

CHILE'S VALUE OFFERING IS ESTABLISHED - BUT IS THERE MORE ROOM FOR GREATNESS?



■ The biodynamically farmed vineyards of Clos Apalta are some of the most beautiful in the world.

As I pass through the dusty vineyards of three of Chile's most famous wineries - Almaviva, Don Melchor and Vinedo Chadwick - I feel like I am travelling through some of the best places in Bordeaux, perhaps Haut-Brion or La Mission Haut-Brion. It's not only the urban features that surround the vineyards in Puente Alto that seem similar to these legendary Bordeaux chateaux. It's also the intense awareness of place and reputation you feel, knowing that tens of thousands of great bottles of red are made here each year. This region in the suburbs of Santiago is ground zero for the best Chilean wines, many of which I have rated 100 points over the years. And that makes it the key inspiration for the excitement much of the world has for Chilean wines today, especially in Asia.

"We have done the research, and the climate and soils of Puente Alto are very much like the best in Bordeaux," admitted Enrique Tirado, winemaker at Don Melchor, who spent time studying in Bordeaux, understanding the similarities in soils and climates in order to finetune the winery's viticulture and winemaking. "We have to understand and respect our soils and climate to make great wines."

Read our accompanying special report on Casablanca: [Casablanca: Exploring Chile's Cool-Climate Diversity](#)

The reality for most of the rest of Chile, however, is very different. The majority of winemakers gear their vineyards and production toward inexpensive but good quality wines. The areas and subregions are each very different due to the diverse soils, exposures and climates of Chile, and yet the end result is very much the same. This is why Chile arguably makes the best value wines in the world at the moment and it's also why we could write all day about good quality wines that cost less than \$20 a bottle from Chile. It doesn't matter if it's syrah, pinot noir, chardonnay or carignan; the quality, value wines from Chile seem endless.

However, if you think you've heard this story before, you probably have. Several times. We said as much in our report this time last year: [Chile's tale of two cities.](#)

And so this year we had a key question in mind as we toured through the country in February: would more producers both large and small be making world class wines now? Would the average quality of Chilean wines increase? Would we find more classic quality wines rated 95 points or more?



The tasting check list in Santiago at the hotel where the JamesSuckling.com team stayed.



Montes Wines makes consistently outstanding wines in Chile.



Executive editor Nick Stock hams it up for the camera.

Market pressures

Polkura and P. S. Garcia were the only small and independent wineries to make wines rated 95 points or more. They are members of MOVI (Movimiento de Viñateros Independientes), an association of independent wine producers. They are not doing anything that other producers cannot, so we have to assume that the other wineries are not making the effort or are simply chained to an economic reality that doesn't allow them to make great wines ... despite great vineyards, micro-climates and soils. They have to sell cheap because the market won't let them do otherwise.

“It’s hard work making great wines here, especially to keep your business going,” said Sven Bruchfeld of Polkura in the Colchagua Valley a couple a years ago when I visited his winery. Regardless, he makes exceptional quality wines every year despite importers around the world beating him up to reduce his prices. Over the years, I have seen how the guy works and there is no one out there that works any harder, and I include small producers in France’s Rhone Valley or Italy’s Langhe in my comparison. Bruchfeld’s wines show his dedication in every drop in the bottle.

Maybe making great wines in Chile is just a mindset then? Then again, the three 100-point wines this year were made by individuals who enjoy the benefits of being part of a large group: Sena, Clos Apalta and Don Melchor. Sena is the brainchild and love of Eduardo Chadwick, head of the Errazuriz wine group with various wineries and estates as well as a large production of inexpensive wines. The same is true of Clos Apalta (owned by Charles de Bournet of Domaines Bournet-Lapostolle) and Don Melchor (with winemaker Enrique Tirado of the Concha y Torro group.) It’s probably easier for these groups to create stellar gems considering their huge resources and the economic power behind their sales and organization.

