

From the Wine Cellar
by Jo and Tom Chesworth

The Fashionable Wines of Chile

Chile is one of the largest wine producers in the world and one of the largest wine exporters to the U.S.A., although there are some “Chilean” grapes which are grown to make wine for domestic consumption, mostly Muscat of Alexandria and Pais. Pais is the mission grape of Chile which was originally planted from seeds brought by missionaries in the 16th century and used mostly as wine for the Eucharist by the church. These wines are grown mostly in Bio-Bio, the southernmost and therefore the coolest part of the large central valley that stretches from near the southern border to the Aconcagua Valley north of Santiago and contains a good 80% of the wine-growing regions in the country.

The real money in the Chilean wine industry is growing “International Favorite” grapes for quality wine which is exported. Most of the grapes grown are Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot (actually often Carmenère, a very similar grape) and Sauvignon (most often Sauvignon Vert or Sauvignon Gris.) The reason for these old-fashioned varieties in Chile is that just before phylloxera (a root louse that attacks grapevines) and downy mildew devastated the wine industry in the rest of the world, a fellow named Silvestre Ochagavia Echazarreta imported the most popular French viniferas. After phylloxera hit Europe a number of French ex-patriots began growing grapes and making wine in Chile specifically for export to Europe using these grapes. To keep the disease at bay they instituted strict quarantine rules on the importation to Chile of grapevines. Partly because of these restrictions and partly because of Chile’s geographical isolation and climate the vineyards of Chile are still free of phylloxera. It is one of the only wine regions in the world where vinifera grapes are grown on their roots and not grafted onto North American root stock.

We have heard it said that wine changed its taste (it always used to taste better the old way than the new way) when the vinifera vines had to be grafted onto North American roots to defeat phylloxera. If you believe this is so, then you should drink Chilean wine. Of course, the terroir is not French, but *c’est la guerre*, one cannot have everything. We have noticed little if any difference between Chilean and European or Californian wines of the same style using the same grapes.

Wine for export is the rule in the Chilean wine industry. Some of it bears the names of international wine companies who grow grapes and have winemaking operations there, such as Baron Philippe de Rothschild among the reds. Of course, there are also Chilean wine companies (or at least wineries with Chilean names). Try a Concha Y Toro Marques Casa Cabernet Sauvignon at \$19 or Concha Y Toro Xplorador Cab at just \$9. Other Cabernet Sauvignons available are Carmen at \$9, Casa Lapostolle at \$11, Santa Rita “Reserva” at \$12 and Vina Santa Carolina \$8.

If you prefer or want to try a Merlot, buy Baron Philippe de Rothschild’s Escudo Rojo at \$15 a bottle or Caliterra “Reserva” at \$11, Carmen at \$9, Concha Y Toro Casillero at \$11 or Walnut Crest at a bargain \$6. Be brave. Try a different red that we think you’ll like as well as Merlot, such as Concha Y Toro Casillero Carmenère at \$11, a Santa Rita “Reserva” Carmenère at \$12 or an organically grown Carmenère – Natura at \$12.

If you’re having mahi-mahi for dinner or your taste runs to white wine, try one of these Chilean Chardonnays – Caliterra “Reserva” at \$11, Casa Lapostolle at \$11, Concha Y Toro Casillero Diablo at \$10 or an organic Chardonnay – Natura at \$11. A selection of Sauvignon Blancs is also available: Caliterra “Reserva” at \$11, Casa Lapostolle at \$10, Concha Y Toro Casillero Diablo at \$11 and Walnut Crest Valle Central also at \$11.

Or go clear off the deep end with a chilled Chilean Pink Goat Syrah Rosé at \$14 a bottle.