

Producer profile

Casa Marin

Like its wind-battered, vertiginous land just off the Pacific coast, the wines from this Chilean producer are extreme. Peter Richards MW looks at how one woman went from bulk wine to craft one of the country's leading quality estates

THERE'S A NICKNAME for the San Antonio coastline: *el litoral de los poetas* – the poets' shoreline. Celebrated Chilean wordsmiths Pablo Neruda, Vicente Huidobro and Nicanor Parra all have connections to coastal towns along this rugged shore, which was for long a liberal, rural backwater. The poets came to escape the bustling Santiago and to be inspired by the vast, inscrutable Pacific and its soul-shaking winds.

These days, the area is much changed. Cruise-liner tourists huddle at the seaside, traffic gleefully thrums along the sleek new tarmac of the Autopista del Sol, container ships loom and grind at the port. But there is still poetry here, embodied by another arriviste, one that has spread rapidly, displacing the pastureland and eucalypt forests from the blustery, bright hillsides, and in doing so creating an exciting new chapter in the region's story. The vine may just end up making this *el litoral del vino*.

If it does, one name will go down in history as particularly pioneering: Casa Marin. This ambitious producer has built a justifiably exalted reputation in just over a decade, from its blustery vantage point in Lo Abarca, barely 4km from the Pacific coast. 'Extreme' was the best word I could find to describe it in my book *The Wines of Chile*, and so it remains: polarising and delighting wine drinkers and critics alike with its challenging, edgy, unapologetically individual wines grown in some of the coolest, windiest, steepest vineyards in the country.

As ever when it comes to appreciating the nuances and intricacies of fine wine, it pays to understand the people as much as the land. In this

Right: the Casa Marin estate in Lo Abarca, home to some of the coolest, windiest and steepest vineyards in Chile

case, the protagonist of what is a powerful personal narrative is Mariluz Marin, a formidable yet charming winemaker who, after crafting a lucrative career in the bulk wine trade, decided to invest in developing a small-scale wine project in Lo Abarca.

Marin's father owned a property close to the current vineyard and the family would come for summer holidays. She remembers her father trying to plant fruit trees, but the lack of water and hungry rabbits put paid to his ambitions. I ask her why she came back to make wine.

'Instinct and intuition,' she says. 'Because I've always felt that there's something here you don't find elsewhere. Look at the lettuces – they're bigger, crunchier, and more flavoursome than those from Casablanca. Everything that grows here is good, even roses. So I thought: why not wine? The vine is the most loyal plant, after all. So I was confident.'

Constant evolution

Marin was not to be deterred in her ambitions for the area. This despite the extreme proximity to the coast, the lack of precedent, a legal objection by the state forestry authorities and a dearth of investors willing to back her. Not to mention that the old woman who sold her the land (whom Marin had known for some time) sought to put a halt to the sale, convinced that Marin would ruin herself.

Lack of water was also a critical issue. While Lo Abarca is a cool area in Chilean wine terms, summer >



Casa Marin at a glance

Location Lo Abarca, San Antonio, Chile
Established 2000
Annual production 150,000 litres
Vineyard area 40 hectares
Plantings Sauvignon Blanc (16ha), Pinot Noir (10ha), Riesling (5ha), Syrah (4ha), Gewurztraminer (4ha), Sauvignon Gris (1.5ha)
New Tierras Blancas vineyard Pinot Noir (6ha), Sauvignon Blanc (2ha), Grenache (1.3ha) and Syrah (0.7ha)

Photographs: Mariluz and Felipe Marin was photographed exclusively for Decanter by Matt Wilson at Casa Marin, San Antonio, Chile

'It's not about what I want: it's about what the vineyard is giving us' Mariluz Marin (tasting grapes, right)

rainfall is often negligible. Marin admits she made a mistake in her first purchase of 57 hectares in 1997: she didn't have enough water. So she bought a further 16ha on flatter land in 1998 to exploit a running water source, today supplemented by an 8m well. Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir were the first varieties to go in; Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Syrah and Sauvignon Gris followed. Frost, wind and botrytis remain constant threats, meaning crop levels can often be unexpectedly low – especially with Sauvignon Gris, Gewurztraminer and Riesling.

In the early years, Casa Marin's wines, typified by her two Sauvignon Blanc cuvées Laurel (a hillside selection) and Cipreses (from the windiest, lowest-yielding hilltop) were unmistakable. Wild, vivid, exuberant, a veritable assault on the senses – they talked of gusty austerity and thrilling edginess, a style one Chilean taster memorably described as 'on the cusp of madness'.

Since then, things have calmed down. The wines – especially since the 2007 vintage – have become more restrained and drinkable as the vines have matured and the winemaking caught up to the exigencies of the site (with its 38 different blocks within 40ha, four different sun exposures, five different soil types and a range in altitude from 0m to 250m). Marin too has mellowed as the project has become more established and her son Felipe – with experience in Sonoma and Marlborough, together with credentials as a national dirt-biker – has taken over as day-to-day winemaker.

What's refreshing about life and wine at Casa Marin is that there is a real humanity to the winemaking process. Part of this is a willingness to admit mistakes while there is also a candid ambivalence about the nature of inevitable evolution.

Take Marin on how the style of her wines is evolving. 'When some people say my style is different from what it was, it both pleases and upsets me. To be honest, I'm ambivalent about it. But ultimately it's not about what I want: it's about what the vineyard is giving us. Our winemaking



Above: frost, wind and botrytis are constant threats at the low-yielding Estero Vineyard, planted to Sauvignon Gris

may have evolved and improved, but we don't follow the market. The most important thing for us is to show our sense of place. It's not easy.'

