

*Sommelier* **INDIA**

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# WINE

For Indians around the world who enjoy wine and the good life

**MAGAZINE**

## ON PAR WITH THE BEST

**CHILEAN WINES COME OF AGE**

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Restricted circulation magazine dedicated to wine lovers and the wine trade

# Chile Heights

Within a short span of 30 years, Chile's wine industry has successfully created its own niche of top quality wines by harnessing its terroir and planting vines in diverse microclimates. Moreover, adds **Bhisham Mansukhani**, it is far from done

**M**uch can be learnt about a people by simply sipping the wine they produce. When applied to South America, that truism is amplified like the spicy notes of a shy Syrah that's been swirled out of slumber. South America displays a feisty "can do" spirit and nowhere is this better expressed than in its wines, particularly those of Chile.

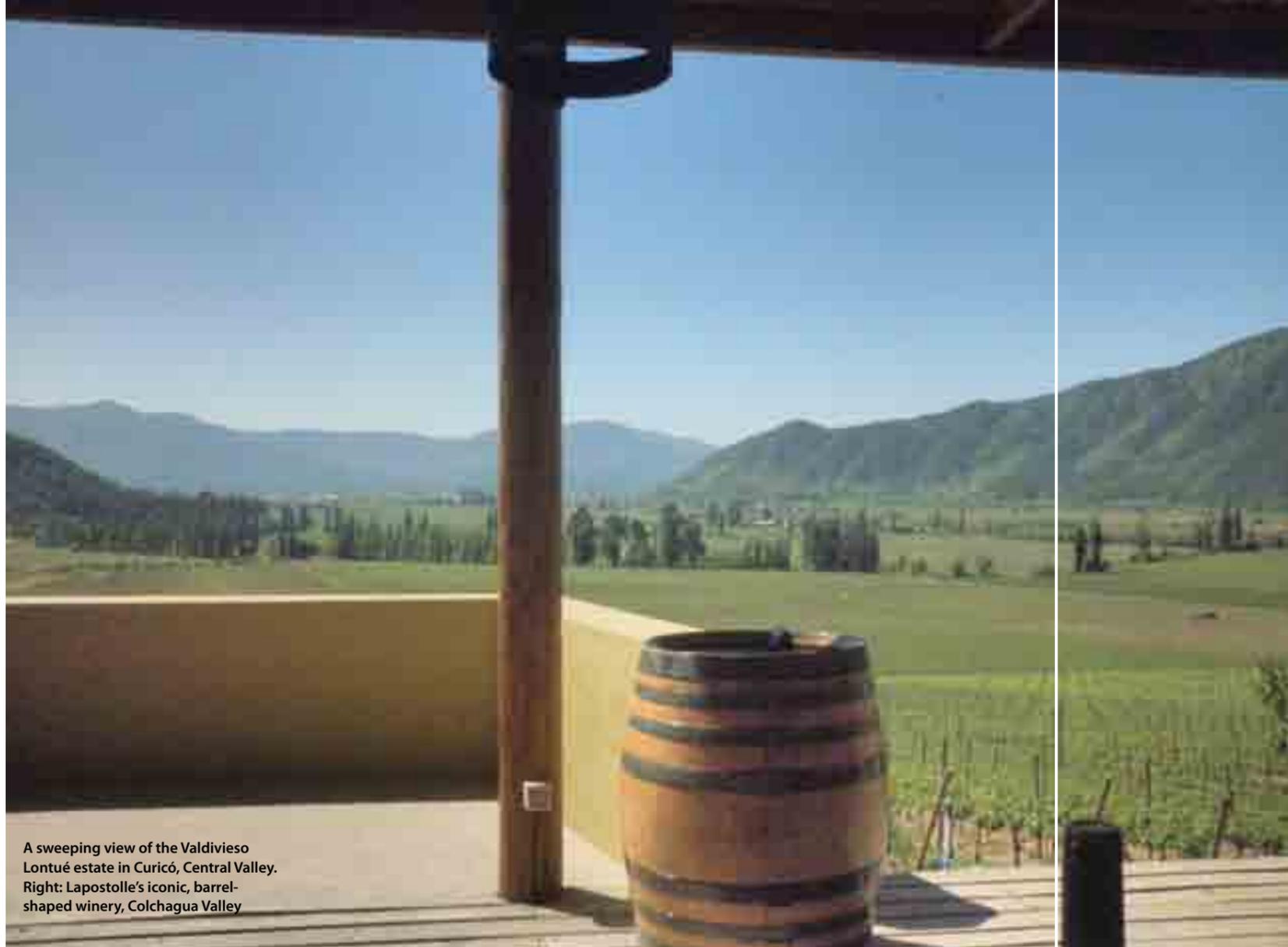
This long, narrow strip of land is fortuitously sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes, bordering Argentina. Covered with alluvial and stony soils made austere by dry weather and baked under the unrelenting sun, Chile – thanks to its twin geographical shield, the Pacific ocean and the Andes – had vines that were in no danger of being infected by the phylloxera louse that consumed many of Europe's 19th-century vintages.

