**Chilean Pinot Noir**

A new breed of passionate winemakers across the country is determined to capture the beauty of this fickle grape variety. Peter Richards MW reports on progress.

**FORGET THE SPACE** race, the quest for the Holy Grail and the search for the Higgs-Boson. There is a mission more compelling and altogether more delicious than all of these. It’s the pursuit of Pinot perfection in Chile. Pinot Noir is elusive. Fickle in the vineyard, flighty in the glass, it can be crushingly disappointing or breathtakingly good. Right now in Chile there is a band of passionate winemakers dedicated to making great Pinot from many sites. There could and should be more, but most admit Chile is not there with Pinot yet. Some excellent wines? Undoubtedly. Great-value Pinot in a global context? Absolutely. But great Pinot, the kind that quickens the blood like no other wine? Not yet. They’re working on it.

The problem is partly one of history. Unlike, say, Syrah, Pinot Noir has been around for a while in Chile. (For example, Cono Sur’s Pinot plantations in Chimbarongo date back to 1968, when the Mir family brought in a clone from UC Davis.) But much of this was used for sparkling wine, and many of the vines were not in the right sites to make high-quality reds in the Burgundian mould. Poor planting and plant virus have also been a problem.

**Patience pays off**

Forward-looking producers have homed in on a micro-terroir scale, introducing French clones on site-specific rootstocks in cool, cloudy areas over granite, slate and clay. But Pinot Noir demands patience – vine age can make all the difference. And Pinot is a recent science in Chile (see growth rates in Fact Box). Even Cono Sur’s Adolfo Hurtado dates his proper Pinot debut to 1999 when he started working with Burgundian consultant Martin Prieur. Progress is painstaking and slow. As Hurtado concedes, fine tuning makes the difference – and takes time.

But things are looking up. New plantings in the south (Bio-Bio, Malloco, even as far as Chile Chico) and the coast (Aconcagua Costa, San Antonio, Limari, Casablanca and Paredones) hint at the dizzying potential for diversity in Chilean Pinot. A new generation of winemakers is adopting what might be termed a Burgundian mindset, as expounded by consultant Alberto Antonini (see interview, p46) when he says: ‘Great wine is about emotion. I believe more in the Burgundian concept – that, at a very high level, uniqueness is more important than perfection.’

Chilean Pinot is a story in the telling. The established regional characters in the narrative are Casablanca, whose best Pinots tend to come from the cool westerly hillsides, and San Antonio/Leyda, which makes everything from muscular to graceful styles, always with juicy natural acidity. Areas to watch include coastal Limari – where Tabali’s cool limestone Talinay vineyard looks promising – and Aconcagua Costa, where Errázuriz winemaker Francisco Baettig is now crafting super-elegant Pinots with the help of Burgundian consultant Louis-Michel Liger-Belair. The south – including Bio-Bio, Malloco and beyond – has exciting potential, if properly handled.

As for buying, find an inspired producer or two and stick with them. There are an increasing number, some featured in the following pages. Cool vintages (eg 2010, 2011) work best – the warmer 2012 and 2009 proved more variable. Each year brings more experience and vine age.

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### Chilean Pinot: know your vintages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Brutally hot vintage; mixed results but some very good wines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Long, dry vintage, some top-notch wines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The ‘quake’ vintage: cool, dry, well-balanced wines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Warm year gave ripe, concentrated styles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Middling sort of year, quite warm, early drinking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Warm, dry, long, some very good reds.</td>
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### Chilean Pinot Noir: the facts

**Chile national wine vineyard area 125,946 hectares (ha)**

**Pinot Noir in Chile 3,729ha**

**Pinot Noir as % of total Chilean wine vineyard 3%**

**Growth in Chile’s Pinot Noir vineyard since 2006 (1,382ha) 170%**

**Growth in Chile’s Pinot Noir vineyard since 1997 (411ha) 800%**

**Key Pinot Noir wine regions in Chile Casablanca (918ha), San Antonio (640ha), Bio-Bio & Malloco (432ha), Curicó (416ha), Colchagua (408ha)**

