

OVERNIGHTER

## Among Chile's Vines, Villas and Views



Victor Ruiz Caballero for The New York Times

The Vik vineyards, in the Millahue Valley.

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Published: March 22, 2013

From my horse-top perch, I could view seemingly endless rows of green vines, stretching out across a wide valley floor. To the west, sharp mountains rose behind a glassy emerald lake reflecting slow-moving clouds; a family of herons roosted by the water. Other than the winemaker who rode next to me, a few workers, hundreds of cattle, those herons and millions of precious grapes, I was alone on this 11,000-acre Chilean estate.



I have done my fair share of wine tasting, from Napa to Bordeaux, and live much of the year close to vineyards in Tuscany, but I have never encountered such wide-open solitude in a wine region — and only a two-hour drive south of Santiago.

That solitude came courtesy of Viña Vik, the only winery set on the eastern side of the Cordillera de la Costa range in Millahue Valley, just over the mountains — 10 miles as the crow flies, though a 45-minute drive — from the more established wine region of Colchagua Province.

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Grapes at Viña Vik.

But the alchemy of this beautiful spot is not just a lucky accident; the land under us had been analyzed and dissected extensively in a lab to see what would thrive here. “We wanted to bring the quality of a top estate in Bordeaux,” said Patrick Valette, the head winemaker at Viña Vik, stopping to take a look at a particularly ripe bunch of grapes, “while emphasizing what makes the Chilean terroir so unique.”

With the deep pockets of Alex Vik, a Norwegian Internet entrepreneur, behind the venture, the hope is that the project will bring the label — and its mostly unknown valley — some much-deserved recognition.

As the region’s labels increasingly come into the spotlight, so have more sophisticated amenities, including wineries and hotels with innovative designs, hoping to attract a new breed of wine tourist. But although this network of services is well organized, it does not feel overly polished, as it sometimes does in places like Napa.

This is especially evident at the Viña Vik, which, though separated from Colchagua by the imposing mountain range, has similar, if not better, conditions for grape growing: plenty of sun, an ideal level of precipitation and varied altitudes and soil types. The estate itself has a state-of-the-art cantina, designed by a star Chilean architect, Smiljan Radic, and a 22-room resort scheduled to open later this year.

Mr. Vik already has two well-received hotels in Uruguay — the [Playa Vik](#) in José Ignacio and the 4,000-acre [Estancia Vik](#), five miles inland — but the Chilean project is on a grander scale, and a more ambitious mission. Mr. Vik and Mr. Valette, a Chilean-

born and Bordeaux-bred winemaker, want to create something new and unusual. “We took into account things like the extraordinary sunlight here, which grapes like *carménère* thrive in but don’t get enough of in France,” Mr. Valette said.

His approach has been a meticulous one, having mapped a 1,000-acre area made up of countless microclimates by analyzing 4,000 different soil wells.

Results suggest that they are on the right path: their first vintage, the 2009, sold out at \$100 a bottle — though we were able to get a taste before it did; it is a delicious red blend, combining five different grapes, with complex flavors of ripe fruit and a long finish. For Old World palates like mine, it’s a familiar taste but one different enough to prove exciting — like a continent-spanning offshoot of Bordeaux. And Mr. Valette believes that the 2010 vintage, released last November, is even better.

But beyond the wine, the epic landscape of the Vik estate is what really sold me. As I watched the sun set over the property from one of four bedrooms in the main villa, I was reminded both of the vastness of an African savanna and the orderly beauty of French or Italian wine country. “We wanted the vineyards to have a very organic and symbiotic relationship with nature,” Mr. Vik told me, “and a place of great beauty for people to visit.”

A version of this article appeared in print on March 24, 2013, on page TR8 of the New York edition with the headline: Among the Vines, Villas and Views.

## Travel

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Published: March 22, 2013

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Indeed, Chile is a country where nature takes center stage — with deserts, the Pacific coastline, soaring mountain ranges and glaciers all on spectacular display. This is perhaps most evident in the 250-mile-long Central Valley, set between the Andes and the Pacific Ocean, with gentle farmland and miles of vineyards in between.



