

Wining up in Chile

Indians consider Chile to be far-flung and a land almost unknown to them but there's no better way to break the ice than this South American country's elegant and diverse wines, and more so the engaging approach of its winemakers.

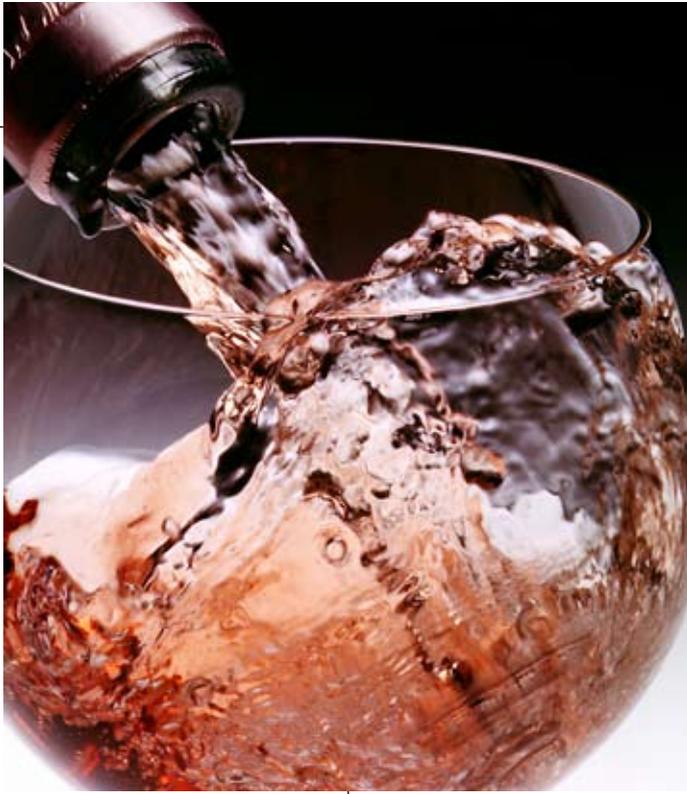
Text: Bhasham Mansukhani

The world is now a smaller, more accessible orb and that's not without benefits. On top of that list is the discovery of that hidden gem of South American wine. So far, South America had been keeping and enjoying its wine mostly to itself. This isn't surprising since about only two of its countries, Chile and Argentina, have a luminous history and sizable production. Chile was in fact, the first off the blocks in the late 1990s with a major export and international PR initiative. But, at the heart of the Chilean wine industry's success is the

wine itself, steeped in rich history. Chile's wine tradition dates back to the 16th century when Spanish colonialists brought wine and vines, which once planted thrived in the prevalent climate – long, dry summers with steep variations in day-night temperature and natural protection from disease, with the immovable Andes to the east and a restless Pacific Ocean shoring up the west. It was this unique climate and geography that saved Chile during Europe's ruinous 18th century when the phylloxera

louse ravaged its vineyards. Chile's star was rising all the way back then. Its reputation for producing great wine though was cemented in the late 20th century when it began exporting in earnest, stunning the world with its quality at incredibly accessible prices.

The past twenty odd years though have seen an evolution – an intimate understanding and respect for the terroir, coaxing



was taking permanent shape.

Many of its sought-after regions are bunched together in the Central Valley, which is the vinous equivalent of Hollywood Boulevard, and accounts for 75% of Chile's vineyards and 90% of Chilean wine export. It is watered by the Maule river in the south and Maipo in the north. The likes of Maule, Maipo, Curio and Rapel comprise the famous clutch that add-up to this top of the mind Chilean wine region, which is essentially a depression between two hill ranges and is blessed with a combination of heavy stone in the east and predominantly clay and silt in the centre, with sandy soil tapering towards the coast. The region is renowned for almost all the varietals and

out varietal character, embracing more wine varieties, and putting out wines that deservedly sell for top dollars. Chile's wine regions stretch their legs for a grand 1400 km, numbering five and taking in the best of this country's diverse geography, which in turn have yielded great vintages of French noble reds such as Cabernet, Syrah and the lesser known but still of French origin, Carménère, and in specific regions, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Petit Verdot and the indigenous Carignan. Of late, Tempranillo (nod to Spanish roots) and Sangiovese have been planted and most become part of blends. Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc are the most widely planted white wines with healthy sprinklings of Gewürztraminer and Riesling. Another indigenous red called Pais was Chile's most widely planted grape until the mid-'90s when the country's second wine renaissance





IMAGE COURTESY: CONO SUR

'cool' edge, as resident oenologists proudly put it. The quality of its Chardonnays and Pinot Noir surprises on the upside.

