

Stirling Wines: Chile & Argentina - Latin Flair to Ward Off the Autumnal Chills

Trevor Stirling (Senior Analyst) • trevor.stirling@bernstein.com • +44-207-170-5087

Introduction

With the days shortening, it's time to cast aside the delights of quaffing refreshing rosé and turn to something more substantial. Alongside South Africa, Chile and Argentina are fast rivalling Australia and New Zealand as true mid-market competitors to the old world classics. Also like South Africa, they have a long vinous history which has only recently been transformed from old-fashioned quantity-driven to state-of-the art techniques and some serious investment from the big guns in the world of wine (e.g. Mouton- and Lafite- Rothschild, Moët-Hennessy).

The vine first arrived in both Chile and Argentina with Spanish settlers in the 1550's, with the dominant grape almost certainly Chile's *pais* and Argentina's *criolla chica*, which is known in California as *mission*, primarily for making communion wine. Both countries received a shot in the arm in the 19th Century, in Chile from wealthy landowners and in Argentina from a wave of European immigration. However, both countries spent most of the 20th century languishing as producers of bulk wine.

Today, that landscape has changed dramatically. In many respects, the paths they have chosen are subtly different, but a few common themes emerge. Both countries' wine industries have become much more export- and quality-oriented. Both countries depend on melt water from the Andes and extensive irrigation. Both countries have also been immune to the phylloxera louse and vines are planted on their own rootstocks, rather being grafted to American rootstocks, as in the rest of the world.

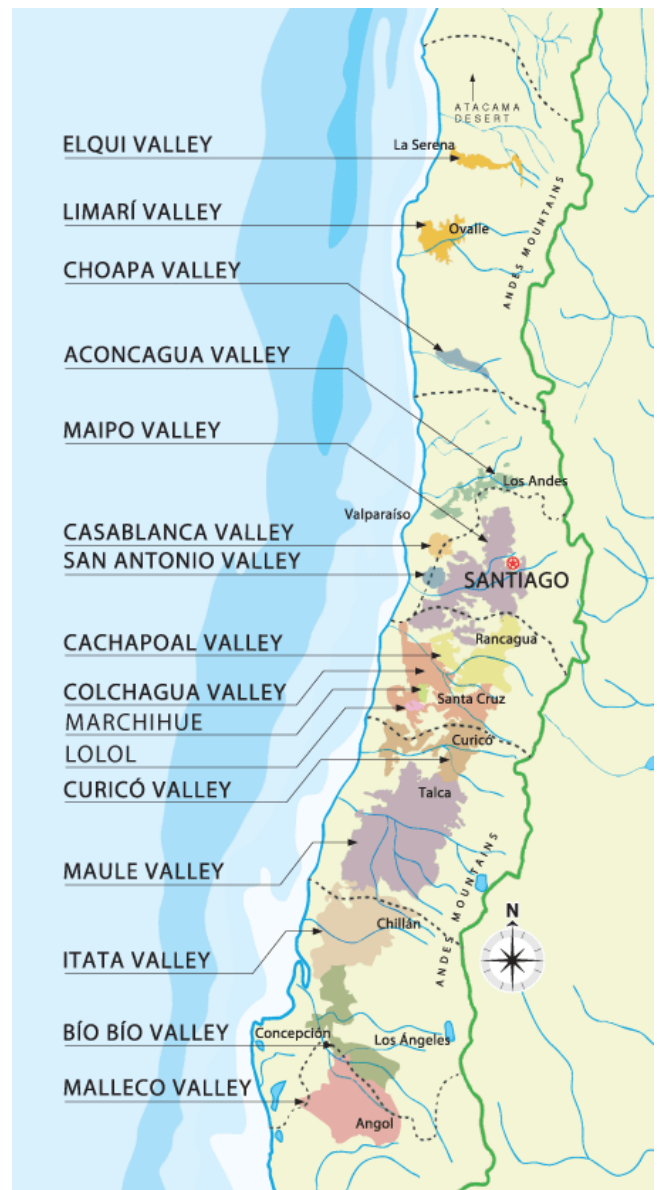
Chile

As mentioned above, Chile's wine industry first took off in the 19th Century when landowners (many of them of Basque origin) who had been enriched by mineral rights, imported French vine cuttings, varieties and wine-makers, fleeing from the depredations of phylloxera. The industry has since had its ups and downs, but a wave of investment and a re-orientation towards exports has revitalized the industry; so today it

produces roughly half the amount of wine of its trans-Andean neighbour.

