THE REVENANT

Once a popular component of Bordeaux blends, Carmenère fell off the viticultural radar for much of the 20th century. More than 20 years on from its celebrated rediscovery in Chile, **Peter Richards MW** assesses its remarkable return

There is something gloriously ancient, mysterious, and knotty about Carmenère. Its story brings together competing historical hypotheses, ampelographic hide-and-seek, and remarkable powers of reinvention. It gets both winemakers and wine drinkers hot under the collar, with the power to dismay and delight in seemingly equal measure. Now, new research is starting to shed tantalizing light on its quirky nature, making this particularly protean grape variety very much a story still in the telling.

Carmenère is considered an old grape variety, and its early history is a matter of conjecture. Recent DNA analysis has identified its genetic origins as a natural cross between Cabernet Franc and Gros Cabernet (a very old variety, most likely a cross of Fer and Hondarribi Beltza). Geographically, this tallies with the earliest citations of the variety in the 18th and 19th centuries, which relate to southwest France, in particular the Médoc, and which include telling mention not only of the high quality of the wines but also of Carmenère's susceptibility to low yields.

Inconsistent production, a bugbear for Carmenère producers to this day, proved to be the variety's downfall in Bordeaux. After phylloxera enforced widespread replanting in the late 19th century, Carmenère all but disappeared from the Médoc. Most likely, this was a case of producers deciding not to replant an unreliable, late-ripening, finicky vine in perilous economic times. Yet that other American import, the rootstock, may also have played a part. Carmenère is notoriously picky when it comes to rootstocks, with some combinations giving decidedly adverse outcomes in terms of yield, vigor, fruit structure, and maturation. Poor results with early rootstocks may have compounded Carmenère's fate in the Gironde.

But phylloxera, for all its devastating consequences, had not done for Carmenère. This tenacious specimen even among vines had already hooked its tendrils into Italian, Chilean, and even Chinese soil, disseminated by agents including a peripatetic workforce (some of whom were to find themselves out of a job due to phylloxera) and Chile's newly minted plutocrats, whose grand tours were funded by a home-grown commodities boom. Not that Carmenère's fame preceded it, of course: The variety swiftly performed a remarkable vanishing act, fading into the background of far-flung vineyards, where it was frequently interplanted and confused with its close relations Cabernet Franc and Merlot.

All photography courtesy of Wines of Chile

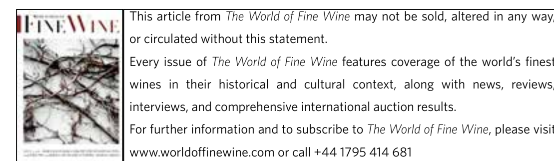
Recognition and revival

Stefano Inama, of the eponymous Veneto producer, notes that Carmenère was often known as "Black Bordeaux" or "Old Cabernet" in Italy and considered a different clone of Cabernet Franc. It wasn't until the early 1990s that this "Italian" Cabernet Franc was identified as Carmenère. While it's likely that plantings of Carmenère are significantly more widespread in northern Italy than official records suggest, some producers, such as Ca' del Bosco and Inama, have embraced the variety, the latter having recently successfully integrated it into the Colli Berici DOC.

"The territory seems to have been purposefully shaped to help these recalcitrant grapes to ripen," says Inama of his San Germano vineyard in Colli Berici. "The earth is red, rich in iron oxide, and on calcareous stone. The climate is milder than surrounding areas, and in the summer it has extremely hot days but cool evenings as the air descends from the woods to the vineyard. It's ideal for Carmenère."

In China, Carmenère is known as Cabernet Gernischt or Shelongzhu. There is, admittedly, some confusion over the term Gernischt and what exactly it refers to on a broader scale in China; it seems that Cabernet Franc and Merlot may also fall under this banner. But recent DNA profiling has confirmed that Gernischt from the Changyu winery in Ningxia is identical to Carmenère. Whatever the case, plantings are widespread: French ampelographer Jean-Michel Boursiquot recently estimated that there could now be anything up to 15,000ha (37,000 acres) of Gernischt in China. (By comparison, Chile's Carmenère vineyard is just over 11,300ha [28,000 acres].)

