

I had the privilege of visiting Santa Rita's vineyards in Chile in January 2011, as the guest of the Claro Group Wineries. This report covers my visit and a general account of the Chilean wine industry.

History

The first vines came to Chile around 500 years ago accompanying the Spanish settlers, the conquistadores, who required red wines for their Communion.

Emancipation from colonial rule in 1818, led by Bernardo O'Higgins, led to a redefinition of Chile's national identity. A new, independent economy developed and with it, an emergent class of entrepreneurial families who controlled the major industries. As a fashionable adjunct, many of these families also diversified into viticulture, including some of the well known names which still dominate the wine landscape today (Santa Rita, Conch Y Toro, Errazuriz and so on).

Around the time of Independence, there were two major influences at play: a desire to emulate French fashion, and phylloxera. The new wealthy classes invested much of their disposable income on all things French. European style wines were in demand and thus cuttings of Bordeaux varieties travelled over to Chile's vineyards and with them, the French style of wine making.

The workhorse grape, pais, was soon superseded by the immigrant interlopers cabernet sauvignon, carménère, merlot, pinot noir, sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, sémillon and riesling-now all established pillars of today's Chilean wine scene. Many of the companies built fantastic properties in the countryside, with vineyards attached. Exports gained momentum, assisted by European economic turmoil and devastation of vineyards there by phylloxera. It is still not clearly understood why Chilean vineyards are still free of this pest but it was a major advantage in the development of commercial viticulture.

Following considerable political upheaval, further changes were in store for the wine industry in the 1980s, with the liberalisation of markets. During this period, a number of forward thinking companies invested in modern winemaking facilities. This has been rewarded as global appetite for quality wines has risen ever since; exploration of the country's diverse terroir continues and with it, the breadth and quality of Chile's wines.

Grapes

Reds

Chile's most important red is cabernet sauvignon. The late ripening variety does particularly well in Aconcagua, Maipo, Alta Maipo, Colchagua and Cachapoal, being dry and warm regions. Different style wines result from the different terroirs, with some elegant monovarietal examples, having pure and concentrated blackcurrant notes; careful site and fruit selection has resulted in some iconic cabernets, demonstrating complexity, concentration and a unique expression. It also appears in Bordeaux-style blends.

Carménère and Merlot are also important as single varietals but may also be blended; however, for a long time, they were confused with one another. Since formal identification (only in 1994), their subtly different identities have been nurtured. Carménère generally takes two weeks longer to ripen compared with Merlot. Useful in blends, varietal merlot

yields a generous wine, with intense red berry, plum and capsicum notes; carménère gives elegant, spicy, earthy wines with firm but ripe tannins. It is the Chilean speciality grape, as Malbec is to Argentina.

Syrah, Carignan, Malbec and Pinot Noir plantings are on the increase as terroir pioneers experiment with the best sites for them. Of these, Syrah shows particular promise, producing some elegant wines in the cooler regions of San Antonio and Elqui; warmer sites in Colchagua give bolder and more concentrated examples. There are now around 5,000 ha of plantings of Syrah (20ha ten years ago).

The Land and its Regions

Chile's long narrow shape is defined by the Andes to the East, the Pacific Ocean on the West, the Atacama Desert in the North and the cool reaches of Patagonia to the South. The resulting Mediterranean climate is a viticultural utopia: prevailing winds from the Pacific and the Humboldt current bring a cooling influence, the latitude ensures a long ripening period and the low rainfall is compensated for by the generous snowmelt from the Andes. The majority of vineyards are irrigated (apart from older vines), which can exacerbate nematodes and vine vigour but in years of erratic weather patterns, delivers consistency. Managers from a Santa Rita vineyard visited in Casablanca commented that frost was the major vineyard hazard there and that water spraying was used to combat the risk. The vagaries of El Niño and then La Niña in the last few years have resulted in uneven ripening; canopy management has been key as excessive vine vigour, and higher yielding, less concentrated wines are an often unfortunate consequence of perfect growing conditions.

Chile's vineyards are mostly concentrated in the 1000 km long plateau, south of Santiago, the **Central Valley**. Some 90% of all of the wine exported by Chile comes from this region. It is subdivided into a number of other regions, including the hot, dry **Maipo Valley**. The Maipo Valley is most famous for its quality cabernet sauvignons and some ripe chardonnays, with good acidity. The **Rapel Valley**, to the south, encompasses the regions of **Colchagua, Cachapoal and Apalta**. Full bodied and concentrated reds are produced in these areas, particularly merlot, cabernet sauvignon and carménère. **Curicó** and **Maule** are cooler and wetter subregions, respectively; both areas produce a wide range of wines and Maule is Chile's oldest wine growing area.