The Wine Regions of Chile

The key to understanding Chile's wine regions is a mixture of latitude, altitude & cold water.



The grape producing regions of Chile lie between 34° and 38° S, the equivalent of between LA and San

Francisco in California. As the case in California, the ocean plays a big role in determining the climate of individual areas, in the case of Chile, the cold waters of the Humboldt Current which originates in Antarctica. The third factor is altitude. Chile is a very narrow country – a little over 100 miles at its widest. Nevertheless there are four distinct zones: a very narrow coastal strip, which rises to a low coastal range (300m – 800m), a central valley and then the foothills of the Andes.

The historic heartland of Chilean wine production starts with the Aconcagua valley, to the North of Santiago, and runs through Maipo to the Colchagua Valley. These valleys are separated from the Pacific by a range of coastal hills and the warm dry climate is well suited for growing red grapes. To the West lies the Casablanca valley. Because it is closer to the coast and the cold waters of the Humboldt Current, this is the classic area for white grapes.

However, perhaps the most exciting regions are to the West, North and South of the classic zones. South-West of Casablanca and closer to the ocean is the San Antonio region, which is fast rivalling Casablanca as Chile's quintessential white grape region, even though it was only first planted in 1998. As you might expect from a cooler climate zone this is the source of exciting Pinot Noir and Sauvignon but also some very elegant Syrah which are reminiscent of the Syrah's of the Northern Rhone – poor man's Côte Rôtie!

Limarí is further north in what should be a much hotter climate but there are no coastal hills so the region has direct contact with the Pacific and the cooling Humboldt Current. This region is rapidly acquiring a reputation for top-class Chardonnay and Syrah.

Finally, Bio-Bio and Malleco in the south have much damper cooler climates than the classic regions and are proving a high quality source of Riesling and Gewurztraminer.

Grapes of Chile

Given its strong French heritage, it's no surprise that the classic French varieties form the backbone of Chilean wine, with a few twists. Cabernet Sauvignon is the focus of most of the premium red wines, often blended with Merlot. However, much of what is called Merlot in Chile is actually another French grape Carmènere. This grape has now virtually disappeared from Bordeaux but must have been mixed up with Merlot in the cuttings that were sent to Chile in the 19th Century. Although Chile can make very high quality Cabernet, I believe that its warm dry climate is more like the South of France than Bordeaux and hence is

better suited to Syrah, a theme I'll return to. Also, as producers push into cooler climate areas, there are a number of high-quality value-for-money Pinot Noirs coming to the market.

Similar to Merlot, much of what was believed to be Sauvignon Blanc is actually Sauvignon Vert and accounts for the thin acidity of many early Chilean wines labelled as "Sauvignon". However, as the producers sort out their clonal selection, I have tasted top top-class wines that have more fruit intensity than the French classics, without going right over-the-top as some NZ wines do. In the past, most Chilean Chardonnays were made in the "international" over-oaked Dolly Parton style. But once again there are great cool climate wines emerging and the newly adopted Stirling house unoaked Chardonnay is from Chile (see below).

Chilean Producers

Until recently, the Chilean wine industry was dominated by the descendents of the large 19th Century investors. The big daddy of the industry is Concha y Toro, which is one of the few large quoted wine companies in the world. In common with its peers, Concha y Toro used to be firmly focused on the mid market/low premium as epitomized by its very dependable brand Casillero del Diablo. Its flagship wine was and is Don Melchor Cabernet Sauvignon, a very good value Bordeaux look-alike.



