower yields, will be a fantastic vintage for Casa Real; up there with the level of our 2018 for quality.”

Viña Carmen

While 60% of the volume at Carmen is Cabernet Sauvignon, winemaker Emily Faulconer is working on some interesting projects, including a biologically-aged rosé and new product Florillon; a Semillon on the flor (layer of yeast). Production of the latter is limited, with only 1,000 bottles made and according to Faulconer “It’s a ‘Marmite’ wine. People either love it or hate it. It’s bone dry, as any residual sugar is eaten away by the flor. I don’t think there’s anything else like it in Chile.” Florillon is part of Faulconer’s goal to champion the country’s old Semillon vines “which have almost been forgotten.” Carmen’s 2022 harvest was, says Faulconer, “a year of balance” and “one of the best we’ve had in the past five years,” despite yields being around 5% lower than in 2021. “This year, we also started to see the results of the 85% replantings we began in our Alto Jahuel vineyard eight years ago. It’s a real turning point for our Cabernet.”



Burning ambition: Vik

property in the Millahue Valley. “Once a year we plan to do a sweep and collect any oak trees that have fallen to the ground (we never cut trees down), then use these to build a fire, upon which we toast imported French oak to make our own bespoke barrels in-house,” explains winemaker Cristian Vallejo of the new project. Last summer, Vallejo managed to persuade Jean-Luc Sylvain, of renowned French cooperage Tonnellerie Sylvain, to travel to Chile and spend two weeks training up Vik’s team in the art of barrel making. The pair were acquainted from Vallejo’s time working at Château Margaux in Bordeaux, and the barrel boss was intrigued by the idea of crafting a Chilean cask from scratch.

“I wanted to keep the identity of the valley, and didn’t want the flavour imparted to our wines from the barrels to come from anywhere else,” says Vallejo. “We now have two full-time staff producing five barrels per day, and plan to train up another two staff next year to increase our production, and also to work on recycling existing barrels for next use.”

Another benefit of making your own barrels is that you can adjust the level of toasting to suit each of your wines, which, according to Vallejo, “allows us to be more precise with our winemaking”.

Rather than importing ready-made barrels from France, the French oak component of the programme arrives in

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Morandé

The producer is looking forward to producing its first Chenin Blanc by the end of the year, as part of its Aventura range. Winemaker Ricardo Baettig is also excited about a new Chardonnay offering from Malleco, a region he calls “a new frontier for quality whites”. However, Sauvignon Blanc continues to rein supreme for the brand in both volume and value sales. In 2022 Morandé sold 30% more Sauvignon Blanc than in 2020, and has expanded its portfolio to include three quality tiers of the variety; an entry-level from Maule, and a Reserva, and a single-vineyard Gran Reserva, both from Casablanca.

Cono Sur

This year Cono Sur is shining a light on its Organic range, which is “the fastest growing in our portfolio, with double-digit CAGR growth over the past three years”, says CEO Paul Konar. Last year was the winery’s best yet for the range, with 3.5 million bottles sold.” To keep up with growing demand, Cono Sur has expanded its organic vineyard area by more than 50% to 456 hectares. All of the brand’s organic wines are vegan. Top export markets are the UK, Canada, and Japan, and Pinot Noir continues to be Cono Sur’s primary variety, which

winemaker Matías Ríos compares with New Zealand Pinot. However, the key difference, he says, is that “Chile has more sunlight hours and therefore more concentrated flavours”.

Concha y Toro

In 2021, Concha y Toro became a B-Corp company, becoming the first public company to achieve this recognition in Chile. In the last 10 years it has reduced its carbon use by 50% through addressing direct emissions produced by the company and its suppliers. Total wine sales increased by 7% in the first six months of 2022, with half of the company’s revenues coming from its premium brands. Top export markets so far this year are the UK (24.5% of total sales) and US (15.4% of total sales). The wine group has also opened the doors to new restaurant, Bodega 1883, where the food is designed to help the wines shine, not the other way around. Moving forward, a big focus will be on the wine group’s new Centre for Research and Innovation. Concha y Toro also plans to prioritise its Cabernet Sauvignon from Puente Alto, where 151 micro parcels tucked among its 40-year-old vines offer “a kaleidoscope of characteristics” for icon wines such as Don Melchor.