Aconcagua produces some of Chile's most elegant wines. At the point where the Andes finally yield to the Pacific, the effect of the cooling Humboldt Current creates a cool microclimate. Frequent morning fogs cool the grapes, and thus slow ripening; this allows the complexity of the wines to develop as they hang for longer on the vines. Some of the country's best examples of sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and pinot noir herald from the **Casablanca Valley**. Planting only really began in earnest in the 1980s; however, success was soon evident and this became Chile's first cool climate coastal region. **San Antonio** is another subregion with even cooler coastal conditions. **Leyda** is a subregion of San Antonio; white wines from these regions are elegant, racy and refreshing acidic. The reds are spicy, structured and complex.

The **Southern Valley** region encompasses **Itata, Biobío** and **Malleco**; these are some of Chile's newer discoveries, often situated on hilly, cooler coastal regions; irrigation is not required here.

A relatively recent phenomenon has occurred in Chile, perhaps an inevitable result of the oligopolistic nature of the market; Chile's wineries are, on average, the largest of any wine producing country and land is concentrated in the ownership of a few large companies. In such conditions, an opportunity has emerged for smaller scale wine producers to join forces and gain critical mass. MOVI (Movimiento de Viñateros Independientes) was created and its aim is to be dedicated to quality on a small scale; it is really about being quite artisanal and personal with wines and it currently has twelve members, hailing from a variety of different backgrounds and wine regions.

Santa Rita

History

In 1880, Domingo Fernández Concha, a successful entrepreneur, founded the Santa Rita estate. The stunning family property looks out on to forty hectares of garden, populated by arauco, cedar, citrus, olive and almond trees. The proportions of the estate are grandiose at every level: is home to Chile's largest bougainvillea, whose growth has been supported by numerous inventive props. Santa Rita's chapel was built in honour of a female scion of the family; her delay in finding a suitable husband caused so much consternation that the church was erected by her father in celebratory relief. A distracted putto gazes at his reflection in the waters of a large ornamental pond as visitors marvel at the estate.

The estate was previously owned by Ignacio de Olivos, Pedro Garcíá del Huerta and Paula Jaraquemada. At the time of Paula Jaraquemada's ownership, Chile was fighting for independence from Spain. In 1814 it is told that following the Battle of Rancagua, one hundred and twenty patriots- including one of Chile's founding fathers, Bernardo O'Higgins- arrived at the estate, battle weary. Paula Jaraquemada gave them refuge the estate's wine cellars. When the pursuing soldiers arrived, she demonstrated great courage in seeing them off, enabling the concealed patriots to recuperate and continue the fight for independence-achieved in 1818. The site is now a national monument but also the inspiration for the brand Santa Rita 120.

Markets

Brand Chile is a success story in the UK although the £4.99 price level remains elusive, frequently on offer to the reality of £3.99. Once this price point is accepted, success is down to quality and volume production.

Santa Rita's largest market is currently the USA, with Ireland, Denmark, Canada, Brazil, China and the UK in approximate descending order of importance for sales. In Europe, Santa Rita is performing reasonably in spite of the economic uncertainty; Brazil, Canada and China are markets with strong momentum. Previously successful, Ireland is currently one of the tougher markets, due to the severity of its downturn.

Chile is currently gaining share from Australia in a number of areas; first, the appreciation of the Australian dollar has eroded the country's lower cost export advantage. Second, jammy, high alcohol styles have been abandoned by consumers in favour of more elegant examples, which Chile can offer at a reasonable price.

Santa Rita's UK retail outlets are with Majestic Wine, Oddbins, Laithwaites and The Wine Society to name but a few; greater involvement with Waitrose is an aspiration and there is a strong possibility of an own label collaboration with Marks and Spencer; Tesco (actually the UK's largest off licence) would be desirous for obvious reasons.

The Claro Group

The Claro Group, led by the late Ricardo Claro, is one of the largest diversified conglomerates in Chile and houses the tenth largest shipping company in the world. Its interests range from packaging, steel, mining, shipping, glass, media to wine.

The Claro Group purchased the Santa Rita brand and the estate in the 1980s. Prior to this, sales were mostly domestic (although Santa Rita wines appeared on a Norwegian wine list in 1920!)

Mr. Claro made some fortuitous purchases of wineries. Many were in need of reorganisation and modernisation. With the Group's investment and propitious acquisitions, the company grew in stature and quality. In 1987, the Group purchased Viña Carmen, a more established brand; in 2001, it bought Terra Andina from Pernod Ricard with the aim of having entry level priced single varietals with proven distribution. Doña Paola was acquired in 1997, in Mendoza. The icon brands Casa Real and Medalla Real are capable of great quality and may be aged; Casa Real is 100% cabernet sauvignon and is only made in the best vintages. Casa Real was born in 1989 and has been nurtured under the expertise of Cecilia Torres, who has been the only taster for twenty years. Medalla Real is an umbrella brand for a number of single varietal brands of excellence.