Viña Valdivieso

As stated afore, Central Valley is Chile's largest producing and most high profile wine region, concentrated with some of the country's most noted producers. Most of these estates are in proximity to Chile's capital city, Santiago. The wines of Valdivieso in Curicó Valley are a great traditional and expressive Central Valley pick, not simply because its range of wines is diverse, but the approach which underlines the individuality of the Chilean wine style. Don Alberto Valdivieso began Valdivieso in 1876, driven by a passion to make sparkling wine because of his love for champagne and thus became Chile's first sparkling wine producer. It didn't stop there, though. The estate began focusing on still wines,



IMAGE COURTESY: VALDIVIESO

blends that Chile is internationally lauded for. Its Cabernet-Carménère blend and Syrah have volubly announced Chile's place high in the pecking order for fine wines. Central Valley apart, Chile has other starring regions such as the very talked-up Casablanca region just north of Santiago, which never mind its industrialised town, has delivered elegant white wines in sandy soils that thrive on extended autumn seasons swelled by cool and relentless Pacific winds. Further north on the fringes of the Atacama desert, incidentally also the world's driest, is Limari Valley, which used to be mostly known

for producing Chile's local and most widely consumed brandy called Pisco, produced mostly from white grape, Muscat. While it still produces Pisco, Limari has put its mineral rich soil to good use, mustering up a reputation for good whites with the trademark, upfront minerality. Aconcagua, only slightly north of the capital, enjoys a conspicuously long growing season and was quickly identified by producers as ideal for producing ripe and complex reds. And, the latest discovery that's got Chileans excited is Leyda, west of Santiago, a mere 12 km from the Pacific Ocean, which gives it the

coincidentally on the cusp of the '90s, when Chilean wines were gaining in world currency. The estate's Lontué winery produces all of its wine (12,201,444 litres) including the batch earmarked for sparklings. Chief winemaker Brett Jackson is of the unshakeable belief that it's the emphasis on imbibing the natural elements that created a unique Chilean style that retains varietal typicity as well as characteristics endemic to the country. In this regard, he has experimented with wild yeast fermentation and the use of smaller tanks for specific vineyard patches, and isn't quite done pushing the boundary. Known for a wide range, the single vineyard and winemaker range are stand-outs as is its much lauded red blend Caballo Loco (crazy horse), which nods to the solera system used to produce sherry.

Cono Sur

Moving on to Rapel Valley wherein its sub-region sits a producer with a delectably anointed pun, Cono Sur. While Cono Sur has vineyards in other regions as well, Chimbarongo (foggy valley) in Rapel is a special one. There's



IMAGE COURTESY: CONO SUR

something old worldly and very current about Chimbarongo. Much like Valdivieso, Cono Sur is conscious about the importance of accent on varietal character. The estate is also big on organic viticulture, a practice that Chilean viticulturists have the privilege of,

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since phylloxera is non-existent. Cono Sur chooses to meet this challenge in an unmechanised and utterly unconventional way—a flock of geese reared by the vineyard staff are let out daily to forage the base of the vines for Burrito, an indigenous pest that could

potentially harm the vines. The only man-made technique trotted in is a hired helicopter grounded near the vineyards and switched on, its spokes working up winds to aerate the vines. The results of aversion to the use of chemicals or mechanised resources show up in the wines, some of which were recently launched in India. The appropriately titled range of organic wines titled Bicycle, given that bicycles are the primary mode of transport to get around in the vineyard, is now imported by Sula Wines to India. Cono Sur's premium Pinot Noir titled Ocio, is its icon wine, while the 20 Barrels range takes its name from the first 20 barrels that the producer brought to Chile to make premium wines.



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA VIK

Viña VIK

If there's one enigma that speaks for how conclusively Chilean wines broke through the verily value wines stereotype, Viña VIK takes the award without much debate. It wasn't a lark that nudged Norwegian millionaire entrepreneur Alexander Vik to buy 4,300 hectares of soil in Millahue, Cachapoal Valley (Rapel) that was waiting to exhale vines that have yielded a wine that Chileans and the world at large are still to taste. This hack had the privilege to do so with perhaps South America's highest profile oenologist, Patrick Valette, and his very skilled accomplice, Gonzague de Lambert, in this haloed and vast estate. A horseback ride is an ideal choice for getting a true sense of the scale of Viña VIK and more importantly, its vision. Only 303 of Viña VIK's 4,300 hectares is under vines, that too after combing through the soil (four samples per hectare), extensive meteorological research,

and understanding the implication of exposure of all its 12 valleys to ascertain where each of the intended varietals would thrive. The very essence of the estate's philosophy is unspooled by the incredible revelation that it intends to put out a single red wine blend (Cabernet Sauvignon and Carménère)! The blend does contain tiny quantities of Cabernet Franc and Syrah and will in the future contain Merlot. Furthermore, Valette explains, there was a conscious emphasis on high density plantation to ensure smaller berries, which concentrates the eventual wine's tannins and flavours. Viña VIK is still to debut in the wine world with the first vintage (2009) to be launched in mid-2012. The 2009 vintage on the palate reveals flavours of ripe cherry and plum and a delightful minerality, bound together in a sort of unmissable balance of acidity and tannins that finishes long, yet lands softly.