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Chile in the form of flat boards, which means shipping just one container rather than the three containers Vik used to require, cleverly saving on space and cost. “Eventually, I’d like us to make the whole barrel from Chilean oak but we’re taking it step by step,” says Vallejo, who also plans to visit Portugal in October to select the exact plot from which the cork for Vik’s wine bottles will come. “Our



Rock star: Itata Valley

philosophy is all about 'holism', and for us, this lies in the detail," he explains.

Vik is not the only producer putting native trees at the top of its agenda. Undurraga, based in the Maipo Valley, is raising funds to support reforestation through its Aliwen range, for which it donates a percentage of its global sales revenue to Chile's Fundación Reforestemos, to aid the replanting of native trees. The winery plants indigenous trees such as the Lenga and the Quillay in 11 Chilean regions.

Last year, Undurraga extended its Aliwen range to include two canned wines; a Sauvignon Blanc, and a rosé. More products means more sales and subsequently greater fundraising for the forestry project. It's a matter that's close to many a Chilean's heart. The urgent need for replanting began in 2011, following a devastating fire that broke out in Patagonia, razing more than 11,000ha in the Torres de Paine national park. A tourist was arrested for having set fire to some toilet roll in the park, though they denied that this could have been the

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Miguel Torres

Fairtrade and 100% organic, Miguel Torres is excited about its Cordillera range; seven wines based on extreme winemaking projects in different terroirs. One of these is the Osorno Valley, which unlike many areas in Chile at the moment, receives abundant rainfall (900ml-1000ml per year). The brand swears by Osorno for its Sauvignon Blanc: “You can't find the same malic acidity anywhere else,” says winemaker Eduardo Jordán. “Acidity is the core of a good Sauvignon Blanc, and it's very easy to obtain great acidity in Osorno, along with a beautiful creaminess from the limestone soils.” The producer will also launch a País from the Millapoa region, made from 150-year-old vines. “We tried not to change the way the vineyard was managed because we figured the vines had made it this far,” says Jordán. A natural wine, made without sulphur, the País spent 12 months in concrete eggs, and uses an ancient winemaking technique called Zaranda, which involves kneading grapes like dough on a wooden board made from Chilean bamboo. Just 200 cases are available from UK distributor Fells.

Viña Errázuriz

While the UK remains the brand's top export market, Canada is coming hot on its heels. “For many years Canada had been a market looking for lower prices, then two or three years ago there was

huge premiumisation, and demand for our premium wines shot up by 20%,” says marketing director Pilar Moreno. In a first for the Chilean winery, Viña Errázuriz will launch two premium sparkling wines, a Blanc de Blanc, and a traditional-method blend, both from the 2016 vintage, that the winery believes will sell thanks to its “strong credentials for cool-climate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay production”. Just 1,500 cases will be available via Hatch Mansfield, split between the two wines, and priced at £29.99 per bottle. The brand intends to increase its sparkling volumes next year.

Vik

Vik has been busy planning the launch of its first Champagne, which will join its La Piu Belle range. “We also have an interesting new rosé, made using Carmenère. It's a first for Chile, possibly for the world,” says winemaker, Cristian Vallejo. “We want to show people that you can make a great pink wine from this variety.” He says that adding Carmenère to the blend gives it “grip” and the impression that you can almost “bite down on the wine”. He reveals that “next year, it will definitely be in the blend again.” The grapes are pressed gently for two hours, then fermented at low temperatures for 30 days. Brazil and the US are Vik's biggest export markets but “Asia is also an important growing market for us,” Vallejo says.

cause of the blaze as it happened some distance from the fire's path. The incident sparked a national emergency, with hundreds of firefighters clamouring to put out the flames, which raged for several months. It drew the world's attention, and began an all-hands-on-deck effort to replenish Chile's lost trees.

“The name Aliwen means 'sacred tree' in Mapuche, and the range is our way of paying tribute to nature and to our indigenous peoples,” says Eugenio Ponce,

Brand updates

Montes

Covid does not appear to have dented Montes' sales, despite the producer exporting 95% of its wines. “When Covid started we thought we were in trouble but in China we had just one month with low sales, after which they bought more wine than before Covid,” says winemaker, Gabriela Negrete. Montes' flagship wine is its Alpha Cabernet Sauvignon, of which China, Japan and Korea buy the most. “We saw a sales lift of around 20% in the last 12 months, but even more in Asia,” says Negrete. “We had to stop sending wine as it was selling out, and we wouldn't have had any left to sell anywhere else.” Negrete says of its 2022 harvest: “Grapes are excellent, with full concentration and fruitiness. Higher yields mean we will average around 10% more in 2022 than in 2021.” The company's focus for next year is “working hard on our carbon footprint. We have also switched to a 100% green energy supplier,” says Negrete.

