

# Old dogs, new tricks

The new Chile is all about reining in the excesses of the past two decades. Never has the experience and heritage of the founding wineries been more relevant and important, says Peter Richards MW



THE WINE WAS a 1967 Cabernet Sauvignon from Macul in Santiago, served reverentially from a bottle besieged by dust, with only a dull red capsule for vestment. It came at the end of a long, exhausting week; my senses were dulled, my energies expended.

And then I tasted it. All the energy I lacked was there in the glass. It was alive, characterful, exuberant – and elegant. While slender and lithe, it was absolutely captivating. Utterly Chilean.

It reminded me of Winston Churchill's words: 'If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.' Chile finds itself at a fascinating stage in its vinous evolution. If the 1980s were about technological innovation in the wineries, the 1990s were a time of rapid viticultural expansion. The vineyard area doubled in size from 53,393ha (hectares) in 1995 to 103,876ha in 2000. The noughties were spent catching up with all of this, but were also in thrall to a stylistic paradigm rooted in ripeness and power. The new Chile is about reining in the excesses of the past two decades, paying more attention to the land and vines, fine-tuning the successful experiments and changing the rest. 'Less is more' is now the mantra of the new generation.

Part of this means a return to past values, a willingness to embrace rather than bury Chile's considerable vinous heritage, which had been disregarded in the stampede to champion all things new. A recognition that ultra-low yields, late harvests and new oak barrels are not the only way to go, and that healthy, unstressed vines, picked early to retain freshness and a sense of place, can be equally valid, and have the potential to communicate a new side to Chile – that of gastronomic, honest wines that are insistent and local rather than garrulous and international.

Hence the importance of wines such as this 1967 Estrella de Oro, and the revival of Chile's traditional producers, especially since the winery that made it, Santa Carolina (established in 1875), is now pursuing a 'heritage' project with the Californian ampelographer Dr Andy Walker. The vineyards that made this historic wine are long since lost to the carnage of the bulldozer and Santiago's concrete sprawl, but vine material was rescued and the winery is developing this genetic stock along with other pre-phyloxera vines, as well as researching and implementing traditional viticulture and winemaking methods.

The result is a new experimental wine that goes under the working name Luis Pereira. The 2012 vintage release is a delightfully refreshing, gentle but firm-textured red, redolent with scents of warm earth and wild berry fruit, and just 12.8% alcohol. It was like a refreshing, unassuming resurrection of the 1967. The past made present, auguring well for the future.

While it's easy to get caught up in the glamour of Chile's headline-grabbing new producers, it's important to consider the bedrock of the industry – Chile's traditional warhorses – and how they are keeping up in this dynamic, ever-changing national wine landscape.

*'Chile is changing – we need to be more professional. I'll guide my winemakers in terms of style, but they need space to create'*

Rafael Urrejola, Undurraga



**Previous pages: Errázuriz, founded in the Valle de Aconcagua in 1870, is one of Chile's pioneering producers. Top: the talented winemaker Rafael Urrejola is working wonders at Undurraga. Above: Santa Carolina has rescued old vine stock as part of its 'heritage' project**

**'El doctor'**

One long-established Chilean producer at the top of its game is De Martino. Head winemaker Marcelo Retamal is a leading light on the Chilean wine scene, a man whose thoughtful but influential ways have earned him the nickname 'el doctor'.

Retamal's initial ambition was to focus on terroir, so he started making a series of single-site wines from around Chile. In doing so, he not only became one of the country's most itinerant winemakers, but also one of its best fed (he insists on attending his growers' celebratory barbecues, to ensure the personal connection). One of his aims was to revive the ancient vineyards of the south and to help raise the profile of the varieties, the vineyards and their smallholder owners.

But soon he realised this wasn't enough. So he pared back his approach to the bare essentials,



**Above: at Lapostolle, Andrea León is working on single-site Syrah and Carmenère from sites around Chile. Left: De Martino's Marcelo Retamal has stopped buying new oak barrels in favour of large oak vats**



rejecting any standardising influence in his quest for individuality and drinkability. From the 2011 vintage he has refused to buy new oak barrels, choosing to vinify and mature his wines in large oak vats and earthenware *tinajas* (large amphora-type vessels). Working with plant physiologist Dr Claudio Pastenes of Universidad Católica de Chile, he modified his irrigation and canopy management to harvest his reds a full month earlier. ('Raisins are one of the most standardising forces in world wine,' he observes.) Out went herbicides, cultured yeasts, micro-oxygenation and enzymes.

I tasted the initial results, the 2011 reds, at the winery with Retamal in early 2012. Despite his

belief in his new direction, I sensed a certain anxiety, just as I did when I revisited the same wines with him in May this year. 'It's a big risk,' he had fretted. 'Harvesting late is easy, which is why so many people do it; doing it this way means you have virtually to live in the vineyard to get things right.'

His fears are understandable but misplaced. These are beautiful wines. They are part of Chile's thrilling new wine idiom – from the gracious and peppery Alto de Piedras Carmenère 2011 (13%) to the earthy, invigorating Las Águilas Cabernet 2011 (13%) and the stunning, tense, resonant Old Bush Vines Limávida 2011 (13.8%). 'The secret to making these wines,' says Retamal, 'is not winemaking. It's understanding the vineyard.'

Another rising star with a clear sensitivity to his vineyards is Rafael Urrejola, once of Viña Leyda and recently appointed head winemaker at Undurraga. This stalwart Maipo producer had been languishing before Urrejola arrived and re-energised the portfolio with his TH (Terroir Hunter) line. This continues to be a standout range not only for Undurraga but within Chile. It comprises 13 wines, all eloquent expressions of both variety and place, with more in the pipeline (crunchy Cabernet Franc and a joyous Grenache/Carignan/Mourvedre blend).

