

The Wines of Chile

Written by Terry Connor

Wednesday, 26 October 2011 08:32

I was going to make my next stop New Zealand after I finished Australia. I debated with myself and practicality won out. I headed for Chile because, for us here in the Lowcountry, the magic connection with New Zealand is based on only *one* wine, that being Sauvignon Blanc from the Marlborough Region. This is a good product and it does well in the Lowcountry. Prices are competitive, the quality is good from all of the producers, and it does well against the competition from California, Australia and France.

So, here I am in Chile. It is the beginning of their spring (September), because I am below the Equator. Bud Break on the vine has begun. This means that the growing cycle is in full swing and activity in the vineyard increases exponentially. (Bud Break actually refers to Buds that form in the previous growing season, become encapsulated in the vine and remain dormant until the following spring.)

Chilean wine comes to us compliments of the 16th century Spanish Conquistadors. As these adventurous young lads traveled from Spain to numerous Latin American destinations, one component of the ships' manifest was *Vitis Vinifera* Vines. *Vitis Vinifera* refers to the species of grapes that originated in Europe and, were then, and are now, familiar to us all. They are Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot, etc. When you try to imagine how these vines survived an ocean voyage of several months, it is truly mind boggling.

Two hundred years later, in both Chile and Argentina, the French influence on winemaking became very strong. This was most fortunate for the French and the Chilean wine industry. Allow me to set the stage. The dreaded Phylloxera Aphid had invaded the European continent and left thousands of acres of vines in ruin. The French, who possessed up-to-date winemaking techniques, sought out other areas of the globe to produce wine. The Chileans, very aware of what the French were capable of doing, and led by Don Silvestre Errazuriz, invited the French producers from Bordeaux to oversee vineyard planting and to produce wine in the Bordeaux style. The combined French and Chilean effort was a success and was further enhanced by the fact that the phylloxera aphid never appeared in either Chile or Argentina.

The Geography of Chile is unique. This is a long narrow country dominated by the Andes Mountains on the east and on the west by the Pacific Ocean. The vineyards are spread out along an 800-mile stretch, from Atacama in the north to Bio-Bio in the South. It may seem boring to point out this geographical data, but it's important to note what is happening. Days are hot, very hot. At night, cool air comes in from the Andes Mountains, which dramatically drops the temperature. This helps to maintain high levels of acidity to go with the ripe fruit that grapes

The Wines of Chile

Written by Terry Connor

Wednesday, 26 October 2011 08:32

develop with the long hours of sunshine. Voila! Ideal growing conditions for the fruit.

They are called “Flying Winemakers.” Foreign investors (see Winespeak) with planeloads of cash invested heavily in the production of wine in Chile. This occurred in the late 20th century. They introduced new technology and styles that helped the Chileans produce wine that was more accepted in markets worldwide. (Sixty countries and growing.) One big example was the switch from barrels made of RAULI wood to Oak and/or Stainless Steel for storage and aging. (The rauli wood left a taste that was just plain unpleasant, and so it was eliminated.) The heavy investment paid huge dividends. Red wines from Chile include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Carmenere, Zinfandel, Petite Syrah, Pinot Noir, Syrah, Malbec, and Carignan. Whites include Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Viognier, and Pedro Ximenez. This represents an enormous change from the 19th

century, when all that was produced was a local red called Pais and a few whites. Here in the Lowcountry, we are the recipients of most of the Chilean styles with prices ranging from \$6.00 to \$20.00.

Two of the biggest wineries in Chile are Concha Y Toro and Casa Lapostolle. Concha Y Toro is well represented in the Lowcountry, and it is familiar to most wine consumers. The winery was started in 1883 and it has 350,000 acres under vine. The wines that reach the Lowcountry are in the \$6-\$20 range. However, should you desire, you can go higher – much higher. For example, a bottle of Almaviva in your Christmas stocking will be \$110. A bottle Of Don Melchor Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon cost approximately \$70. Go ahead! Treat yourself.

Casa Lapostolle was founded in 1994 by the Marnier Lapostolle family of Grand Marnier fame. The winery produces 150,000 cases of wine each year that includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Carmenere, and soon Syrah. All available in Lowcountry stores in the \$6-\$20 range. Here again, you can go higher if you want by ordering a bottle of Casa Lapostolle Clos Apalta Merlot for about \$72. One thing that makes Casa Lapostolle unique is that they destem the grapes by hand. This is very time-consuming, but it is their style. They maintain that it significantly contributes to a higher quality product.

Winespeak:

The Wines of Chile

Written by Terry Connor

Wednesday, 26 October 2011 08:32

The **Flying Investors** mentioned above include Robert Mondavi in collaboration with Vina Errazuriz to produce a Cabernet-Merlot-Carmenere blend called SENA. (\$70 +). This effort was undertaken to prove Chile could compete in world Markets with a top-notch product. It worked. In addition, Chateau Lafite Rothschild collaborated with Chilean producer Los Vascos, and Chateau Mouton Rothschild joined forces with Concha Y Toro to produce ALMAVIVA. These joint efforts were successful. However, I am of the opinion that the effort came more from a passion for wine rather than financial reward. I say this because Mondavi was already a respected wine legend and Lafite Rothschild and Mouton Rothschild were from First Growth Wineries. Just adding their names, endorsements and expertise to the Chilean adventure was enough.

Cheers. Feel free to contact me at tacc@hargray.com

Next stop is Argentina

[Read more Drink Globally](#)