Casa Silva

“We are focusing, as always, on our Carmenère. The commitment of the Silva family to the variety and the expertise of our technical director Mario Geisse, known as the 'King of Carmenère' in Chile, ensures that it will continue to be our flagship,” says Arnaud Frennet, commercial director. Casa Silva has carried out 90 micro-vinifications across three vintages (2005, 2006 and 2007) for the variety, and identified 72 potential Carmenère clones, which its team narrowed down to just two frontrunners. “All were analysed in terms of genetics – it was a real nature versus nurture experiment to see whether it is the genetic make-up of the plant, or where and how it is planted, that makes the most difference,” says Frennet. The producer has also cut its water use by 30%, and halved its amount of pesticides in the last two years. “If we hadn't made those changes when we did, we would have half the production we have today,” says Frennet.

Santa Ema

With estates in Islay de Maipo and Maipo Alto, Santa Ema's total production is 280,000 nine-litre cases per year, with 50% going to its domestic market and 50% to export, for which key markets are China, Brazil, Belgium, and the Czech Republic. A major recent project has been installing 600 solar panels on the property, which will provide almost 100% of the winery's energy. The move to solar represents a US\$250,000 investment, and according to winemaker Rodrigo Blasquez, “it will be around six years before we break even”, but it's “well worth it” for the sustainability of its vineyards. Blasquez says the 2022 harvest is “looking especially good for Cabernet and Syrah,” and highlighted Santa Ema's high-altitude terroir (700m-1000m) as giving “superb freshness, acidity and colour” to its reds this year.

Undurraga's export director, Europe. Deforestation is the second-biggest cause of global warming, so through supporting the replanting work, the winery is also contributing to a more sustainable future, not just for Chile but for the planet. To celebrate the foundation reaching its goal of planting 1m native trees, this year Undurraga used its own recycled wine bottles to create a collection of water glasses featuring printed illustrations of Chile's native trees. Twenty per cent of sales from these 'green glasses', which can be bought via the winery's bricks-and-mortar shop and website, is donated towards the forest foundation's work.

The issue of fast-spreading wildfires raises big questions, as it does for winemakers across the globe, about how climate change will affect the future viability of vineyards.

One of the biggest transitions in Chilean wine is a mass migration south. Put simply, winemakers must go where the

water is. And that life source is creeping increasingly further down the country. It's becoming less of a question of 'should we move?' and more a question of 'how far do we go?'

“Drought is affecting everywhere north of Santiago,” says Undurraga's Eugenio Ponce. “In the next 30 years vineyards in Chile will be mainly down south, and we'll see many more wines coming from southern regions.”

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As a result of this climatic phenomenon, producers are packing their bags and taking off in search of new viticultural manna. “Our future is in the south. The north is too risky,” says Eduardo Jordán, winemaker at Miguel Torres. Certainly, this is no new territory for the likes of that producer, along with Montes, and Casa Silva, which have for some time been experimenting with making wine in the extreme conditions of Patagonia, that far-flung locale that paints Chile's most southerly tip. However, it's the minority of winemakers that are prepared to go to quite such lengths. Depending on where a winery is based, relocating its vineyards to the outer limit of the

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Koyle

Winemaker and co-owner Cristobal Undurraga is clear that “organic is the only way to go”, which is why he has created a thriving ecosystem on Koyle’s 65ha certified organic property. “Our biological corridors are a constant source of information for the vines. Everything above and below the soil is teaching the plants how to be more resilient,” he says. The winemaker attributes the popularity of Koyle’s Carmenère, especially, to the brand’s organic approach. “When there is nitrogen in the soil, the variety will express a lot of pyrazines (green notes). We sell more Carmenère overseas than other wineries because our organic approach means far less of those green notes are present.” Over the next couple of years, the producer will focus on extending the Koyle experience with accommodation and a small restaurant for visitors, to be completed by 2026. Koyle will also release 6,000 bottles of an experimental 100% Grenache rosé through The Wine Society.