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Peter Richards MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Chile.
The results
A work in progress, said our tasters, who were excited by the evolution towards a more refined style, and the promise of even greater things as winemakers fine tune their practices. Amy Wislocki reports

PINOT NOIR TASTING into an area which, at the moment, is much under scrutiny - the issue of elegance and drinkability as opposed to power, heat, ripeness and oak," said Peter Richards MW. "The whole “less is more” philosophy is rapidly gaining traction in Chile and is brought to its greatest conclusion in Pinot. So it’s a barometer for how Chile is getting on – and my conclusion is that it’s solid performance, but more can be done!"

This seemed to be the prevailing sentiment among the panel. ‘Good Pinot Noir should elicit an emotional response,’ continued Richards, ‘while this was a solid performance, it perhaps lacked the trellis I was hoping for.’

‘Part of it is that site specific,’ commented Isa Bal MS. ‘Chile has done a great job with Cabernet and Merlot, but you can make something great with these varieties across a large area. With Pinot, it has to be in the right place, and it may take time for producers to push the pinot sites, get the vineyards up and running and produce results. We tasted some very good wines, but they are nowhere near the full potential of what Chile can offer.’

‘I’d like to see more complexity, but that will come with time,’ said Dirceu Vianna Jr MW confidently, adding that "The prices of many of these wines would be a major draw for wine lovers. These wines are consistently high quality, and represent extremely good value in the context of New World Pinot Noir.”

The tasters agreed that New Zealand was further ahead on the learning curve, and certainly in terms of regional identity, but Richards predicted that ‘Chile will in time challenge New Zealand, both in terms of diversity and in terms of cool-climate winemaking.’ He added ‘What Chile does really well at the moment is make consumer friendly, affordable and easy-drinking Pinot that’s food friendly, good enough for connoisseurs but at the same time offers great bang for their buck.”

Winemaking styles elicited largely positive comments, with tasters encouraging producers to perhaps lay off the oak even more, and be willing to take even more risks in harvesting earlier in order to get greater freshness. “Oak was a little heavy handed in cases, but largely well handled,” observed Virginia Jr. “Alcohol was high in many cases though, and that relates to my main concern, which is acidity levels, which were mostly on the low side.

‘There could be lovely, bright, juicy fruit,’ he continued, “but the acidity would be so low that the overall effect was closing. This also impacts on longevity – I wouldn’t want to keep most of these wines for more than seven years.”

Regarding varietals, 2012 performed better than expected – it was a tricky vintage that reduced the parameters of what winemakers could do,” said Richards. ‘Those who made good wines in 2012 should be congratulated, as there were some great results.”

Regionality doesn’t yet shine through as much as it could. ‘It’s still early days,’ said Richards, ‘with wine age and region playing a bigger part than expected. That said, Casablanca garnished much praise, described by Virginia Jr as his “highlight”. ‘It surprised me with its diversity and high quality,” agreed Bal, who had expected Leyda or wider San Antonio to hog the limelight. Bio-Bio is also exciting, said Richards, with a regional style that highlights gingery, minty, red fruits. ‘There aren’t many winemakers there yet, but you get earthy, texturally complexed, green and granity wines.”

Entry criteria: Producers and UK agents were invited to submit latest-release Pinot Noirs (maximum of three wines per producer) from these regions: Aconcagua Costa, Bio-Bio, Leyda, Casablanca, Lirquén, Maule, Paredones and San Antonio

The scores
103 wines tasted

Outstanding
12
Highly recommended
44
Recommended
41
Fair
3
Poor
2
Faulty

The tasters’ verdicts

Isa Bal MS
Bal MS has been the head sommelier at Heaton Blumenthal’s three Michelin-starred restaurant The Fat Duck for the past eight years. Zarów-trained Bal is also the Sawarki in The Best Sommelier of the World competition in Tokyo, and he was previously named Best Sommelier of the Year in the UK.