However, Concha y Toro has developed a range of brand families such as Frontera, Terrunyo & Trio. Of particular note to us are some truly excellent premium brand families. Cono Sur makes top-notch Pinot Noirs and Concha y Toro have released some wines under the 'Wine-makers Lot' sub-label. If you live in the UK, the Wine Society lists a particularly fine Pinot Noir.



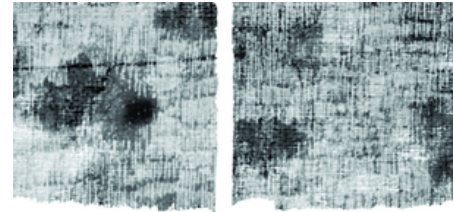
One of the new ranges that has particularly impressed me is Maycas from the Limari region in the North of Chile. They produce a delicious unoaked Chardonnay which I think represents terrific value – imagine a full bodied Chablis Premier Cru at half the price. This is the new Stirling house wine I mentioned above.



At the top end of their range, Concha y Toro has a joint venture with Mouton Rothschild called Almaviva, which is arguably Chile's best wine. If you spot an older vintage of this wine on a restaurant list, with a bit of bottle age, don't hesitate – not cheap but still a bargain.



Finally, Concha y Toro also own Emiliana, and more importantly Emiliana Organicos, formerly know as VOE (Vinedos Organicos Emiliana). As the name suggests, these are wines produced from organically farmed grapes. Their top wine is called Coyam, an eclectic blend of Merlot, Carmènere, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Mourvèdre, and is a former winner of the Best Wine of Chile award.



COYAM

Emiliana

Coyam was the word used for "oak" by the Mapuches, the original inhabitants of central and southern Chile. Ancient oaks surround the Emiliana vineyards in the Colchagua Valley, where our grapes are organically grown and hand picked. French and American oak are used judiciously to age this skillfully crafted blend of carefully selected Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmènere, Merlot and Petit Verdot. The result is a unique wine, with lush fruit and subtle oak, that echoes its harmony with nature.

WINE MADE WITH ORGANICALLY GROWN GRAPES

If Concha y Toro is the behemoth of the industry, there is also a tier of extremely high quality wineries that are still of reasonable scale. For me the primus inter pares is Montes. The top end of their range is the so-called Alpha, with a flagship Alpha M Cabernet Sauvignon. However, my favourite is their Alpha Syrah and above all their top-of-the range Syrah Folly. This is a fabulous wine, in my view to be ranked as one of the global premier league of Syrah's. The labels are also fantastic, with each year a different design from Ralph Steadman who used to do the art-work for Oddbins.



Casa Lapostolle has its home in the same Colchagua valley as Montes. This winery is owned by the same family that owns Grand Marnier and their flagship wine is a blend of Merlot, Carmènere, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot, called Clos Apalta, a great wine with a bit of bottle age.



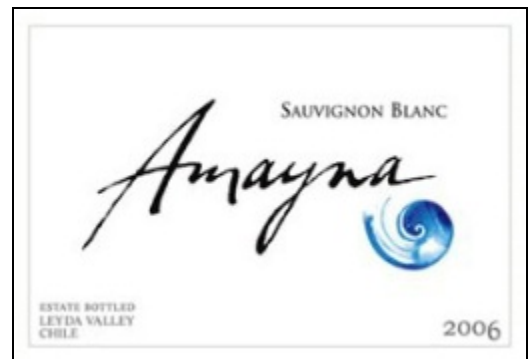
Errázuriz is another mid-tier firm, I believe one of the original Basque oligarchs, but widely distributed on the export markets. Their wines are very high quality – look out for the wild-ferment range of varietals. They used to have a JV with Mondavi called Señá, but they are now sole owners, buying out the Mondavi stake after the sale to Constellation. Their excellent flagship wine is called Don Maximiano.



In the section on the wine regions of Chile, I talked about the new cooler-climate region of San Antonio. One winery from this region that has rapidly risen to prominence is Matetic and their premium range EQ. The Matetic family are one of Chile's largest land-owners and set up this organically-farmed winery in 1999, slightly further inland than the classic white grape territory. As befits a cooler climate region, they do an excellent Pinot Noir (maybe just a tad over-extracted) but their Syrah is to die for and a former winner of the Best Wine of Chile award.