Santa Carolina

In August, Santa Carolina launched its premium El Pacto range. The name means ‘The Pact’, and refers to the winery’s commitment to maintaining its heritage while moving into the future. The range includes a Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère, Chardonnay and a single-varietal Romano, the latter being the first commercial vintage following a 12-year-long “rescue project” to cultivate the ancient and extremely rare grape. “Today there are only 15 hectares of Romano in the world. We have four of them,” says winemaker Andres Caballero. He describes the wine as being “like a Pinot Noir but more rustic in terms of tannins; authentic, honest and easy drinking”. Due to the global scarcity of the variety, Caballero says “there is great curiosity about drinking this dinosaur”. Next year, Caballero expects to make “much more than the initial 2,000 bottles, possibly twice as many”. The El Pacto range is available through Ehrmanns, with an RRP of £15-£18.

Aresti

With 400ha spread across four estates, Aresti exports 800,000 cases per year, with around 90% of its production going to export. Its top markets are Finland, Russia, and Japan, but the brand has also been focused on opening up new markets such as Belgium, Iceland, Israel, and Norway. Aresti is preparing to launch its new Bombus (bumble bee) wine, following a three-year project working with bees. “The native Chilean bee is in danger of extinction, but we noticed that it was present in our high-altitude Merlot estate, at 1,245m above sea level,” says global marketing manager Barbara Lewin. “We’ve been planting more flowers that the bees like and using fewer chemicals to protect them. We now have around 50 bee hives on the property.” Aresti aims to partner with a nonprofit to donate a percentage of Bombus profits to the survival of the bees. Included in the Bombus range is a Cabernet Sauvignon and a Sauvignon Blanc (£10-£12), distributed in the UK by Freixenet Copestick.

‘Casablanca used to be the zone of production par excellence, and was the first valley to be explored with real oceanic influence, but now it has a lot of problems with water. It’s very dry’

first valley to be explored with real oceanic influence, but now it has a lot of problems with water. It’s very dry,” says Philippe Rolet, CEO of Los Vascos, the Chilean outpost of Domaines Baron de Rothschild Lafite. “In the past two years, we’ve switched all our grapes over from Casablanca to Colchagua.”



Grape expectations: Santa Carolina

country makes little sense in terms of transport costs and the risk of oxidation that can occur in the wine on route. So the search is on to find a new ‘middle ground’ in the south; a safer bet.

“With our present conditions of temperature, precipitation will move south by around 400 km; this is a massive change,” says Elena Carretero, sustainability director, Santa Rita. “We are already carefully studying some terroirs to the south.”

Undurraga, too, is planning to move its operations, and has earmarked Maule Valley. “What else can we do?” asks Ponce, who reveals the brand recently sold a 250ha vineyard in preparation to move south. “Times are changing, and you’ve got to get prepared for that.”

One region feeling the seismic impact of this migration is Casablanca Valley. Despite producing exceptional wines, its future hangs in the balance as producers exit the area in their droves, heading for Leyda, Limarí and Colchagua.

“Casablanca used to be the zone of production par excellence, and was the



Colour field: vineyard

What’s frustrating for the industry is that the quality of Casablanca wines, especially its Sauvignon Blanc, is top drawer. It feels like a tragedy to leave it all behind. “Casablanca wines are as good as they’ve ever been. There are just more players now,” says Rolet.

Charles de Bournet, CEO of Lapostolle, is torn for this very reason. “We’ve been talking about leaving Casablanca for 10 years. But then we taste the wines and say ‘We can’t leave. They’re just too good.’” But he describes the finances involved in making wine from the region as “shocking”. According to de Bournet, it’s not only the lack of water that’s draining the coffers, but also black frost, to which Lapostolle lost its entire vineyard in 2014, as well as some more unusual, fluffy-tailed suspects. “Rabbits are becoming a huge problem in Casablanca. They start off by eating the grapes, then they move onto the trunks of the vines. It’s out of control because it’s so hot and dry there and they have nothing else to eat.”