Richards’s verdict ‘Pinot Noir is certainly a grape variety that can present that challenge to the Chinese wine industry. Overall, on this tasting, the wines showed a distinct Chilean character in the glass. They were generally fruit-driven, with soft tannins, some a bit more complex than others, but generally for drinking within the first five to six years.

‘However, Pinot Noir will need time and patience to find its perfect form in Chile. In terms of region, I was most impressed with Casablanca, while for me the jury is still out on San Antonio. Bio-Bio showed some regional character that may become more distinctive in time. Finally, it’s worth mentioning that the price range of the wines that we tasted made the wines an attractive buy compared with Pinots from other countries.’

Peter Richards MW
Richards is a Master of Wine and one of the UK’s youngest award-winning writers and broadcasters. TV and radio credits include Saturday Kitchen, (BBC 3), The Food Programme (BBC Radio 4), at Tastings (Sky One), Richards writes regularly about Chilean wines, his book The Wines of Chile was shortlisted for the André Simon Award.

Richards’s verdict ‘Pinot Noir is the high wire act of the wine world. The margin between success and failure is minimal in scale yet dramatic in effect. In this tasting we saw Chile maintain a creditably stable footing but, being critical, the performance could have had more aplomb, more verve and more grace.

‘It’s fascinating to see winemakers focus on elegance and balance in Pinot over power and concentration. As the mantra goes, less is more - but, in order to do less, you need to know more. Great Pinot needs winemakers who are unafraid to take risks, push boundaries and dedicate their time’s work to fine-tuning a fickle variety. More disciples are needed in this arduous task.

‘Many wines lacked harmony and persistence – perhaps a sign of young wines. All too often I wrote ‘shame!’ after a promising start (the tricky 2012 vintage didn’t help). Some richer styles were just too overdone - harvested too late to be balanced (hot and alcoholic) – while some leaner styles were simply under-cooked. Back to the drawing board for both.

‘On the positive side, there is less misuse of oak and extraction, and the wines showed diversity and an increasing accent on refreshment. San Antonio/Leyda, Casablanca, Aconcagua Costa, Limarí and the south all showed good quality. The potential is there. Time for Chile to capitalise.’

Dirceu Vianna Jr MW
In 2008, Virginia Jr became the first South American male Master of Wine, winning the Villa Erdnitz Award for Excellence in the Business of Wine. He is currently wine director of UK merchant Coe Vintners, and is a wine educator, technical consultant, freeline writer and wine judge.

Vianna’s verdict ‘As a category, Chilean Pinot displayed a great degree of consistency across the board. It is safe to recommend these wines to consumers who are looking for wines that are fruit-forward, fun, approachable now and easy to enjoy. The wines combined excellent varietal character with the beaming personality of Pinot Noir associated with Chile. Judging by the results of this tasting, Chile is a reliable place to go for good-value Pinot Noir.

‘The wines that are evocative, fruit forward with attractive juicy fruit, soft tannins and destined for short- to medium-term enjoyment, not for long-term cellaring. Burgundy lookalikes they are not, nor should they try to emulate Burgundy. However, producers looking to raise their game would do well to incorporate some savoury notes, strive for more complexity and seek wines with more freshness. The latter is vitally important for the category as a whole.”

The tasting also served to highlight a few shadows of reality. It will certainly take time for these shadows to be transformed into more recognizable regional styles, but some areas, such as Bio-Bio, are starting to show a distinctiveness that can only add to Chile’s diversity.’