Changyu winemaking consultant Lenz Moser confirms the prevalence of the grape in Ningxia. He estimates it covers around 20–25 percent of the local vineyard area but points out that he is replacing the vines because they struggle to produce fully mature grapes in the high-altitude conditions,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Carmenère in brief

- Ancient vine, a natural crossing of Cabernet Franc and Gros Cabernet (itself a descendant of Cabernet Franc).
- **Synonyms:** Grande Vidure, Merlot Chileno, Cabernet Gernischt.
- **Often confused with:** Cabernet Franc, Merlot.
- **Most planted in:** Chile, China, northern Italy.
- **Ampelography:** The leaves have a tight or overlapping petiolar sinus and are shiny red-orange with bronze patches when young, red in autumn. Bent or crumpled stamen filaments. Smallish, long bunches.
- **Viticulture:** Vigorous plant with inconsistent yields. Poor fertility in basal buds necessitates cane pruning. Prone to Parthenocarpic Fruit Development (PFD), or *millerandage*, and *coulure*. Ripens late. Suits only certain rootstocks (101-14 favored in Chile, 420-A in Italy).
- **Soils:** Best are well drained, with low to moderate fertility.
- **Climate:** Needs a warm climate with moderating influences and a long ripening season. (Late-season rains mean disease pressure.)
- **Wine characteristics:** Varies from lighter styles (green-/red-pepper notes, medium-bodied, firmish tannin, red berry fruit character), to riper iterations (black fruit, low acidity, succulent tannins, dark chocolate, and soy flavors). Because it can be low in acidity and tannin but with complex aromas, it is often used as a blending partner for Cabernet Sauvignon.
- **Recommended Chilean producers/wines:** Casa Silva, Lapostolle (Collection), Falernia, Tamaya, Errázuriz, De Martino, Carmen, Concha y Toro, Terranoble, Montes, Antiyal.

giving "off-putting" herbaceous characters. "I've now done 15 vintages here, and I haven't tasted a single good Carmenère that's pleasing, gentle, or generous. It's just not an option for top-quality wine in Ningxia," asserts Moser.

Viticultural drama

While Carmenère also crops up in countries as widespread as Canada, North America, Argentina, and Australia, with varying degrees of success, it was in Chile that the variety had its most celebrated moment of viticultural drama. In 1994, Boursiquot was visiting Chile to talk at a conference and was invited to visit Viña Carmen's vineyard: a plot of Merlot. He was, he says, totally unprepared for what came next.

"As soon as I got out of the truck and walked into the vineyard, I could see this wasn't Merlot," recounts Boursiquot. "The young leaves were orangey-bronze, not green like those of Merlot; the petiolar sinus was closed, not an open U like Merlot. It was thus easy to say it wasn't Merlot. The tricky part was saying what it was. It took me perhaps only one or two minutes (though it seemed pretty long to me at the time!), but then I noticed an inflorescence with a bent or crumpled stamen filament—lucky for me the vines were flowering—and the only variety I knew with this characteristic was Carmenère."

Although Boursiquot had only encountered Carmenère in an ampelographic collection, it being so little cultivated in France, this and other evidence convinced him that he was indeed dealing with the old Bordelais variety (a point subsequently proved by DNA analysis). Fellow French ampelographer Claude Valat had also previously noted that the Chilean Merlot vineyard wasn't entirely pure. Nonetheless, the initial reaction from Chile to Boursiquot's revelation was ambivalent, some fearing the damage that might be done to the bigger brand of "Chilean Merlot," which Carmenère had helped make so distinctive. But soon Carmenère was being separated, cultivated, and commercialized in its own right. The first wineries to launch standalone varietal Carmenère wines were Carmen and De Martino, though the former initially used the Bordelais term Grande Vidure to avoid confusion with its brand. Since the first 330ha (815 acres) were registered in the 1997 vineyard census, Carmenère has grown to cover 11,319ha (27,970 acres), with plantings up nearly 60 percent in a decade. It's now Chile's fifth most planted variety after Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, and Chardonnay.