Viña Sutil has no regrets about quitting Casablanca to move to Litueche in

Brand updates

Ventisquero

Total production stands at 1.8 million cases across the business, with Brazil, China, and the US its biggest export markets. The company has accelerated its sustainability efforts, and now recycles 75% of all materials used (including corks and glass) and recuperates 80% of its water by filtering and returning it to the winery’s reservoir, before using it to irrigate the vineyard. Ventisquero is gearing up to launch an extremely limited 100%-Garnacha rosé from the Atacama desert as part of its Tara range, which should hit markets in June 2023. Only two barrels of wine were made, and winemaker Felipe Tosso says the limestone soils add a captivating “chalkiness” to the rosé.

Emiliana Organic Vineyards

With 1,000ha spanning Limari, Casablanca and Colchagua, and now Maule, having purchased 250ha in the region last year, Emiliana continues to lead the charge in organic winemaking. No herbicides or pesticides are used, and all electricity in the wineries is renewable. “In May we changed energy provider so that we buy only clean energy. We also have solar panels in the vineyards to power our pumps for irrigation,” says winemaker Noelia Orts. She reveals that “2021 sales were amazing for us”, and that the brand sold 1million cases for the first time. “We

increased both our volume and value across the business by 24% last year. Emiliana now plans to focus on its Animalia range, which launched this year, and includes an intriguing Orange Organic Wine 2021 (£11.99). Orts is keen to share Emiliana’s expertise in organics with fellow winemakers around the world. “More wineries are starting to ask us for advice on organic viticulture. We are happy to help and share our knowledge wherever we can.”

Viña Los Vascos

Part of the Domaines de Rothschild empire, Los Vascos has a total of 3,600ha, of which 90ha are certified organic, and a further 300ha under transition. “The aim is to have all our wines produced organically by the end of the decade,” says Philippe Rolet, CEO, Los Vascos. The winery will launch an oak-aged Chardonnay in its Cromas range, made with grapes harvested from two separate zones of Colchagua (Litueche and Peralillo), which the producer believes makes for a fresher wine with better acidity and ageability. “It’s a first for us to have a Chardonnay at a premium price point (£17.25),” says Rolet. “Chardonnay from Chile used to be much closer to the Californian style, but we’ve been able to maintain the natural characteristics of the region. It’s taken us 20 years to make a Chardonnay that is purely Chilean in style.”

‘We’ve been talking about leaving Casablanca for 10 years. But then we taste the wines and say “We can’t leave. They’re just too good.”’

Colchagua, which has less risk of frost and, presumably, fewer critters. “It’s giving us three times the grape volumes that Casablanca did,” says Nicolas Sutil.

One winery, however, is prepared to die on the hill for Casablanca. According to Terra Noble winemaker Marcelo Garcia, the brand plans to stay put in the valley, where it put down roots in 2006. “It’s easy



Noelia Orts, winemaker, Emiliana Organic Vineyards

Brand updates

Sutil
The US is a key market for the producer’s popular La Playa brand, which represents 80% of the company’s sales. A joint venture created in partnership with a Napa investor, who manages distribution in the US, La Playa has been a member of the ‘1% for the planet’ foundation since 2020. This means that 1% of profits from the sales of La Playa wines are donated to causes that help the environment. “Our focus is on charities that protect the coastal edge of Chile,” says Nicolas Sutil, director. Part of its mission to create “wines with purpose”, the La Playa range includes three quality tiers and pricepoints; an Estate Series, Reserva range and Gran Reserva collection.

Valdivieso
The sparkling wine aficionado has reached one million 9-litre cases per year and will soon launch a sparkling rosé aged on its lees, made from Cinsault. “We are trying to bully Bibendum into taking it,” says Christian Sotomayor, export director. The pink fizz has “fresh berry fruit aromas, and we’ve blended in 10% Pinot Gris for backbone”. An “Asti-style” Muscato is also in the wings, which has “big potential”, along with a Centenario Blanc de Blanc from Bío-Bío, in honour of the winery’s 100-year anniversary. “Chilean Blanc de Blanc is definitely richer than Champagne. We don’t have that razor-like acidity that they have in France, but we have more depth and tension.”