IMAGE COURTESY: MIGUEL TORRES



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA VIK



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA MONTES

BACK IN 1979, MIGUEL TORRES BEGAN WITH 100 HECTARES AND TODAY PLANTS 445.

Miguel Torres

Miguel Torres has held sway in Spain as a massive producer of wines across all its segments. It wasn't simply a colonial bonhomie that brought the great man to Chile, but a firm and informed belief in its terroir. He wasn't simply the first Spaniard to enter the country's wine business—he was the very first foreigner. His Curico Valley winery isn't just a firm presence on the map for its wine but also its historic significance, where the first metal tanks ever to be used to ferment and store wines in Chile

back in 1979, still stand and operate today. Back then, Miguel Torres began with a modest 100 hectares and today plants 445. The massive emphasis on the use of French oak—more than 2,000 new barrels rolled in annually—is a conspicuous signpost of old world influence, though there's an interesting contrast reflected in the progressive practice of closing wines under screw caps for export markets that demand so. Another of the producer's firsts was to become the first Chilean winery to obtain fair trade certification for its Santa Digna range, meaning that Miguel Torres has paid fair prices for all required raw material. It's no coincidence that Miguel Torres' Santa Digna range has built the producer's reputation, and is currently exported to India, its Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon being definite picks, not simply for ripe fruit but expression of distinct Chilean influence.

Viña Montes

The story of Viña Montes that began in 1987 was also the incipience of Chile's transition from being an almost exclusively value wine producer to one that

also had the capacity to produce serious wine. Producing wine of imperious quality was the intent that brought together a quartet of aspiring, believing men. Twenty-four years on, Viña Montes has three estates in Curicó and two in Colchagua, one of which is redoubtably Viña Montes' crowned jewel, La Finca de Apalta in Apalta. This winery is special not simply because it is home to one of Chile's singularly largest clutch of premium wines, but that it is surrounded by vineyards planted on undulating slopes levelling into long, windswept flatland, enjoying a peach of a microclimate. The vineyard is predominated by red wine grapes, namely Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère, Syrah, including others. Fortuitous visitors have the privilege of an enjoyable ride up a hill to admire the sloping vineyards and also better understand the viticulturist's philosophy. The winery is another story in itself, designed as a gravitational flow set-piece, containing a basement cellar where French oak barrels sit, bathed in soft light, the wine inside soothed by the sound of Gregorian chants.



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA MONTES

This added touch coupled with the terroir is perhaps responsible for Montes' trove of superstars, especially in its Alpha range—Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Carménère. Not many wines can stand-up to the complex elegance of the iconic red blend, Montes Alpha M (Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot) or for that matter, Montes Folly, which belies its name when its content of 100% full-bodied Syrah is poured out. Montes is imported to India by Sonarys.

Lapostolle

There are two commonalities that bind the much revered Lapostolle and its equally famed neighbour, Montes. They're both based in the Apalta region and coax nothing but great wine out of the fruit they annually harvest. The difference here is in the fact that the estate belongs to a famous French family,

Marnier-Lapostolle, who also produce Grand Marnier liqueur. The vineyard is served well by its geography that limits sun exposure, coupled with relatively infertile soil, which keeps the yields low. Celebrated flying winemaker Michel Rolland, who has also worked with Grovers in India, played a critical role in Lapostolle's early years, imbibing modern techniques in oenology and bringing in temperature controlled steel tanks and French oak barrels. The winery itself is designed in the shape of a barrel and is an ideal space to taste Lapostolle's elegant and subtle red blends, Borobo (40% Carmenère; 28% Syrah; 18% Cabernet Sauvignon; 12% Pinot Noir and 2%

MONTES HAS THREE ESTATES IN CURICÓ AND TWO IN COLCHAGUA.

Petit Verdot) and the iconic, Clos Apalta (Merlot, Carménère, and Cabernet Sauvignon), concentrated and robust, its supple tannins rendering a finish as infinite as the horizon. Lapostolle is imported to India by Moët Hennessy.