Highly Recommended


Artifice, Platinum, Casablanca Valley 2010 17.25 (90) IB 16.5 IB 6DV 19 N/A UK www.artifice.eu

Aromas are intense with notes of blueberries, leather, wet earth and sweet spices. On the palate it has very good fruit structure, ripe tannins, fruit and refreshing acidity with a faint hint of bitterness. Drink 2013-2020 A15.5%
Highly Recommended (continued) 17–18.25pts (90–94pts)

Viña Casablanca, Cefiro, Casablanca Valley 2012 (17.5%) 18.5 BR 116 DUV 17.5 £9.89–£10.50 Raul, James Newton, Source Wines
Notes of dark cherries, beetroot and currants. Not the most aromatic but a gorgeous, succulent flavour profile. Ripe, intense and harmonious, with soft, taninly textured fruit and suavely-savoury spices. Drink 2013–2020 Alc 15.5%

Morrison’s, The Best, Casablanca Valley 2012 (17.0%) 16.5 PR 116 DUV 17.5 £9.99 Morrison’s, Cellar Door
Inviting aromas of blackberries, raspberries and a hint of leather. Earthy, savoury, inviting. Understated, beautifully integrated and really exciting. Silky with supreme balance, a beautiful feel and great potential. Drink 2013–2018 Alc 15.5%

Terranoble, Kaykun, Casablanca Valley 2012 (17.0%) 16.5 PR 116 DUV 16.5 £21–£24 The Vineyard (Dorking), Vintage Cellars, Whitebridge Wines
Blackberry jam, wet earth and black cherries on the nose. Ripe, juicy with good concentration. Smoky, dried and fresh toast. Toasty hints. This is juicy, cogent, fluid and refreshing with some lovely elements. Drink 2013–2020 Alc 16.5%

Viña Leyda, Reserva, Leyda Valley 2011 (17.0%) 16.5 BR 116 DUV 16 £10.95–£11.99煅, Jack, Cellars & Kent, The Vineyard (Dorking), Vintage Cellars, Whitebridge Wines
Gingerly, rosiny hints on the nose with aromas of bacon fat, red fruits, roasted peast, blackberry and undergrowth. Freshness and lift, with this invigorating, food-friendly wine, delivering in an earthly, lean style. Drink 2013–2019 Alc 15.5%

Sudtanned with aromas of blackberries, raspberries, wild strawberries. Paleale fruit of and silky tannines. Drink 2013–2020 Alc 14.5%

Dry leaves, raisins and strawberry fruit. Ripe, juicy and easy to drink with beautiful notes of dark chocolate and sweet spices, adding to its complexity. Succulent, satisfying stuff. Drink 2013–2018 Alc 15.5%

Valdivieso, Single Vineyard, Leyda Valley 2010 (17) 16 BR 116 DUV 17 £15.49 Bibendum
Beautifully silky textured, excellent concentrate of fruit and an opulent finish. It’s hard not to love this kind of big-boned style – tons of fun. A spicy, heart-warming finish. Purists will cite its excess flesh, but hardly will love its voluptuous curves. Drink 2013–2018 Alc 14%
## Recommended (continued) 15.6-17.3pts (83-89pts)

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### My top three

**Isla Mal BS**

- Artifices, Pichilemu, Casablanca Valley 2010
- Alesco, Colesa, San Antonio Valley 2011
- Aquitania, Colchagua, Casablanca Valley 2011

**My top three Peter Richards MW**

- Montecillo, Bélgica, Casablanca Valley 2012
- Bodegas Biou, Casablanca Valley 2012
- Casa Silva, Cool Coast, Paredones, San Antonio Valley 2012

**My top three Dirceu Vianna Jr MW**

- Viña Ventisquero, Grey, Leyda Valley 2013
- Viña Ventisquero, Grey, Leyda Valley 2013
- Viña Ventisquero, Grey, Leyda Valley 2013

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### Expert summary: Peter Richards MW

This tasting may not have given us fireworks, but Pinot lovers will surely take heart from the consistency, diversity and value for money offered right across the board

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### Chilean Pinot Noir

**Viña Ventisquero**

- **www.ventisquero.com**
- **UK importer:** PLB
- **East Grinstead, W. Sussex**
- **E:** bccorea@ventisquero.com

**Viña Carmen**

- **www.carmenwines.com**
- **UK importer:** Hallgarten Drutt
- **E:** sales@hallgartendrutt.co.uk

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**Peter Richards MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Chile**

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**Viña Tabali**

- **www.tabali.com**
- **UK agent:** Boutinot Ltd
- **www.boutinot.com**

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