

Forbes

Splendor in the Glass: The New Vina Vik Winery and Hotel in Chile

This story appears in the May 24, 2015 issue of Forbes.

During my tour of Viña Vik, Internet entrepreneur Alexander Vik's latest glamorous South American getaway, a manager told me the Frank Gehry-esque serpentine roof on the hotel was made of titanium rather than gold. That's because titanium, she explained, has a better thermal capacity to withstand the climate of Chilean wine country.

I got the feeling that might have been the only reason.

Because otherwise, Vik, the design-minded billionaire whose first three hotels put Uruguay's José Ignacio on the map, spared no expense in developing his new wine resort. Vik's aim isn't just to produce a vintage every season but also to make superlative wine. (Hotel staff regularly mentioned a goal of 100 points from Robert Parker.)



"I've always been interested in the concept of terroir—what made one piece of land a great producer and not its neighbor?" the 60-year-old Vik says. "Wine has infinite grades in quality—it's not like growing wheat or raising cattle. I thought it would be a good challenge to grow the best wine in South America."

In 2004 Vik, whose mother was from Uruguay, convened a research team to study Argentina, Uruguay and Chile to find the best place on the continent to grow red grapes. Two years later they found their answer: the Millahué Valley, which means “place of gold” in the local Mapuche language. “I’m convinced the conditions are as good as anywhere in the world,” says Vik about why he didn’t look beyond the continent.



To be sure, researchers took more than 4,000 soil samples across the 11,000-acre plot of land before Vik closed the deal. Then scientists, led by esteemed French-Chilean oenologist Patrick Valette, installed weather stations and researched “all the elements of terroir” to determine the best places among the property’s 12 valleys to plant each varietal for the Bordeaux-style blend. Two-thirds of the harvest is sold to other wineries, while the grapes that go into the Vik blend are hand-harvested at night by a team of about 400 workers.

“We are using the diversity of grapes to make something exceptional,” says Vik. “Maybe 15 Cabernet Sauvignons, 10 Carmenères and 7 Merlots. It’s like a puzzle.” There are plans to eventually bottle second- and third-run wines. But a portfolio isn’t the point.

Asked how much he has invested in the project, the famously cagey—and his competitors would say dishonest—Vik tells me he truly doesn’t know. But he scoffs when I ask if he expects the venture to support itself. “Absolutely. [Making it in] the wine world is a slow process. It takes years and years and years” to grow, age, market and distribute wines. (Vik wine retails for \$130 in the U.S.) “It’s a long-term investment. But if you succeed, it’s very lasting.”

For all the science on display in the winemaking operation, it’s art that rules the hotel, which opened late last year. As with their other properties, Vik and his wife, Carrie, filled this one with contemporary art and commissioned artists to create installations in each of the 22 rooms. It’s the kind of hotel that only a deep-pocketed visionary could pull off, without answering to investors’ caution.

“In Chile,” he continues, “it’s all about the vineyard.” The main building is perched on one of the prettiest hilltops on the property—with staggering views from every room—as is the restaurant and a slate infinity pool, which appears to be floating over the countryside.

The communal living room includes works by Chilean artist Roberto Matta and a diptych from Anselm Kiefer’s “The Secret Life of Plants.” The rooms and suites (which start at \$1,200 a night, including meals) vary wildly, but all have a strong point of view. The Vik Suite features art by Antonio Seguí and James Turrell, and the bathroom of the Azulejo Suite has hand-painted blue-and-white tiles in the Portuguese tradition, depicting a playful panorama of the vineyard.

Naturally, winery tours and tastings figure prominently in the Viña Vik experience, but guests can arrange guided hikes, mountain biking and horseback riding through the vineyards on short notice. There are also massage therapists at the ready in the spa, and yoga classes can be arranged with some preplanning.

The main pastimes, though, seem to be eating and drinking. Vik recruited chef Rodrigo Acuña Bravo, who made a name for himself at Casa Lapostolle in the nearby Colchagua Valley, to lead the kitchen. His cuisine is straightforward, hearty and delicious, making the most of the hotel's location in Chile's main growing region, the breadbasket to the world.

As for wine pairings, there's just one: When guests take their seats, servers appear with decanted Vik. (There are whites and a sparkling on request.) The wine turns out to be food-friendly and surprisingly versatile.

"We're satisfied with how the wine is developing," says Vik. "The vines are at a young age but producing great wines. We're focused on viticulture, on growing the best grapes, but also on letting the grapes express themselves. It's holistic, organic and very pure. You can drink it with abandon without any consequences."