

Chile's new icon wines: Producers pushing up the quality bar

Chile has historically only had a small number of iconic wines but that is all set to change argues Geoffrey Dean. Fresh from two weeks of travelling through the country, he reports that there is a second tier of wine producers who are all vying for the equivalent of a 'Champion's League' spot and making legitimate claims to be the 'next big thing'. Dean meets the winemakers and tastes the wines – highlighting those that he thinks should be on every sommelier's radar.

By [Geoffrey Dean](#) March 26, 2019

Wines from Chile have always had intensity of fruit but now there is a growing trend to enhance the regional typicity of the wines – particularly at the premium end.

Spend a couple of weeks travelling round Chile, tasting the wines and talking to the winemakers, and what strikes you is how intent they are on producing high quality wines with a sense of place. Nothing encapsulates that better than the Cautin VIGNO movement, on which more later, but the elegance and refinement of those wines were common features along with Chile's historically generous fruit expression.

While icon wines like **Almaviva**, **Chadwick**, **Don Melchor** and **Seña** continue to attract global acclaim, it is really the pretenders in their wake who are lifting the bar. A posse of these wannabes, all aiming for a wine industry equivalent of a Champions League spot, are raising their game so relentlessly that the old order is being threatened. It is great news for the consumer.



Vik winemaker Cristian Vallejo with his top wine

The second tier revolution is being spearheaded by **Viña Vik**, with its multi-million dollar backing from the uber-wealthy Norwegian family of the same name. The vines, planted in 2006-7 in the Cachapoal Valley to a density of 8,100 per hectare (60% higher than Chile's average), get a cooling afternoon sea breeze blowing in from 40 miles away. This is crucial for the freshness of the Cabernet Sauvignon, which always forms the majority of its three labels. Cabernet Franc, Carmenere and Merlot make up about a third of the grand vin, which sees 100% new French oak for 23 months, comfortably absorbing it. Cristian Vallejo, with Vik since the very start, is a passionate winemaker who crafts some eye-catching wines of poise, structure and balance.



Emily Faulconer

Equally talented is Emily Faulconer, winemaker at **Viña Carmen** in the Maipo Valley, whose barrel-fermented and barrel-aged Semillon 2017 was the white 'find' of the visit. "This is such a revelation of what a white wine from here can be," Faulconer, 34, declared. "The fruit came from Colchagua Valley dry-farmed vines that were planted in 1958 by the same growing family that farm them now. The wine has weight and texture, as well as balance from

the old vines.” Chile, which used to have 30,000 hectares of Semillon until the 1980s, now has only 800h left. It was gratifying to hear Falconer say that “we want to take responsibility for these old vines.”

Carmen’s Gold Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon 2015 is a reminder of how good the best unoaked Chilean examples from this varietal can be. From ungrafted vines planted in 1957, with a low yield of 3.5 tons per hectare, this was aged mainly in third and fourth use barrels. Blessed by very fine tannins and layers of complexity, as well as spice, it did not need any new oak.

By contrast, Miguel Torres’ regal **Manso de Velasco Cabernet Sauvignon 2013** from 116-year old vines in the Curico Valley effortlessly absorbs 70% new oak. Chalky tannins were very well integrated and, with its seductive red and black fruit, full body and long finish, this complex 13.5% wine is another world class Chilean red.



So too is the **Montes Alpha 'M' 2015**, a Bordeaux blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (80%), Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Petit Verdot. "The idea of this wine is to pay homage to this vineyard here in the Apalta Valley," Dennis Murray, Montes' export manager, said. "It's considered the number one spot for reds in Chile, with a hectare selling for \$120,000. Compare that to \$60,000 in Colchagua and \$40,000 in Maipo." Elegant and complex, yet massively concentrated and with added structure from 100% new oak, this is a wine with real presence. The **Montes Purple Angel 2016** (92% Carmenere & 8% Petit Verdot) also sees 100% new oak, and has great intensity and length, with overt but well-integrated tannins. It is another wine of very high quality.

Continuing the theme of outstanding Cabernet Sauvignon, it is heartening that a massive producer like **Luis Felipe Edwards**, whose output is 36 million bottles per annum, is crafting stunning wine from the varietal. "I want to tell people that you can make Colchagua Cabernet of real quality," LFE's highly experienced head winemaker, Nicolas Bizzarri, said. His LFE 'Top' Cabernet Sauvignon 2014, not yet released, saw 40% new oak for 20 months, giving structure, but has glorious ripe fruit. Its very fine tannins, while powerful, are beautifully meshed. Another Cabernet Sauvignon single varietal yet to be released that also showed immense promise was the **San Pedro Cabo de Hornos 2017**, skilfully fashioned by Gabriel Mustakis from 100% Cachapoal Valley fruit, using 50% new oak.



The Vik winery is also a landmark boutique hotel, in much the same style as the iconic Spanish wineries

New oak, then, is still being extensively used for many of Chile's leading labels, even if percentages are lower than yesteryear. This also applies to many blends, with even **Emiliana**, whose 1,000 hectares under vine have been certified biodynamic since 2011, using between 33-40% new oak for their superb top two labels, **Coyam** and **Ge**. The latest release of the latter, 2014, made mainly from Syrah and Carmenere, has tremendous concentration and personality.

De Martino, of course, abandoned all new oak usage in 2011 in the quest for purity of fruit. Their search for old clay amphorae ('viejas tinajas') took them all over Maule where these vessels, 500-1200 litres in size, were sitting around largely unused. The bodega also employs 'foudres' for maturation, with their stunning **Las Cruces Old Vine Series 2016** spending two years in them. Made from Cachapoal Valley bush vines planted in 1957, this Malbec/Carmenere field blend has remarkable fruit intensity and length, with marked freshness, and is one of Chile's finest wines.



Andres Sanchez and wife Daniella Gillmore with their Carignan VIGNO

Elevage in foudres for two years is a requirement for the **Carignan VIGNO** wines, to which association 14 wineries have signed up. More perhaps than any Chilean reds, these wines speak of a sense of place. To qualify, the wine must be made from a minimum 85% Carignan dry-farmed Maule bush vines that are at least 30 years old (most are more ancient with Julio Bouchon's being over 100). All of the half dozen or so labels I tasted were outstanding, with personal favourites being Gillmore and Bouchon. The former is made from ultra-low density bush vines of 2,300 plants per hectare.

Quality and character, therefore, are Chile's twin watchwords as they seek to draw greater global attention to wines that have always had fruit intensity. The country's plethora of top-notch winemakers can be expected to accelerate the drive towards top-class wines with enhanced regional typicity.