Los Boldos
Part of Portuguese wine group Sogrape, Los Boldos is excited about its work with Touriga Nacional, which winemaker Meinhard Bloem says “behaves very differently in Chile”. Despite having similar granitic soils to Dão, Touriga offers “five times the volume in Cachapoal.” The brand makes a single varietal and a rosé from the grape. Bloem would like to introduce more Portuguese varieties like Touriga Franco, which people are “sceptical about ripening in Chile.”



to sell up and move away; much harder to stay and invest in the region, and work on improving it for future generations,” he tells *the drinks business*. “We’ve reduced our hectareage so that we have lower yields, and more concentrated grapes. Several years ago, everyone was in Limarí, then they left after six or seven years without optimum water. Now the same thing is happening in Casablanca. The quality we have there is huge, so we want to conserve these efforts rather than simply leave.”

It may prove to be a wise decision if the wines from the region continue to delight consumers. But how will Terra Noble manage to maintain its volumes if the situation there is so bleak? In Garcia’s view, the real issue is not a lack of water, but of over planting. “If the government doesn’t limit the number of hectares that can be planted in any one region, then winemakers will experience the same issues wherever they go,” he says. “It’s a matter of overcrowding.”

Noelia Orts, winemaker at Emiliana Organic Vineyards, couldn’t agree more. “We like Casablanca, there is just too much planted there,” she says. “We are going to shrink our plantings – which currently account for more than 250ha in the region – and drop our presence significantly. In

‘If the government doesn’t limit the number of hectares that can be planted in any one region, then winemakers will experience the same issues wherever they go’

future, we will only use Casablanca for our premium wines.”

While producers weigh up the quality of wines against their bank balances, one name crops up again and again in murmurings among the trade.

Itata Valley, located in the Bío-Bío region, around 500km and a five-hour car journey south from Casablanca, is one of Chile’s oldest wine-growing regions. More or less forgotten until fairly recently, winemakers say that arriving in Itata is like “going back in time” due to its unpolished, raw appeal and small-scale growers that work the land by hand. “Itata is not as gentrified as areas like Maule or Maipo. It’s small and rural, much more rustic, with an average vineyard size of around 3ha per grower,” says Christian Sotomayor, export director at Valdivieso.

IMPRESSIVE PRICES

The area’s very old, pre-phylloxera vines are owned by local farmers, who know every nook and cranny of the undulating hills and steep valleys. Due to an unfolding issue regarding the reappropriation of lands to indigenous Mapuche peoples, large wine companies are not willing to risk buying land there, meaning the farmers can command impressive prices for their treasures. The fantastic quality of the region’s grapes has led to brands jostling to secure exclusive, supply deals with Itata farmers.

Viña Carmen, Miguel Torres, Viu Manent, Montes, Sutil, and Louis Felipe Edwards are among those working with Itata growers to transform their “extraordinary raw materials” into wines that can be brought to market. “If I had one coin, I would place it there,” says Andres Cabellero, chief winemaker at Santa Carolina, which includes an Itata wine in its new El Pacto range. “Wines from Itata simply have better balance than anywhere else.”

But what might the farmers get out of these partnerships with commercial wineries, other than big bucks in the short

Three sustainable innovations in Chile

From bountiful biological corridors and biodynamic soils to conserving water and generating their own energy, Chile’s winemakers are taking action now to secure their future.

Zero-waste vineyards

Maquis winemaker Ricardo Rivadeneira takes a holistic approach in the vineyard, making use of every natural element. “We use shredded Pita plants instead of plastic cables to fix the canes to the vines, and we use grape stems as mulch on the property’s roads, which reduces mud and dust in summer.”

Maquis planted lots of acacia trees on its riverside estate, partly to attract bees, but also because “they are naturally rot resistant so they make great fence posts. Most ‘bought’ wood comes treated, to some extent, which has a toxic element,” says Rivadeneira.

Compost mania

Producers are getting giddy over compost. At Koyle, winemaker Cristobal Undurraga says: “Compost is like wine. You can make a very simple wine or a very complex wine. We’re starting to make complex compost.” Cono Sur is also getting in on the game, using giant compost “teabags” to enrich

its soils. “Each teabag weighs 3kg, and we submerge these in our reservoir to add microlife and nutrients,” says winemaker Matías Ríos. “The tea solution feeds into our drip irrigation from there.” Meanwhile, Morandé keeps a vast pool of worms to accelerate its composting process. “We make compost from discarded wine byproducts to fertilise our vines, and the worms speed up the process. We have so much compost now that we might start selling it on to other wineries,” says winemaker Ricardo Baettig.