This imperviousness to disease means 95% of Chile's vineyards comprise ungrafted vines – a boon that is reinforced by the country's unique terroir. Toss into this promising milieu long months of sunshine to ripen the fruit, nights cooled by winds rushing in from the ocean and mountains, plus that inimitable Chilean approach to organic viticulture combined with an almost spiritual belief in the potency of the soil to bear sublime fruit, and what you get is a style of noble, old world varietals that are respectful of authentic values and yet distinct from both, the old and new worlds. South America, it seems, is an ebulliently self-discovering universe unto itself.

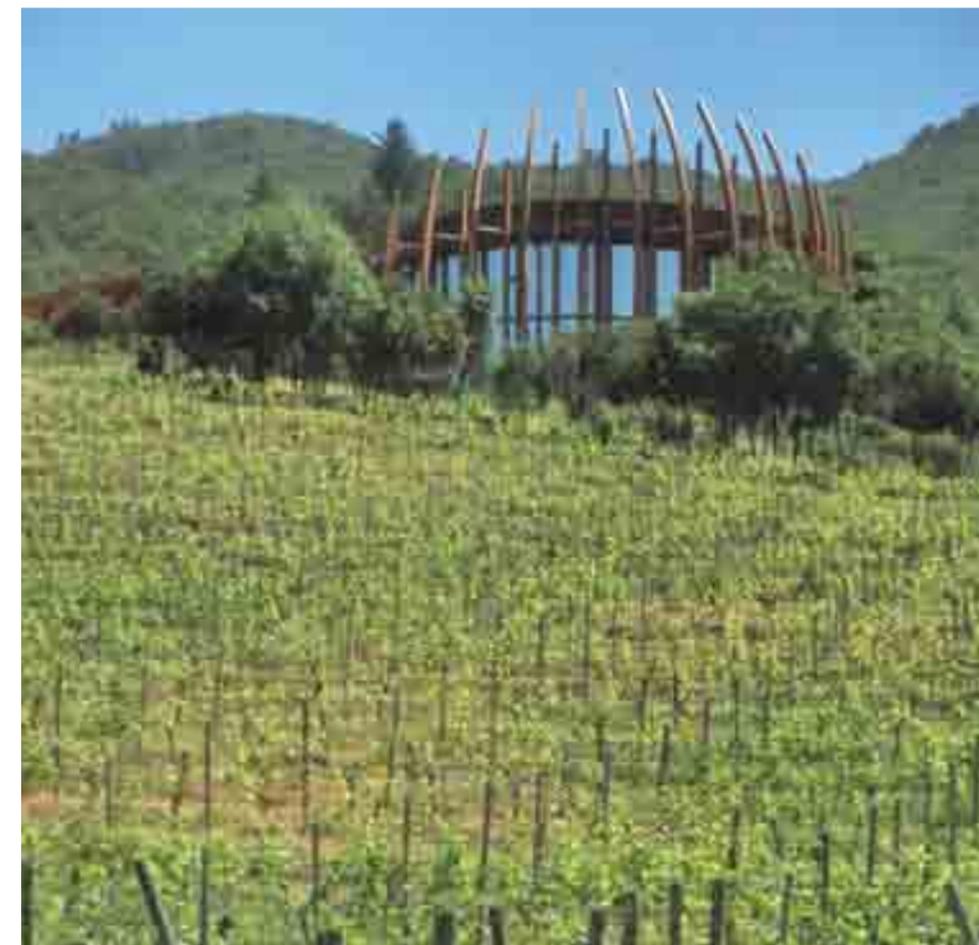
Chile's vinous odyssey began when Spanish conquistadors alighted on its crumbly sands in the 16th century to colonize and plant vines, including what was at the time an unremarkable red variety called Pais. A crude and unremarkable beginning it may have been, but a second wave of European immigrants brought fortune through French noble varietal cuttings, which thrived when phylloxera devastated Western Europe's vintages, and the world's thirsting eye and palate finally turned to Chile. The country's wine industry plateaued in the mid-20th century at the same time that European wine producers overcame disease to regain glory. through diligence and the grafting of new rootstock. Meanwhile, Chile, in a similar display of resilience, slowly built back its own wine industry, surviving a prohibition regime in 1938 and the ripping out of a third of its vineyards in the 1980s.