“We don’t have to farm biodynamically but we believe in the principles and the environment,” explained Charles de Bournet during a tasting in Santiago. His 2017, which is his 20th vintage for his estate and garners a special label, is stupendous and is the third in a trilogy of perfect 100-point wines from Clos Apalta. I have been to his vineyards numerous times and they are some of the most beautiful in the world. Clos Apalta, according to Bournet, is one of the biggest single biodynamic vineyards in the world. “We are making wines to compete with the best in the world but wines that are unique to our soils and terroirs.”



Clos Apalta owner Charles de Bournet shows off the special label of this 100-point 2017 with his winemaker Andrea Leon.



Enrique Tirado, winemaker of Don Melchor, is a student of Bordeaux terroir and he shows how it relates to his own vineyard's soils in Chile.



Marie and James taste with Eduardo Chadwick, owner at Vinedo Chadwick, and winemaker Francisco Baettig.

Biodynamic leanings

Biodynamic farming is indeed one of the highlights of Chile that we should not overlook. The country has some of the largest holdings in the world. The winery of Emiliana is reportedly the largest biodynamic vineyard in the world with thousands of acres, and the wines are fantastic quality from the complex and exotic [Emiliana Valle de Colchagua Gê 2017](#) (a blend of 56% syrah, 31% carmenere, and 13% cabernet sauvignon) to the juicy and delicious [Emiliana Pinot Noir Valle de Casablanca Signos de Origen El Rincon 2019](#).

“My uncle José was one of the first to start farming biodynamically in Chile and we believe in the methodology and principles,” said the young and dynamic winemaker Alejandro Mitrakis, whose family is a key shareholder in Emiliana. “We believe the grapes make wines with more character and energy.”

That energy, combined with the respect they have for the earth, is what excites me about what Emiliana and others are doing. I like to say that biodynamically farmed vineyards are like super organically farmed ones that use no inorganic chemicals, but also follow the philosophies and principals of the late Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner from the 1920s that canonized principals of farmers at the time. Regardless, I am enthused when I find great wines that have come from biodynamically farmed vineyards. This makes my 100-point wines this year such as the [Seña 2018](#) and [Clos Apalta 2017](#) - both from biodynamically farmed vineyards - truly exceptional.

I am also extremely sympathetic to the old vines of the south of Chile such as the valleys of Itata and Bío Bío. These regions are some of the poorest in the country with ancient vineyards, some more than a century old. And grapes such as carignan and pais flourish here and make soulful and delicious reds. They also are extremely inexpensive with some of the the best bottles costing \$15 to \$20.

In addition, this year we noticed a much higher consistency for high quality carmenere. Winemakers said they have fine-tuned their vineyards to produce wine with more varietal personality, moving away from the fruity, almost sweet and sour character. In great vintages like 2018 and 2019 carmenere is excellent quality, but it also shines across the board no matter the price.

“In the past people were very critical of the greenness in our reds, particularly carmenere,” said Marcello Papa, head winemaker at Concha y Toro. “Carmenere is considered the grape of the country and everyone criticized that so they made rich and jammy wines. But people are now more willing to have wines with some greenness. So we are making more balanced wines. We are more honest with the variety and the place it comes from than before when we used too much new wood and other things.”

Honesty is a virtue for Chilean winemakers and our tastings and meetings confirm this. So I too must be honest. The fundamentals of the winemaking in Chile continue to be solid and for wines rated 90 to 93 points, costing around \$20 a bottle, it offers the world a huge variety of drinkable and enjoyable wines at great prices. It is an impressive feat to capture a commercial, mainstream sweet spot like this so effectively, especially in these unusual times. But I feel Chile now has to raise the bar. Many wineries have the ability to make great wines - my question for them is do you have the will to make it happen? We of course will be back next year, and I hope to find more exceptional wines then.

-James Suckling, CEO and editor



Alejandro Mitarakis Guilisasti of Emiliana and his team taste with James in Santiago - they're holding a natural wine with no sulfur.



Aurelio Montes Sr. of Montes Wines shows his racy reds which go well with ceviche in La Mar restaurant in Santiago.