His terroir quest for TH even took him to Chile Chico – more than 2,000km south of Santiago, at 46°S latitude (Central Otago in New Zealand is 45°S). He planted five experimental plots and lost much of the fruit to winds, birds and frost. Yet he doggedly made some bracing Sauvignon Blanc and supple Pinot Noir. 'It's an adventure,' he says. 'This must be the southernmost vineyard in the world. In life, not everything should be easy. But I'm positive we have something interesting and different.'

That Urrejola is now overseeing operations at this venerable, 15 million-litre winery is testament to his talent and work ethic. 'I believe in teamwork,' he explains. 'I see myself less as chief winemaker and more as head of oenology. Chile is changing; we need to be more professional. I'll guide my winemakers in terms of style, but they need space to create.' To go by his work to date, that style is one of elegance, terroir focus and individuality.

**Licence to diversify**

Andrea León is another name to watch in the arena of Chilean reinvention. A dynamic and deft winemaker at Lapostolle (where the head winemaker Jacques Begarie works with consultant Michel Rolland), León has been given licence to develop single-site Syrah and Carmenère from around Chile under the Collection brand. The wines stand out for their individuality, vibrancy and drinkability – in contrast to the typically more generous, luscious style of the classic Lapostolle wines. As such, they represent a significant and positive diversification for both Lapostolle and Chile.

When I visited León in Apalta, she invited me to punch down her small bins of single-lot Carmenère and Syrah. ('Not so hard – you'll over-extract!' she chided me.) We tasted nascent 2013s from barrel: sinuous Carignan, floral Mourvèdre, sturdy Grenache and stunning Petit Verdot (made with minimal skin contact). I asked if she had any whites planned. ➤



**Above: The reinvigorated Santa Rita, founded in 1880, is developing new vineyard land in Pumanque, coastal Colchagua**

'Maybe a sherry style, from PX,' she muses. 'I love food, but many winemakers create wines that taste great in the lab but not at the table. You have to make wines you like to drink.'

It's a sentiment echoed by the head winemaker at Errázuriz, Francisco Baettig. 'I feel at peace with the wines I'm making,' he reflects. 'These are wines I like to drink and feel comfortable selling.' Baettig, married to a French woman, is famously Europhile in his wine tastes. Such wines include punchy, textured Sauvignon Blanc from Aconcagua Costa; a wonderfully reticent yet food-friendly Marsanne/Roussanne/Viognier blend; spicy Syrah and a robust Grenache/Mourvedre/Syrah/Roussanne blend.

Most indicative of Baettig's intent, however, is the new Pinot Noir Wild Ferment Aconcagua Costa 2012. It's a bravura rendering of this most elusive of



**Above: Francisco Baettig at Errázuriz – at peace with the wines he's making**

varieties, all too often overdone in Chile, but here sappy, crunchy and devastating in its seductive power. 'Sometimes you have to be humble and ask for help,' Baettig says. 'I wasn't making the kind of Pinots I like to drink, so I started working with Pedro Parra (*see p46*) and [Vosne-Romanée producer and his partner in the Chilean venture Aristos] Louis-Michel Liger-Belair. Now we're less afraid to harvest a month earlier, and are on the right track.'

Getting on the right track implies a willingness to take risks in the vineyard and winery, and to invest in education to ensure everyone understands the stylistic evolution. But it's a risk even the most traditional deem worthwhile. Take Santa Rita, founded in 1880 but recently reinvigorated by the hiring of innovative Australian winemaker Brian Croser, the development of new vineyard land in Pumanque (coastal Colchagua) and a rejuvenated head winemaker in Andrés Ilabaca.

'We're looking back, in order to move forward,' says Ilabaca. 'We wanted to move away from over-extraction, high alcohols and standardised wine, so we had to get ourselves back into gear, get into the vineyards and start to work.' Early results with Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Carmenère look very promising.

Chilean wine is moving on. Far from forgetting the past, forward-thinking producers – be they long established or not – are embracing their history to excellent effect. Familiar names, such as Concha y Toro, Ventisquero (Tara), Veramonte, Carmen, Montes, Miguel Torres, Morandé, Viu Manent, Casa Silva, Cono Sur and Valdivieso are all engaged in the same undertaking. Hopefully, some 45 years from now, we'll be savouring the fruit of these very same endeavours, and finding it as magical as the 1967 was for me. **D**

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

## Four of the best: traditional Chilean producers at the top of their game

### De Martino

**Established** 1934

**Head winemaker** Marcelo Retamal

**Try** The new 2011 reds, especially Limávida, and the Viejas Tinajas Cinsault and Moscatel

**UK importer** Les Caves de Pyrène

**www.demartino.cl**

### Undurraga

**Established** 1885

**Head winemaker** Rafael Urrejola

**Try** The TH (Terroir Hunter) and Volcanes de Chile ranges

**UK importer** González Byass

**www.undurraga.cl**

### Lapostolle

**Established:** 1994

**Head winemaker** Jacques Bégarie

**Try** Collection range, especially the Miraflores Elqui Syrah 2011 and Portezuelo Carmenere 2010

**UK importer:** Berkmann

**www.lapostolle.com**

### Errázuriz

**Established** 1870

**Head winemaker** Francisco Baettig

**Try** Specialities range, esp Aconcagua Costa Wild Ferment Pinot Noir 2012

**UK importer** Hatch Mansfield

**www.errazuriz.com**