It's also evident in how Felipe talks of the new Tierras Blancas project, 10ha of prime vineyard recently planted on an adjacent hillside over white limestone soils on north-facing slopes: cooler and windier than the current vineyards but with more sunlight exposure. 'Everything we did wrong here, we put right there,' he says, detailing clonal material, rootstocks and automatic irrigation methods as Marin mutters about 'investing all our profits'.

In 2008, Casa Marin parted ways with its US consultant Greg La Follette, who had played a large part in crafting the wild styles in the early years. These days Casa Marin is very much a family affair. When I last visited, earlier this year, we sat round the same table as always, five members of the (extended) family and me, chatting about wine, occasionally tasting an older vintage or a current release. It was pleasant, familiar, relaxed.

But one nub of contention was the Pinot Noir. This variety has to my mind been the one weak link in an otherwise exemplary range, with wines that

have consistently been too oaky, extracted and worked. Marin was eager for my opinion of the 2010s, wines Felipe had pushed to have harvested earlier than normal and made with no new oak. There was evident tension when we discussed the relative merits of pursuing the fresher, brisker style – perhaps more challenging for certain markets, but clearly Felipe's vision – over retaining the toasty forcefulness that has been the winery's hallmark. We mulled it over and Marin declared herself 'more positive now' than how the wines had tasted six months previously. Then we moved on...

Moving with the times

Evolution is a necessity of any business but there is a reassuring groundedness about Casa Marin. These days there's no bulk operation – while Marin describes the bulk business animatedly as, 'a passion, a puzzle, a game I enjoyed playing so much', she notes how the business has changed, with retailers and brokers rather than winemakers like herself now dominating proceedings.

The Matisse line has been discontinued and the Cartagena label is now effectively a cost-effective >

Casa Marin: a timeline

1975 Mariluz Marin enters the wine industry

1997 First 57ha of what will become Casa Marin purchased

1998 Additional 16ha with water source acquired

1999 First vines planted (Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir first to be planted; Riesling, Syrah, Sauvignon Gris and Gewurztraminer come later)

2001 A further 1.5ha bought to plant Sauvignon Blanc for Laurel cuvée

2003 Extra 0.5ha acquired to build winery

2004 16ha purchased (now Tierras Blancas vineyard)

2005 Winery finished

2008 Felipe Marin (Mariluz's son) joins the winemaking team

2010 Additional 8ha bought adjacent to Tierras Blancas site for water (total now owned: 99ha)

2011 Tierras Blancas planting starts



Above: Felipe Marin, Mariluz's son, has taken over the day-to-day winemaking at the winery; one of his visions is a fresher, brisker style of Pinot Noir

'[They are] challenging, edgy, unapologetically individual wines grown in some of the coolest, windiest, steepest vineyards in the country'

version of the main Casa Marin brand. While Cartagena Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenere are sourced from Colchagua, the Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Pinot Noir are made in the Lo Abarca vineyard alongside the other brands. In some markets where the main Casa Marin brand is viewed as too pricey, Cartagena slots in. 'It allows us to spread our brand and also helps sell Casa Marin off the back of it,' observes Marin.

There's no intimidation, though, that the family behind Casa Marin is resting on its laurels. The Tierras Blancas project will keep Felipe busy while his Dutch-born wife Jamie Verbraak is aiming to develop wine tourism (a B&B already exists on site). A delectable sweet Riesling was made in 2009 and more may follow. Marin, meanwhile, is fighting to establish Lo Abarca in Chile's new appellation framework, while talking of establishing a Committee of Fine Wine to promote diversity and quality in all parts of the country.

It's all part of life on the breezy *litoral del vino*. As Huidobro wrote in his memorable poem *Horas*: 'Now and then/Ripe hours/Drop on life'. These are ripe times in the life of Casa Marin. **D**

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Richards' top five from Casa Marin



Casa Marin, Miramar Vineyard Riesling, Lo Abarca 2009 ★★★★★
19pts/20
£17-£18 (2010) **stockist details below**

This is the winery's best Riesling to date. Beautifully structured, very complex and with beguiling baked lime aromatics. Fermented with wild yeasts in old barrels, this is reminiscent of a classic dry Austrian style. **Drink:** 2012-2018. **Alcohol:** 12.5%

Casa Marin, Cipreses Sauvignon Blanc, Lo Abarca 2010 ★★★ 18
£17-£19 (2009) **stockist details below**

Dense, vigorous and compelling. Mineral charge underlies elegant citrus and leafy layers. Spicy, broad, stony: wonderfully challenging, proof that Cipreses has overtaken Laurel as Casa Marin's finer Sauvignon. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 13.5%



Casa Marin, Estero Vineyard Sauvignon Gris, Lo Abarca 2011 ★★★ 18
£17 (2010) **stockist details below**

Fast becoming a house speciality, this white deftly blends the citric punch and

leafy vigour of Sauvignon with a succulence and richness that's entrancing. Still young; in the same mould as the excellent 2010 vintage but slightly more discreet and elegant. **Drink:** 2012-2014. **Alc:** 13.5%



Casa Marin, Miramar Vineyard Syrah, Lo Abarca 2009 ★★★★★ 18.5
£30-£32 **stockist details below**

A wine that typifies Casa Marin's edgy, challenging, ground-breaking style. Vivid aromas of black pepper, mint, olive and plum lead into a lithe, brisk palate that flirts with sourness and finishes savoury, fresh, moreish and invigorating. **Drink:** 2012-2017. **Alc:** 12%

Cartagena, Tres Viñedos Pinot Noir, Lo Abarca 2010 ★★★ 16
£15 **stockist details below**

Felipe's freshest take on Pinot to date, this cherry-scented, dense but vigorous red is the way forward. Still a work in progress but shows the promise for graceful Pinot here. **Drink:** 2012-2014. **Alc:** 14%

All wines are widely available via UK agent Mentzendorff. For details, see p135