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A work in progress

Today, Carmenère is the subject of ongoing research in Chile, much of it led by or involving Professor Yerko Moreno, an associate professor at Talca University and director of the Grape and Wine Research Centre. One recent finding was that Carmenère's poor fruit-set, commonly thought to be a micro-nutrient deficiency or a result of the bent stamens, or filaments, was actually attributable to pollen abnormalities resulting in non-germination. This tied in with a separate research project, carried out in conjunction with the Casa Silva winery, FONDEF, the Universities of Talca and Santa Maria, and the Max Planck Institute, which found that Chilean Carmenère is not as genetically diverse as previously thought. Of 42 initial Carmenère accessions (or potential clones), just two clonal families were identified, with two individuals from these families selected for further trials.

> Today, Carmenère is the subject of on-going research in Chile. The focus among the country's best Carmenère producers is shifting to elegance and a sense of place

"Most probably the genetic diversity was limited to start with, when Carmenère was introduced to Chile in the mid-19th century mixed with other cultivars," comments Moreno. "The lack of clonal variability in Carmenère is not a bad thing per se. It can save us time and money doing clonal selection and instead allow us to concentrate on the key viticultural and enological variables like rootstocks, irrigation, nutrition, harvest timing, winemaking, cultivars for blending, yeasts, oak, et cetera." Mario Pablo Silva adds that the two clones identified will be trialed in detail over the next four years, with yield being a key area of study. "It may well be that one of these two clones yields better than the other," says Silva, "but the importance and implications of this will only become clear over time."

Moreno's conclusion that "we're only just starting to understand Carmenère" is echoed by René Merino of Tamaya. "Carmenère is still a work in process: 21 vintages is not enough in wine years to say we have mastered it." Merino also espouses the view widely held in Chile that too much Carmenère is planted in the wrong sites, where the climate is too cold or warm, or the soils too rich or water-retentive, necessitating significant viticultural and winemaking intervention, resulting in ill-judged wines. The focus among the country's best Carmenère producers is shifting to elegance and a sense of place. "In the beginning, I was more focused on the expression of power with Carmenère," confesses Alvaro Espinoza of Antiyal and Emiliana, who made the first Grande Vidure wines at Carmen. "Now I focus on the expression of place."

Staying power

Carmenère demands a lot of its custodians but can reward those who stick with it. As De Martino's Marcelo Retamal comments, "It's the most difficult grape variety to cultivate and vinify that we have in Chile, but it has the potential to be world class." Some are throwing in the towel—from Moser's Changyu in China, to Château Potensac in Pauillac, and Brown Brothers in Australia. Others, by contrast, are taking up the challenge—for example, those in France backing Boursiquot's stance that "French producers (and particularly Bordelais) should reappropriate Carmenère, especially with a view to climate change." These include Rodrigo Laytte, technical manager at Château Kirwan, who installed 3,000 Carmenère plants in 2014 with a view to including it in the 2016 blend, "to give the wine even more complexity." Stefano Inama is enamoured: "So far, Carmenère is a success in every market. People are surprised to find a Carmenère from Italy—and once they try it, they like it. It's a project of craftsmen, with vineyards on slopes, worked by hand."

As both the understanding of, and support for, Carmenère progresses, we can expect not only to learn more about this mysterious variety with remarkable staying power but also to see more wines and styles on the shelf. Falernia is making a Carmenère using a proportion of dried grapes (*appassimento*) in Elqui. Within Chile, there is support for initiatives to promote quality Carmenère along the lines of VIGNO, which has championed old-vine Carignan in the south. Lapostolle winemaker Andrea León is working toward earlier ripening cycles and incorporating "lighter expressions" off granitic slopes in Apalta. Marcelo Retamal is harvesting his Carmenère a month earlier than five years ago and eschewing new oak barrels and all other winemaking interventions. Carmenère is even conquering new territories: Kirwan's Laytte recently planted the variety at an altitude of 1,500m (5,000ft) in Sonora, Mexico, as part of his Uvas de Altura project together with the likes of Touriga Nacional, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, Syrah, and Grenache. His aim? "To make the best wine in Mexico."

A century after it performed a dramatic disappearing act, Carmenère looks like it is here to stay—albeit not everywhere, and not necessarily under one banner. According to Inama, "Carmenère is already considered a local variety in the hot, dry climate of the Colli Berici. In fact, our plants are beginning to show subtle differences from their French relations. Who knows what it might be called in another millennium?" Going by its recent past, few would dare to predict what the next few hundred years might hold for Carmenère. ■