

An aerial photograph of a terraced vineyard in Chile. The vineyard is planted in neat, diagonal rows on a hillside. Three people are walking through the vines in the middle ground. The background shows a dense forest of evergreen trees under a hazy sky. The title text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

a walk on the WILD SIDE

With its oddball grape varieties, ancient dry-farmed vines and funky winemaking techniques, Chile's south is making the kind of wines that restaurants are crying out for. **Peter Richards MW** abandons the comforts of Cabernet Sauvignon to investigate



MAIN & ABOVE: EXPLORING THE VINEYARDS OF ITATA.
FAR RIGHT: HARVEST TIME AT GARCIA + SCHWADERER



Is Chile really worth the effort? It's a question – often expressed as a resigned reaction – that is fairly widespread in the on-trade. Perhaps it's understandable, given how many brilliant wines from all over the globe vie for attention in our bustling and colourful marketplace, including tried and tested favourites.

But it's also based on a conception of Chile as somewhat predictable and limited in both its wines and what it can offer to on-trade venues.

It was a thought that crossed my mind as I stood in a deep pit surrounded by 50-year-old dry-farmed País vines in southern Chile. I was being filmed by a drone and chatting with craggy, charismatic grower Eugenio Molla.

The same notion returned later when savouring characterful, food-friendly local wines at dinner in Itata while discussing a local producer who puts speakers (waterproofed with condoms) into his barrels to play music directly to the wine.

While mulling the various pros and cons of this approach, the local wines quietly slipped down a treat – unobtrusively characterful, refreshing, gastronomic – alongside a decidedly modernist menu.

The default historic setting for Chile in the UK on-trade is as a source of steady but uninspiring house Sauvignon Blanc or Merlot. Recently, however, some more forward-looking venues have branched

out via Carmenère, Pinot Noir and Syrah.

Yet still, the perception persists of a country that delivers solid, maybe ever-improving wines but which neither make the finest partners for food, nor have the capacity to get people excited – be they sommeliers or diners.

This, of course, begs the question: what *does* get people excited when it

'CHILE NEEDS TO EVOLVE FROM BEING A COUNTRY OF WINEMAKERS TO ONE OF WINE GROWERS' ANDRÉS SÁNCHEZ

comes to wine? That's complicated, but I'd suggest it comes down to factors such as novelty, intriguing back-stories, a sense of personal discovery and, most importantly, delicious, gastronomic, characterful wine.

And this is precisely where Chile's deep south enters the equation. For many years, wine regions like Maule, Itata and Bío Bío were sidelined as winemakers championed international varieties from the Central Valley. But the resulting impression of Chile as a country with limited winemaking experience, history and diversity was actually a significant misrepresentation of what had for long been happening in the south.

Here, small plots of dry-farmed, sometimes centenarian vineyards of País, Carignan, Cinsault, Muscat, Malbec and a

host of other (often unidentified) varieties grew on granite soils amid rolling hills and a milder, more temperate climate than warmer areas to the north.

The hills around the port city of Concepción are considered Chile's longest established vineyard, and it's a sobering thought that, given it was first developed in the mid- to late-16th century by Jesuit missionaries, this area has more winemaking history than the great estates of the Médoc.

The problem was the wines – high in acid and low in alcohol, made in a decidedly homespun fashion from unfashionable grape varieties – were sow's ears made out of silk purses. The regions festered; grape prices fell and no one paid much attention.

The new Chile

Now, however, several key things have changed. Firstly, Chilean winemakers have woken up to the tremendous potential of this vinous legacy and are falling over themselves to craft wines that are both representative and engaging for the modern wine drinker.

Secondly, the market is increasingly looking for refreshing, characterful wines from unusual grape varieties with a story to tell – and Chile is rising to meet the challenge. In much the same way that, say, Swartland has risen in profile on the back of an intriguing legacy, Chile's cool south is now also a hot spot in world wine – and one that offers intriguing options. >>



'I've just started with a Beaujolais-like Cinsault, a Muscat from Itata, a Rhône white blend from Aconcagua and a Carignan from the south,' says sommelier Yuri Gualeni from Coya in London. 'Wines show more focus, nervier acidity, lighter and fresher alcohol levels, less extraction of fruit to almost non-existent oak, with cement, steel and some amphorae doing the funky bit. These wines sit best at mid-tier prices because they have the quality to be good but won't be appreciated by those seeking "house wine" styles.'

This viticultural renaissance is being expressed in many different ways. One is Vigno, the collective brand that champions old-vine Carignan from Maule's dry-farmed coastal zone (see box).

'For me, it's the most significant innovation in recent Chilean wine history,' says Vigno co-founder Andrés Sánchez. 'Chile needs to evolve from being a country of winemakers to one of wine growers. We need to safeguard our heritage and tell stories through our wines – and this is a brilliant way to do it.'

Then there's the emergence of Itata as a source of intriguing, offbeat whites

and reds, often made from the likes of Cinsault, Muscat and País. De Martino is a winery that has been doing pioneering work in this region, producing celebrated low-sulphur wines made in traditional large clay jars called *tiñajas* from both Cinsault and skin-contact Muscat under the Viejas Tinajas brand.