Concha y Toro

It's almost impossible to construe Concha y Toro as just a wine producer. This winemaking behemoth is Chilean wine's equivalent of God in Central Valley by virtue of its omnipresence in Central Valley (vineyards in each sub-region). It also has vineyards in Casablanca for good effect. In total, Concha y Toro owns 8,700 hectares of land under vines across Chile as well as partly in Argentina and still sources for more. Concha y Toro is unsurprisingly Chile's largest wine producer. But, unlike certain equally large peers in the new world, Concha y Toro



IMAGE COURTESY CONCHA Y TORO

has endearingly risen above the stereotype that the larger the producer, the more mediocre wine it makes. Concha y Toro has retained a disciplined boutique approach to winemaking, right down to its entry level. Yields are modest, vines densely planted on plains, hills and even on river-banks. And, there a lot of labels dotting a long pecking order. Top of the mind is undoubtedly Casillero Del Diablo (Devil's Cellar), which lies at the centre of a fascinating story, a rather gothic but illuminating cellar experience at the company's main winery in Pirque (Maipo) and not in the least, medium-bodied reds that finish rounded rather than sharp as a devil's tail! Fittingly however, Concha y Toro's icon wine is named after its founder, Don Melchor, and is by far one of the two brightest stars in the widening firmament that is Chilean premium wine. A straight Cabernet Sauvignon picked from the vines growing out of Puente Alto's stony soil aged for 14 months in French oak, the Don Melchor 2007 delivers a layered



IMAGE COURTESY SANTA RITA

mid-palate of cassis, chocolate and savoury notes. Another almost equally astonishing purple flake and that second shining gem to Concha y Toro's credit, is another single vineyard wine it produces along with France's Rothschild family, which also happens to own Bordeaux' first growth Chateau, Mouton Rothschild. A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Carménère, Almaviva is also produced in Puente Alto and stands out as debatably South America's most sublime red blend.

Santa Rita

Maipo Valley holds the untouchable title of 'South American Bordeaux' not simply because red wine has built its reputation but because of an actual history of Bordelaise contribution towards planting vineyards back in the 1800s, citing the similarity of its gravel soils similar to Margaux and Pauillac. One of the greatest beneficiaries of this French involvement was Santa Rita founded in 1880 in the sub-region Alto Jahuel. While Chile is widely lauded for the quality of its Cabernet Sauvignon, critics underline Alto Jahuel for its long history of producing complex Cabernet Sauvignon that matures splendidly in the bottle. Santa Rita's location, at least 1,200 feet above sea level, bolsters the vine's phenolic intensity and a longer ripening cycle translates into full-bodied wines tempered by elegant tannins. While Santa Rita also has four additional wineries in Chile, Alto Jahuel is its centrepiece, producing as well as storing its finest ferment of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Carménère amongst the reds, and Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc amongst the whites, bottled under its range of labels, the



most prominent of which are 120, Reserva and Medalla Real. Santa Rita's best foot forward though, is its super-premium Casa Real—a straight Cabernet Sauvignon picked from very old vines and only produced if the vintage is sterling, and 2007 certainly was. The Alto Jahuel winery is officially a national monument and interestingly neighbours a museum of pre-Colombian art teeming with rare artefacts of that defining era.

Viña Santa Carolina

The location of a winery inside a populous city isn't entirely unheard of, though it may draw the odd frown from diehard oenophiles. For Santa Carolina, which does have its winery in Santiago's suburbs, an urban location has only drawn respect as the Chilean capital's leading wine attraction drawing a steady stream of wine tourists. Founded in 1875, the original winery, now a national monument, is still remarkably functional. And, it makes serious ferment in a style unmistakably Chilean and yet an enigma for the



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA SANTA CAROLINA

MAIPO VALLEY HOLDS THE TITLE OF 'SOUTH AMERICAN BORDEAUX'.

full-bodied elegance it delivers. Maybe that has to do with its strict viticulture values practised across vineyards predominantly in Central Valley, Casablanca and Leyda. Casablanca and Leyda make for evolved and balanced white wines, namely Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. The Central Valley gems of Colchagua and Maipo Valley however, grow the fruit for the ripe and expressive red wines that are Santa Carolina's inarguable backbone. The producer owns two vineyards, Miraflores and Los Lingues (clay soil), which enjoy a warm climate tempered by Pacific Ocean winds in Colchagua deep soils and warm dry climate. While Miraflores' rocky soil yields a good

harvest of Cabernet Sauvignon, Los Lingues's clay soil, much like Bordeaux's left bank, is classic Merlot country. The deep sandy soils of Los Nagales in Maipo Valley, similar to those found on Bordeaux's left bank, are largely planted with Cabernet Sauvignon and recently some Syrah. The soil combination of rock and sand and a significant chasm between day and night temperatures, crowned with a long growing season, turn out a Cabernet that boasts a balance of ripe fruit and structure. Not surprisingly, most of the fruit for Santa Carolina's top wine VSC (80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Syrah, 10% Petit Verdot) is sourced from Maipo. The VSC 2007 is full-bodied, combining fruity and spicy notes and supple tannins.