Santa Rita is now Chile's second largest owner of vineyards and can draw on a great diversity of terroir, which is ever increasing. Ricardo Claro's philosophy was to invest and Santa Rita's has one of the most diversified vineyard portfolios in Chile, with interests ranging from north to south; by having access to such a wide range of grape varieties and terroirs, the company has insurance against climatic hazards and select the best quality grapes for the wines. For example, within the Medalla Real portfolio, it has cabernet sauvignon from Maipo, sauvignon blanc of Leyda and chardonnay from Limarí and carménère from Colchagua, all yielding the very best examples of their kind.

For Santa Rita, cabernet sauvignon is the best selling variety although carménère is advancing, benefiting from a country-wide decision to focus on its signature grape.

Forever in discovery mode, Santa Rita is looking into sites for syrah and merlot, which currently represent a smaller part of the portfolio but are the former is certainly in vogue. Carignan from Chile's oldest wine making region, Maule, is proving to be more aristocrat than arriviste. Old, low yielding traditional bush vines on small plots are producing some very interesting wines.

Tastings

Cristóbal Fernandez led me through the family tree of wines and nothing disappointed. We tasted varietally, encompassing different brands and logically moving up the palate scale from light whites to fuller bodied reds. I have listed the highlights, in my opinion below.

Of the Sauvignon Blancs, I was especially delighted by the Carmen Gran Reserva, 2009 from Leyda. This had an inviting nose with a kaleidoscope of flavours, including apple, grass, lemon, (could I smell sea salt?); the palate replicated the nose and the flavours continued into a long finish. This elegance and complexity comes from a cooler microclimate, higher altitude, with calcium and clay rich soils. The 13% alcohol was in balance with the wine's concentration. Can this really retail at £9.49?

Of the Cabernet Sauvignons, I marginally preferred the 2008 Carmen Gran Reserva to the 2007 Santa Rita Medalla Real; the former hails from Maipo Alto, home of the iconic Casa Real and Almaviva. The nose invites with blackcurrant, eucalyptus and coffee; the palate reveals the wine's elegant, ripe, fine tannins, further blackcurrant and a long finish. The concentration in this wine is down to the age of the vines and the good diurnal temperature differences; at higher altitude, the intensified ultraviolet radiation of the afternoon sun ripens the grapes, exciting and developing the anthocyanins, but the cool mountain air cools them down in the evening.

Terra Andina's 2009 Carménère Reserva is a rich vermilion colour. The nose is an elegant and complex mix of chocolate, spice, pepper. The 14% alcohol is carried off successfully as it is in fine balance with the palate; tannins are ripe but firm, the acidity is high and the flavours persist into a long, pleasing finish. At £7.99, this represents good value.

The Terra Andina Altos Carménère/Carignan blend (70%/30% respectively) is an interesting marriage. Small parcels of old bush vines in the Maule region give low volumes of good quality carignan. It is almost opaque purple in colour but the shape on the palate is Montagues and Capulets. The firm structure of the carignan provides a framework for the the fleshier carménère but the combination is harmonious. For £9.99, this unusual but successful wizardry deserves a following once understood.

The last sample was 2005 Casa Real, 100% cabernet sauvignon from vines approaching fifty years of age. It is entirely hand harvested and spends fourteen months in new French oak. The appearance was a garnet core, showing some age with a narrow but graduating garnet rim. The nose was a rich, ripe but not overbearing blackcurrant and blackberry scent. The palate demonstrated the pedigree of this wine, with concentration of fruit, grippy ripe tannin and great acidity all well balances. This retails at £30 may be enjoyed now or aged further.

Lunch in La Casa Doña Paola completed the winery experience, where I was able to parry the acidity of ceviche with a glass of sauvignon blanc (Leyda); the delightful museum dedicated to pre-Colombian art showcases some truly precious artefacts and looks out across a matrix of vines. Here, I was reminded of the cruelty and dishonour shown to the last King of the Incas, whose gold ransom was taken bona fide in exchange for his life; the gold was expropriated and he was executed. I marvelled at some incredible hats and headpieces, made from a vast array of materials. Both serve as a reminder of Chile's roots and long heritage.

Summary

There is a matryoshka doll of success here: Ricardo Claro's metamorphosis of Santa Rita, has made it a leading world player in top quality wine production. Chile's success and excellence with single varietals is attributable to its certainty of identity in wine making, where other countries struggle to brand themselves and ape traditional markets.

In today's globally competitive markets, wine styles can come in and out of fashion but classics always endure. Chile is the country where single varietals reach their finest expression, a point not lost on customers. They are able to do this because of the unique terroir advantages but also because the winemaking is intelligent and adaptable.

I am truly grateful to my sponsors for a thoroughly enjoyable, memorable and insightful visit.