The '80s and '90s saw a resurgence when several Chilean producers invested in Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay plantations. At the same time, Spanish wine giant, Miguel Torres and Baron Philippe de Rothschild, too, invested their name and money in Chile to produce wine.

View of the Apalta vineyards and countryside from Viña Montes' vantage point



A sweeping view of the Valdivieso Lontué estate in Curicó, Central Valley. Right: Lapostolle's iconic, barrel-shaped winery, Colchagua Valley



CHILE HAS OVER 1,400 KM OF VINEYARDS ACROSS A VARIED TOPOGRAPHY WITH CLIMATIC CONDITIONS RANGING FROM COOL ROLLING HILLS TO SCORCHING DESERT AND WINDSWEPT COAST

These two decisive decades were Chile's rite of passage into the club of the world's great wine producers. Its wine industry was infused with enthusiasm and vision. Earnest efforts were made to understand soil character and climate in a bid to create an arsenal of impressive wine styles at great value. In the wake of the "noughties" (the decade of the 2000s), Chile's reputation as a bonafide producer of global recognition wasn't merely established, but was extolled for its sheer (soon to be realized) potential.

This is best reflected in the Chilean producers' collective belief that it was time their country shed the negative cliché of "value for money" and instead posited its finest wines at the sort of premiums that Bordeaux and Chianti enjoy. In doing this, Chile is simply asserting its rightful place in the established hierarchy. And there's no better way to know this than to immerse oneself in the country's wine regions, and drive out of Santiago with lots of stops at traditional Chilean towns and savour an empanada or fillet steak alongside a pile

of fresh vegetables, while Chile's best wine sits in barrel and bottle, waiting to be uncorked.

### LAND OF DAZZLING DIVERSITY

Chile has over 1,400 km of vineyards across a varied topography with climatic conditions ranging from cool rolling hills to scorching desert and windswept coast. It is divided up into five key regions. The dominant Central Valley is Chile's single biggest region, producing 75% of the country's wines and covering the four notable sub-regions of Curicó, Maipo, Rapel and Maule. Its vast stretches of soil abound with silt and clay at its heart, with jagged pebbles in the east and crumbling sand shored up by the ocean.

Known widely for its Cabernet and Carménère, the region is home to nearly all the major producers, chiefly Concha y Toro, Valdivieso and Santa Carolina. Of late, though, the most widely talked about sub-region is Apalta in Colchagua (Rapel), where some of Chile's iconic wines are produced –

Alpha M by Montes and Clos Apalta by Lapostolle.

The most northerly and unlikely of viticulture areas, Limari Valley lies outside the Atacama Desert. While most of its arable land was earlier planted with Muscat to produce the country's favourite spirit from grapes, Pisco, fortunately some producers have identified and appreciated the capacity of Limari's soil, which is rich in mineral and quartz, to produce white wines with delectable minerality and moderate acidity.

Closer to Santiago, Casablanca is prime Chardonnay territory. The vines are cooled by the Humboldt current coming off the Pacific. The onslaught of frost in spring restricts further growth, so yields are low and the resulting wine, deliciously concentrated. Also north of Santiago, is Aconcagua which translates into "a place where there is no corn" but there is certainly plenty of wine. Blessed with a lengthy growing season, the region produces mostly red wines with phenolic ripeness. Moreover, Aconcagua's loose soil allows the vines to sink their roots in easily so this region has built a great reputation

for producing Chilean mainstays – Cabernet Sauvignon, Carménère, Syrah and Merlot – while becoming a key experimental spot for Sangiovese and Nebbiolo.

In Chile's south lie the lesser-known, yet promising, regions of Biobío and Itata. Apart from the red staples, their relatively cooler climate allows varieties that would otherwise turn shy in the warm north, namely, Riesling and Gewürztraminer as well as the famous Burgundian pair, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The finest expression of these varieties, however, is to be found back in Aconcagua's sub-region, in what is perhaps Chile's most exciting new discovery, Leyda Valley. Lying closest to the ocean (a mere 12 km), Leyda Valley's topography appears to have been teleported straight out of Champagne – vineyards abounding in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (as well as Syrah and Riesling) carpet its gently rolling hills. The region can lay undeniable claim to producing Chile's best Pinot Noir, which ripens with timely consistency



Left: Vina VIK vineyard in Millahue, Rapel. Above and below: Chile's diverse terroir has encouraged winemakers to experiment with new varieties



and makes a cherry-laced, mineral-style red.