Leaf reduction

Terra Noble is working on a new growing technique to reduce the number of leaves on plants, which will in turn minimise water evaporation. “We are cutting the leaves more to adjust the balance between the fruit on the plant compared with the number of leaves,” says Tomás Uribe Martínez, regional director, US & Europe. “You need just enough leaves to provide a canopy to cover and protect the fruit, but not so much that the evaporation deprives the vine of water.” With this process, he is starting to see “more rounded, softer tannins and greater freshness” in the wines.

‘Itata is not as gentrified as areas like Maule or Maipo. It’s small and rural, much more rustic, with an average vineyard size of around three hectares per grower’

term? The answer lies in the wineries’ considerable research and development. Established producers have the means and staff numbers to help growers analyse their soils, and the contacts and connections with laboratories to assess their wines. “We do all the lab tests for the grower we work with in Itata so that he doesn’t have to,” says Sutil. With lab work often directing decision-making in the cellar, it’s win/win for everyone. Miguel Torres has a similar arrangement with its growers in the Osorno Valley.



A river runs through it: water is a precious commodity in Chile

“They used to lose a lot of grapes to botrytis, but our team has a lot of experience in this area so we have been able to help them solve that problem,” says Jordán.

Especially seductive is the Cinsault coming out of Itata. The light, fruity red could be “Chile’s new Pinot Noir,” says José Miguel Viu, owner of Viu Manent. Fresh, floral, earthy, and with a minerality derived from Itata’s granitic soils, these are showstopping wines with a distinctly Chilean feel, and with a regional backstory to make even the most veteran sommelier weak at the knees. As well as still wines made from Cinsault,

Valdivieso is working on the launch of a sparkling rosé aged on its lees, suggesting that the variety may have more strings to its bow than first thought.

And what of the Atacama, that hostile desert perched at the top of the country? How have things moved on there in the last 12 months? It was Ventisquero that first planted in the Atacama, in 2007, and according to its winemaker, Felipe Tosso, the past year has been spent experimenting with irrigation techniques to reduce the salt in the soils. “Deserts are full of salt, and drip irrigation causes that salt to rise,” he says. “This year we began using small sprinklers instead to help spread the water out, which means less salt rises to the top of soils, producing wines with less salinity. It has increased our yields by 20% – and we should see the results in our wines that are released in 2024/2025.”

It’s back to the Magic Eye. One minute there is salt, the next minute there’s not. But one thing Chile will always have, is a truly pioneering spirit. **clb**

‘Deserts are full of salt, and drip irrigation causes that salt to rise. This year we began using small sprinklers instead to help spread the water out’

Brand updates

Terra Noble

Carmenère specialist Terra Noble plans to focus on its CA1 and CA2 wines, which launched in March 2022. Both are Carmenère, but made from grapes grown in two contrasting regions, 70km apart – the first from Colchagua, and the second from the coastal region, but with identical winemaking processes used for each. Priced at £29, the brand says the range represents its ongoing respect for the variety. It is also gearing up to launch two red blends from Casablanca; a Carignan/Mourvedre/Garnacha and a Syrah/Tempranillo. Terra Noble’s top export markets include China, US, Brazil, and Germany.

Louis Felipe Edwards

The brand is excited about its Macereo Orange Wine from Itata, which has spent 90 days on its skins. Its first commercial vintage (2019) sold out its 1,200 cases. “For 2020, we doubled our volumes and for 2021 we were able to increase the quantity even further,” says winemaker Nicolas Bizarri. The orange wine is available in Waitrose, priced at £8.99. The producer is also experimenting with Italian variety Sangiovese, making 3,000 bottles per year. All Louis Felipe Edwards wines are 100% vegan.

MontGras

Sales for the brand are up by 17% in 2022, compared with 2021. The producer is experimenting with Tannat, an indigenous variety to Uruguay, which winemaker Adolfo Hurtado says lends “excellent acidity” to its Cabernet Sauvignon blends. “Next year we are going to certify our carbon footprint, and we plan to be fully carbon neutral by August 2023,” says winemaker Adolfo Hurtado. “Our goal is for our Ninquén estate to become the most sustainable in Chile within the next two years. It will be powered by 100% natural energy, with organic agriculture and our own nurseries and orchards to grow trees.” He calls it an “ambitious masterplan” and believes it will lead to a 4m kg increase in capacity for vinification.