Drilling down further into the San Antonio region is the Leyda valley which has its own sub-appellation. This is home to what I think is Chile's best Sauvignon Blanc: Amayna from Garcés Silva. As is the case for many of Chile's top wines, imagine an old-world equivalent, in this case Sancerre, intensify the fruit, add a little more body but stop short of being a varietal caricature. Delicious.



Also from the Leyda valley is the eponymous Leyda winery, part of the much larger San Pedro group, ultimately owned by the CCU holding company, in which Heineken has a stake.

Argentina

Argentina is the world's fifth largest wine producer and most of the production goes for local consumption. In the late 60's Argentineans drank 90 litres per head, at a time that the UK was drinking 3 litres. By 2005, that had dropped to 28 litres and the UK had climbed to 23 litres. As a result of this collapse in domestic consumption, the industry was forced to raise quality and re-orient itself towards the export market. This re-orientation went hand in hand with a wave of foreign investment, both from European wine producers but also from Chile, much to many Argentineans chagrin.

The foreign investors were attracted by the very favourable conditions for vine cultivation. Because of the rain-shadow effect of the Andes, the air is very dry,

leading to low incidence of the fungal diseases which are the bane of most grape growers' lives. Furthermore, the climate in the foothills of the Andes provides the perfect balance of bright, warm sunny days to ripen the grapes but cooler, fresher nights to preserve the fruit flavours and acids that give the wine character. Finally, the melt water from the Andes provides plentiful water for irrigation.

Wine Producing Regions of Argentina

Mendoza is by far the most important wine-growing province in Argentina, accounting for approx 70% of all production. Typical vineyard altitude is between 600m and 1,100m. Perhaps the best known area in the province is Luján de Cuoyo (which was Argentina's first designated appellation) in the upper Mendoza valley with the highest altitudes in the area. In the Tupungato region in the Uco valley, altitudes can be as high as 1,200m. High altitudes are in general good for quality wine because they lead to cooler fresher nights, and what the experts call greater diurnal temperature differences (i.e. the difference between highest and lowest temperatures in a 24 hour cycle), which help preserve those vital acids. This is classic Malbec country.

San Juan and La Rioja, which are much hotter than Mendoza, are primarily bulk wine producers and need not bother us.

Salta is further north than Mendoza and in theory hotter, but once again latitude is trumped by altitude for this is home to some of Argentina's highest vineyards, rising to 1,500m above sea level.

At the other end of the country, Rio Negro in Patagonia has historically been the classic fruit-growing area of Argentina. However, in a similar way to Elgin in South Africa, it is fast becoming a source of high-quality cooler climate grapes and is the centre of sparkling wine production for Argentina.



Grapes of Argentina

The signature red grape of Argentina is Malbec. This grape is originally from South West France. It still provides part of the mix in many Bordeaux blends and is found as a mono-varietal in Cahors. However, the grape often struggles to ripen in the maritime climate of Bordeaux and has found its true spiritual home in Argentina where it can produce wonderful intense fruit-driven wines, with heaps of tannin that makes them a great accompaniment to steak, and yet are ready for drinking much earlier than the equivalent wines made from Cabernet Sauvignon. Argentina also makes some top-class Cabernet Sauvignon but so do many countries in the New World. Its Malbec's are unique.

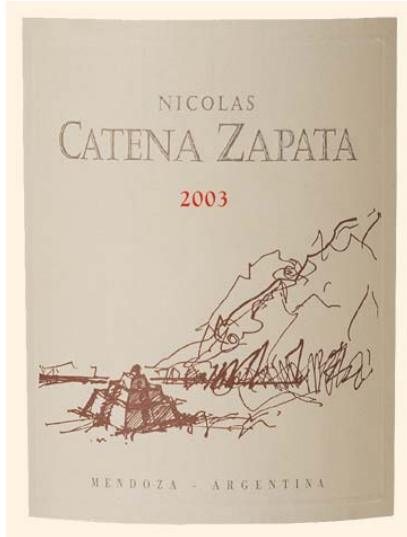
The second most planted wine variety is Bonarda from Italy, which was brought to Argentina in the 19th Century. There is much debate about exactly which Italian grape it is descended from but it is increasingly fashionable.