Victor Ruiz Caballero for  
The New York Times

Roast lamb at Viña Vik.



Victor Ruiz Caballero for The New York Times  
A view of vineyards and mountains from  
Lapostolle Residence.

The best of those vineyards are found in the Colchagua Valley, over the mountain from the Vik estate, where a new generation of winemakers has successfully started to wrestle great quality out of the bountiful grapes, applying an Old World artisanal approach to New World conditions.

In 2008, the Wine Spectator put the spot firmly on the oenophile map [when it named](#) Lapostolle's Clos Apalta 2005 its top wine of the year. It was a coup not just for Lapostolle, but for the whole region. (The winery is owned by [Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle](#), the great-granddaughter of the creator of Grand Marnier.) The property epitomizes the region's upscale wine tourism aspirations: overnight stays in one of the four casitas, or luxury villas, include private tours of the winery, all meals, morning yoga classes and visits to the area's other vineyards.

Lapostolle's cantina is like a site-specific art installation, spiraling underground five floors, and then opening up in a vaulted tasting room with a glass floor suspended over rows of the family's most prized vintages, including bottles from around the world. The building's complicated design contrasts with the winery's simpler process: grapes are still hand-harvested by local women; the resulting juice is only slightly filtered, creating a very light but flavorful final product.



Victor Ruiz Caballero for The New York Times  
Architecture at Lapostolle.

Though Lapostolle is the regional superstar, some of my favorite experiences were at smaller estates like Viu Manent, a property that was founded in 1935 and includes wines like its Gran Reserva Malbec, which received numerous international prizes for its 2010 vintage.

We ate a long lunch, choosing from the simple menu. The grilled steak and organic salad with a glass of the malbec proved to be one of the best meals of the trip. Under the shade of a fig tree, overlooking the estate's horses at pasture, the beauty of the place had never been more apparent.

## IF YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

The region is a two-hour drive from Santiago. You can rent a car; the highways are well marked and easy to navigate. Otherwise, most resorts can arrange a driver for the journey.

If you can't make the trip, the **Puro Wine** shop in SoHo in New York (161 Grand Street; 212-925-0090; [purowine.com](http://purowine.com)) is devoted solely to vintages from the country.

### STAYING THERE

There are four casitas at the **Lapostolle Residence** (56-72-953-360; [lapostolle.com](http://lapostolle.com)) costing about 283,500 pesos a night (about \$590 at 462 Chilean pesos to the dollar), including all meals, a private tour and tasting at the estate's Clos Apalta winery, and visits to other nearby wineries. The property also just opened a restaurant, Casa Parrón, in an old adobe house, open Tuesday to Sunday for lunch with a prix fixe menu and wine pairings, from 30,000 to 60,000 pesos, depending on the tier of vintages.

**Viña Vik's new resort** ([vik.cl](http://vik.cl)) is set to open in November, with 22 rooms, a swimming pool, restaurant, spa, and activities like horseback riding and mountain biking for \$1,200 a night, all included (United States dollars preferred). But for now there are four luxurious rooms in the main villa, with sweeping views of the valley, which include tastings at the state-of-the-art cantina, meals and bike rides or horseback riding, from \$800.

Housed in a former Jesuit monastery, the **Residencia Historica de Marchihue** (56-9-307-4183; [residenciahistorica.com](http://residenciahistorica.com)) makes an excellent base to explore the Colchagua Valley wineries with 23 rooms costing from 78,000 pesos a night.

### EATING THERE

Among the area's standout vineyard restaurants is Viu Manent's **Rayuela Wine and Grill** (56-2-2840-3180; [viumanent.cl](http://viumanent.cl)) featuring simply grilled local meat and fish, like a wild

salmon with Chilean cream corn. Don't miss the oysters served with a glass of sauvignon blanc.

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