### GRAPES TO GLASS

Chile played consummately to its strengths when it picked a group of varieties that thrived in its alluvial soils and relentless sunshine, and ushered the country into the select group of great wine producers. While most of Chile's producers were producing a New World style of wine, with elegant cherry and black currant notes and rounded tannins, such as Montes and Concha y Toro, another style indicative of the country's bolder ambition to make wines that age, also mushroomed. This was the standout varietal, Cabernet Sauvignon, which ripened beautifully in the Chilean terroir and upon which Chile built the foundation of its vinous future. The Chilean avatar, as honed by the likes of Tarapacá and Cono Sur, is conspicuously more acidic with pronounced tannins.

Another Chilean success is Carménère, which fell out of favour with the Bordelais but found a new home in the southern hemisphere as far back as the 19th century, although it was initially mistaken for a Merlot. Carménère has flourished under the Chilean sun, turning out a medium-bodied yet

elegant, fruity style with spicy notes. The Cabernet Sauvignon-Carménère blend has delicious length. Merlot completes the red trinity, taking root in Chilean clay soils and staying true to an approachable New World style of rounded elegance and expressive fruit, tempered with hints of chocolate.

Encouraged by the phenolic maturity of the reds grown so far, Chilean oenologists have taken up the challenge to experiment with Sangiovese and Tempranillo. Syrah, for its part, has quietly become Chile's most exciting prospect, stunning international tasters with its Rhône Valley-like black pepper and spicy character, awakening Chileans themselves to Syrah's potential as they crank up plantings, which until 12 years ago accounted for just one per cent of Chilean vineyards. While Colchagua has the largest concentration of Syrah vines, Elqui in the north, and coastal Casablanca have already

posited a few promising Syrah vintages.

The script with regard to white wine is not entirely dissimilar. Chileans plumped for the international darling, Sauvignon Blanc. However, just as Carménère was mistaken for Merlot, a certain unremarkable Sauvignonasse was planted and presumed to be Sauvignon Blanc. Spanish wine maestro Miguel Torres

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WITH GENTLY ROLLING HILLS,  
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12 KMS FROM THE OCEAN



Viña Leyda vineyards in San Antonio, Aconcagua

is credited with producing one of Chile's first great Sauvignon Blancs in 1979 in Curicó Valley, fermenting and maturing the white in what were the first steel tanks ever to be used for vinification in Chile. Yet, it is Chardonnay that best expresses Chile's competence with white wines. A multitude of styles have emerged, from the un-oaked to the barrel-aged buttery variety as well as a middle ground occupied by partly "malo-ed", lightly oaked Chardonnays, that drink crisp and mineral. ("Malo" or malolactic fermentation is an important winemaking process. See *Glossary, page ...*). Viognier is an unlikely strong point for Chile. Thanks to the late ripening and fuller expression it achieves, Viognier retains an aromatic core so sprightly that it would make Coindreau proud, although the heat at peak ripening time can step up the sugar and eventual alcohol content.

At the very heart of Chile's success are a clutch of visionary winemakers who seem to possess a crystal ball, with their insight and sense of the country's soil and climate. Visionary Michel Friou, may well be South America's most highly regarded winemaker, and he undoubtedly makes the continent's most acclaimed wine, Almaviva – a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Carménère and Cabernet Franc – produced by Baron Philippe de Rothschild and Concha y Toro at their co-owned vineyard in the hallowed region of Puente Alto (Maipo). Having worked extensively across the vineyards

of the world, including a short stint in India in the early 1990s, Friou believes that the choice of vineyard coupled with an austere approach to viticulture has played the most pivotal role in Almaviva's success. Great varietal expression is achieved, he says, from a soil that is left largely alone.

This veritably Chilean philosophy is echoed by the likes of Cono Sur, which takes organic viticulture to a sublime level, especially at its Chimbarongo estate in Rapel that is almost entirely non-mechanized. Staff members commute within the vineyard only on bicycles. Pesticides are banned and in their place a flock of hungry and diligent geese are deployed to run through the vineyard, picking off an indigenous bug called "Burrito" that inhabits the base of the vines. Other unconventional techniques involve incorporating the design of a church in the barrel room, complete with round-the-clock Gregorian chants, at Montes' Apalta Valley estate, literally soliciting a spiritual influence.

It is apt to close with an example that illustrates the future direction of Chile's winemakers. The Viña VIK vineyard in Millahue (Rapel) encompasses 4,325 hectares of which it has planted only 380 ha. Under the stewardship of South American winemaking doyen, Patrick Valette, it has produced a premium single red wine blend of Carménère and Cabernet Sauvignon, Vik 2009 – an astonishing precedent – with its first vintage. Chile now appears poised to trigger yet another renaissance in its wine production, having shed its value-for-money reputation. ♦