The signature white grape of Argentina is Torrontés, a grape that has Spanish roots. Historically, this was the work-horse quaffing wine for domestic consumption. As yields have been reduced and modern wine-making techniques applied, quality has undoubtedly improved. Some critics have given very high marks to these floral wines but I have yet to find one that really knocked my socks off - but then I haven't tasted that many either.

Chardonnay has proved the most successful of the classic white varieties and can be very successful at higher altitude.

Argentinean Producers

For me, the wines of Nicolas Catena are at the top of the heap in Argentina. His flagship wine is Zapata, which is a Malbec based Bordeaux blend.



However, my personal favourites are his Alta range. As the name suggests these come from high altitude vineyards in the Mendoza area. His Malbec is truly world class but I would also place his Chardonnay in the global premier league – imagine a Meursault with attitude. This wine does see a lot of new oak but it has the intensity of fruit and acidity to support it and is overall a very balance wine, albeit one that need a couple of years of bottle age to truly integrate.



Another source of high quality Malbec is O Fournier; their flagship wines are labelled Alfa Crux.



The Zuccardi family also make excellent Malbec but they are probably most famous for their Tempranillo. This grape is the backbone of Rioja and Ribero Del Duero in Spain and the Zuccardi family make probably the best New World rival to the original classics under the Q label.



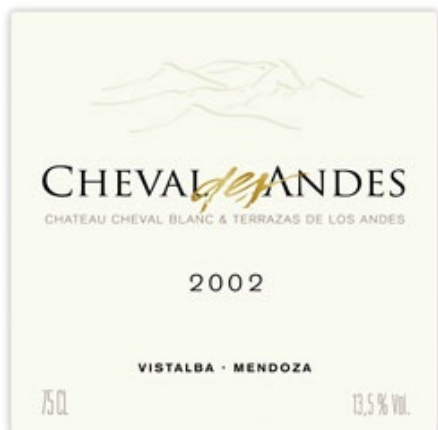
Susana Balbo is a leading example of the new wave of Argentinean producers. Together with her husband, she owns the Dominio del Plata winery but markets her top-of-the-range wines under her own name. The wines are close rivals of those of Catena wines at slightly sharper prices. One critic described her Malbec as "At once creamy and penetrating, pliant and juicy, boasting impressive concentration of sweet fruit and enticing inner-mouth perfume". I couldn't match his flowery language but I agree with his conclusions.



One of the most famous foreign investors in Argentina is Michel Rolland, probably the most famous (or notorious) consultant oenologist in the world, Michele Rolland, the man behind many 100 Parker point blockbusters. He is part of a group of seven investors (hence Clos de los Siete) who have sent up a shared winery but each make their own wine. Michel Rolland's version is fairly widely available and although it is denser than some of the more elegant Malbecs stops well short of being over-the-top.



Another French investor is Château Cheval Blanc from St Emilion. Cheval Blanc was 50/50 owned by Bernard Arnault and Albert Frere but Arnault has recently sold his stake to LVMH. The top of the range Argentinean wine is called Cheval des Andes. It is excellent but a bit pricey for what it is. The next tier of wines are sold under Terrazas de los Andes, and the Reserva range represent much better value-for-money.



French wine-makers are not the only European investors in Argentina. Masi from Italy who are best known for their Amarone have also invested. They make a intriguing wine called Pasa Doble, which is a blend of Malbec and Corvina (the core grape for Valpolicella and Amarone).



Last but not least come the fruits of Chilean investment. The Montes firm, which I mentioned earlier in the context of Chilean Syrah, has established a winery called Kaiken, named after a Patagonian wild goose that flies between Argentina and Chile. Their Malbec is very approachable, good value-for-money and I have recently seen it as a pouring wine in the BA business lounge at Heathrow Terminal 5.



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