

THE VIEW ACROSS THE ANDES



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The Excess
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Chile and Argentina share an exciting future with respect to Latin wine production.

In this article, David Stevens-Castro explores their taste and influence on markets around the globe.

Chile, the so-called ‘winemakers paradise’, is pumping the world with well-priced, quaffable wine. At the same latitude on the opposite side of the Andes, Argentina is also producing seductive and approachable wines that are just as delicious in their own way. In the last 10 years, wines from both countries have enjoyed considerable international success at cheaper price-points. However, critics commonly dismiss the entirety of Latin American wine as being ‘fruit forward & simple’. Should mass appeal at a cheaper price necessarily equate to a lack of complexity? Is there truth to this categorisation of Latin America wine?

During the mid-90s the Latin American wine industry was radically modernised. One of the major changes that took place was the opening of international free trade routes. Export markets grew strongly and expanded rapidly. Both Chile and Argentina were well equipped to meet the demands of expansion. Similarly, wine production in Latin America enjoyed a wide availability of cheap labour and highly skilled professionals. The agricultural strategy of the time was premised on producing higher yields: more kilos of grapes per hectare. The wine industry was also bolstered by an increase in local and foreign investment. This strategy positioned the Latin American countries in the cheapest and most competitive part of the price pyramid. Ultimately, both regions have become victims of their own success and the global consumer has now pigeonholed the wines they produce as cheap and easy drinking.

Within the wine world, New World countries strive to affiliate themselves with a flagship variety. New Zealand has been very successful with sauvignon blanc, South Africa with pinotage etc. Chile has identified carménère as its flagship variety. Although successful, it is yet to develop notoriety in the global mass market. It is in fact its bordelaise brother, cabernet sauvignon, which is gaining traction for Chilean wines in the international wine media. Argentina has strongly marketed their wine industry through the guise of the flagship variety, malbec.

Chile is part of a continental island with unique geography. The diversity of the arid Atacama Desert, the majestic Andes Mountains, the Patagonian Ice Fields and the great Pacific Ocean, create a truly unique vine-growing environment. Moreover, this extraordinary geography means Chile is free from many of the pests and diseases that typically affect viticulture, including the dreaded phylloxera. The vineyards of Chile are like goldfields that are yet to be fully exploited. There is a wide assortment of terroir with the potential to produce wines of the highest calibre.

One of my favourite Chilean producers is De Martino. Located in the Maipo Valley, they are known in Chile as the ‘terroir hunters’. De Martino has made wines from more than 350 different locations along the country. Their understanding of soils and vineyards is mind blowing. The winemaking team is lead by Marcelo Retamal, a truly inspirational character. Amongst their current projects, De Martino are making wines in traditional clay pots under the Viejas Tinajas label. Viejas Tinajas literally translates to “old pots” and represents a return to the traditional vessels used for fermentation in ancient times. Premium winery, Casa Lapostolle, is another excellent example of Chilean innovation at its best. Situated in Apalta in the Colchagua area, the estate is organically and biodynamically run. The state-of-the-art winery is built right into the hillside. Designed to produce wines gravitationally (transporting wine without the use of pumps), it is without a doubt the most impressive Chilean winery I’ve seen—and the wines taste terrific too.

Though Chile is commonly recognised for its plethora of medium and large sized winery operations, there are some noteworthy small-scale producers enjoying a more hands-on approach with artisan methodology. La Reserva de Caliboro in the Maule Valley is one such example. Home of the *Erasmó* wine label, the estate is underpinned by a strong respect for its Chilean cultural heritage. The benchmark wine of the estate is a cabernet dominant bordeaux blend with restrained red fruits and a strong mineral focus.

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Recent innovations have taken place in the coastal areas of Chile. The extreme slopes of the Elqui and Limari valleys are starting to generate premium quality wines. Low rainfall, high sunlight hours and vineyards located at altitudes of up to 2,000 meters, make the wines of the Elqui Valley a very unique proposition. De Martino's *Alto los Toros* syrah is a peppery and smoky wine, which originates from a unique area of granite soils. The Camanchaca fog that creeps over the Limari Valley creates another truly unique viticultural area. The Limari Valley is home to some of the only pure limestone soils in Chile. The Talinay 'Tabali' chardonnay provides a great example of what the region can offer; tense and chalky acidity coupled with crisp citrus fruit.