Viña Tarapacá

The drive into the Viña Tarapacá Ex Zavala estate in Maipo Valley makes an impression even before its wine lands on the palate. The



verdant Andes range on one side partially straddled with precipitously planted vines and a sheer drop on the other, sandwich a column of even asphalt that draws visitors straight to the very traditional winery and a 1920s mansion, delectably walled in by green creepers. Viña Tarapacá's origin dates back to 1874, when as mentioned earlier, Maipo Valley's potential as being Bordeauxesque had been discovered and harnessed into a region that would go on to produce some of the country's best reds. The location of Tarapacá's vineyards is half the battle won—the Andean meltwaters naturally irrigate the soil and four distinct seasons contribute to what is a long ripening cycle for the fruit on the vines. The consequent Cabernet Sauvignon lies at the heart of Tarapacá's success, illustrated finely by the Gran Reserva Etiqueta Negra, a blend of the estate's



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA TARAPACÁ



IMAGE: BERSANT PANSURUKIAN

MOST OF THE FRUIT FOR TARAPACA'S WINES ARE PICKED FROM ITS MAIPO VALLEY VINEYARDS.

best Cabernet Sauvignon lots, with nominal amounts of Syrah, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. Vinification is followed by 16 months in oak. The result requires some patience and when poured, it is immaculate, boasting near perfect great phenolic ripeness on the palate, and licorice, dark plum and cherry, spice and chocolate, its supple tannins enhancing what is a very long finish. The Cabernets across the Tarapacá range, be it Gran Reserva, Terroir or Tarapacá Reserva, are unfailingly on the money. Other reds, chiefly Syrah, Merlot and Carménère in the Tarapacá Reserva range, express varietal typicity and unmistakable distinct Maipo Valley ripeness. Tarapaca's Chardonnay warrants mention too, not just for the quality of fruit but vinification, which turns out a white that draws complexity from part barrel fermentation and maturing, yet retaining fresh citrus fruit flavours. Most of the fruit for Tarapacá's wines are picked from its Maipo Valley vineyards, though it has begun to go further in Casablanca and Leyda Valley,

especially for its sparkling wines. **Viña Leyda** Leyda Valley is the most recent wine region born of Chilean appellation laws, falling within southerly San Antonio province in Aconcagua. Proximity to the Pacific Ocean (12 km) defines the very distinguished style of this region which, though completely unlike Casablanca, is easily one of Chile's few great regions for white wine. And, the literal pioneer in this region, Viña Leyda has made the most of getting off the blocks with other much larger producers now following in the wake of its success. If one were to doze-off on the ride and awake on arriving, the incumbent could be forgiven for thinking he's been impossibly teleported to the north eastern French region of Burgundy. Apart from being similarly scenic, some of Leyda's vine clones were flown in from Burgundy. Leyda Valley is already being hailed as the top region for turning out cool climate expressions of Pinot Noir, Syrah, Chardonnay and Riesling—crispy fresh, delicious acidity and fruit balance. Viticulturalist Ignacio



IMAGE COURTESY: VIÑA LEYDA

Casali reveals how the grapes are picked late into the harvest season allowing for fuller varietal expression, helped greatly by a reliably cool climate (peak temperatures of 23.5 °C) and alluvial soils predominated by clay. Leyda Valley's Reisling is an exciting prospect, given how little of it Chile makes. The estate's Costero Riesling 2010 has a decidedly fresh lemony character, layered with a touch of gunpowder and spice. The single vineyard Chardonnay with time spent in oak, integrates stone fruit flavours with toast and dry fruit. The Pinot Noir is a revelation, indicative of Leyda Valley's still latent potential. Raspberries and cherry are subtly apparent on the front palate and this medium-bodied wine has moderate acidity with minerality on the finish. The Syrah is noteworthy for being one of Chile's very few that deliver a hybrid style of new world robustness tempered with Rhone Valleyish peppery notes. Leyda Valley as a whole remains one to watch out for in the future, a fact that has interestingly been swallowed faster by the world outside of Chile, which already laps up 90% of its production. I