In Argentina, the conditions are drier and more continental. Many of the vineyards are planted at higher altitudes, which increases the effect of solar radiation. Infertile soils and continental influence generate very dry growing conditions. The dry conditions are counterbalanced by an endless supply of crystalline snowmelt that is funnelled down from the Andes Mountains. The fact that the water supply is manually controlled (irrigated) assists with low incidence of pests and disease.

Mendoza is the wine capital of Argentina and is responsible for more than 80% of the country's area under vine. Lujan de Cuyo, on the outskirts of Mendoza is home to Altos Las Hormigas, the 'malbec specialists'. They are a multidisciplinary group that combines the skills of internationally renowned consultants Alberto Antonini, Attilio Pagli and Pedro Parra. Their wines from the high altitudes of the Uco region have naturally higher acidity levels. Coupled with a strong fruit concentration, the wines exhibit a strong ageing potential. Another Mendoza producer, Rutini Wines, boasts a strong winemaking portfolio ranging from varieties such as torrontes and malbec, right through to international styles of chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon. A grape with large appeal in the UK at present, torrontes has highly pronounced floral aromatics of rose petal and orange blossom. La Rural de Rutini houses a museum with an impressive collection of over 5,000 winemaking and viticulture relics. It is a unique expression of national pride that is well worth visiting.

The Chilean and Argentine wine industries are on the cusp of something special. Their unique terroir and innovative winemakers are creating a legacy for premium quality wine; complex wines with a sense of place—I for one look forward to being part of that journey. A

David Stevens-Castro is a Chilean agricultural scientist and sommelier based in Australia.

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De Martino 'Viejas Tinajas' Cinsault 2011, Coelemu—Chile
Quite close to a cru beaujolais in character. A 'natural wine' made in traditional clay amphorae (pots) with no additions. The use of carbonic maceration gives the wine a lifted, fruit purity and overall freshness that isn't commonly seen in Chilean red wines. The juicy palate and light aftertaste is inviting; it is a breath of fresh air. Drink now to 3 years.

Casa Lapostolle 'Clos Apalta' 2010, Colchagua—Chile
Clos Apalta is the premium wine of this house—a blend of carmenere (71%), cabernet sauvignon (18%) and merlot (11%). Despite showing good complexity early in its life, there is still room for ageing and development. It ticks every box. There is a certain vibrancy on the nose and palate that seems to be unique to biodynamic viticulture. A 'keeper' that will cellar for up to 15 years.

Erasmus Late Harvest Torontel 2008, Maule—Chile
This estate is dry farmed. Made with torontel grapes from 60-year-old vines. Once harvested, the grapes go through a two-month drying process. The drying takes place under a roof in a colonial house on the property. It's barrel fermented and matured in French oak for several months. A handcrafted masterpiece that delivers citrus and rose petal aromas with orange peel flavours on the palate. Probably the rarest, wildest and best of all Chilean late harvest wines. Drink now but it will age for up to 10 years.

Rutini Chardonnay 2011, Tupungato—Argentina
The lightest and crispest chardonnay that I have tasted from this region. Fresh, elegant, floral and citric with hints of vanilla. The wine is underpinned by its firm acidity and framed by a mineral finish on the palate; it is an attractive wine with wide appeal. Will age well up to 5 years.

Altos Las Hormigas Malbec Reserve 2009, Uco—Argentina
Visually a deep and intense inky colour. The bouquet exhibits fine floral aromas, which are underpinned by flavours of graphite earth. The graphite character is a hallmark of the wines from this producer. The wine is rich, broad and dense on the palate. The tannins are long, delicate and carefully worked. A complex wine with a persistent mineral finish and an overall freshness that invites a second glass. Ageing potential of 10 years.

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