'These wines helped show people that there was another Chile,' comments

winemaker Marcelo Retamal. 'We now need to create a category for Itata, to drive momentum and fuel this movement of micro-producers that is starting to emerge.'

Local roots

The País, or Mission grape variety, is widespread in southern Chile, and in Itata especially. Thin-skinned and productive, it was largely shunned by quality producers

ON-TRADE INSIGHTS

ALISTAIR COOPER, 1855: 'Swartland has played an integral part in changing perceptions of South Africa, and the southern regions could well prove to be as pivotal for Chile.'

CHRISTOPHER DELALONDE MS, BOUNDARY: 'País should be treasured as the national outsider for southern Chile – like Carignan is for Roussillon.'

MARTIN LAM, FOOD & WINE CONSULTANT: 'Chile has expanded into a more confident, world-class wine country, which no complete UK wine list should ignore.'

HÉCTOR RIQUELME, CHILEAN SOMMELIER & WRITER: 'Southern Chile is a completely different reality from the Central Valley. These wines offer freshness and a sense of place.'



VIGNO: 'THIS IS THE WAY TO SELL CHILE TO THE WORLD...'

Vigno (short for Vignadores de Carignan) is a voluntary appellation acting as a shared trademark. The idea began in 2009 when journalist Eduardo Brethauer and Gillmore winemaker Andrés Sánchez were mulling how best to revive and promote old-vine Carignan from the coastal areas of Maule.

A set of criteria was devised – minimum 65% Carignan, from dry-farmed bush vines at least 30 years old growing in the Maule secano, aged for at least 24 months. Twelve wineries initially signed up.

'It was a quantum leap for Chilean wine,' says Sánchez. 'We wanted to go beyond what existed in Chile, a denomination system designed on geographic lines. Our aim is to unify producers, making wines that express a sense of place.'

Although they differ in style between producers, Vigno wines tend to be rugged and intense, thrilling expressions of Carignan's vibrant acidity, firm tannin and wild blue fruit. Some wines have been overdone (oak, extraction, ripeness) but a recent tasting

showed a move towards elegance and balance.

There is talk of introducing a sub-category for early-release carbonic styles. Establishment support has been forthcoming: Lapostolle recently joined and Concha y Toro is also signing up.

VIGNO
VIGNADORES DE CARIGNAN



until Miguel Torres started using it to make firstly a delicate pink fizz named Estelado and then a juicy, joyous red under the Reserva de Pueblo brand. The latter was particularly significant because it proved that País could make a credible red.

'It's been a brilliant and gratifying experience,' attests Torres winemaker Fernando Almeda. 'It hasn't been without its challenges – people seemed to have a chip on the shoulder or mental block when it came to País. But I've learnt a lot and, in fact, working with País has now changed the way we manage all our vines.'

Almeda also points to the socio-economic benefit of reviving these old vineyards, which are often tended by elderly farmers who have traditionally earned little for their grapes. Torres now works with 80 smaller producers and has instituted three separate Fairtrade groupings in the southern area, providing training and other support.

'This is an important part of our country's history but people were grubbing up vines and losing a winemaking tradition that goes back generations because they didn't have an alternative or exit strategy. Now they are organised and can see a commercial future in what they do,' says Almeda.

Smaller producers are now springing up in the south, adding a healthy dollop of diversity into the equation – Laberinto, Rogue Vine, Pandolfi Price, Tinto de Rulo, Zaranda, Louis-Antoine Luyt, Clos Ouvert, Cacique Maravilla and Alto Las Gredas are cases in point. What's more, the limits of Chile's southern winemaking regions

are being expanded by the likes of Casa Silva in Lago Ranco, Coteaux de Trumao in Osorno, De Martino in Pucón and Undurraga in Chile Chico.

So is Chile really worth the effort? 'Yes, perhaps the wines from the south need to be hand sold but they offer us a point of difference and that's how we create

ambassadors for our establishments and these wineries,' says Alistair Cooper of wine bar and restaurant 1855 in Oxford.

'Price-wise, they sit perfectly not at house level but as a mid-price by-the-glass option. And they work well on their own or with lighter food. Things have moved on dramatically in Chile.' 🍷

SIX TO TRY FROM CHILE'S NEW WAVE

LABERINTO SAUVIGNON BLANC CENIZAS DE BARLOVENTO 2014, MAULE

A new paradigm for Chilean Sauvignon Blanc: invigorating, zingy and laser-like in focus, it benefits from ageing. Someone in the UK market needs to snap it up.

Looking for UK on-trade importer

PANDOLFI PRICE LARKÜN CHARDONNAY 2013, ITATA

The unoaked rendition from this excellent Chardonnay producer is spicy, savoury, fresh and elegant. £9.50, *Berry Bros & Rudd*, 0800 280 2440

ROGUE VINE GRAND ITATA WHITE 2013

Centenarian Muscat from Guarilhue in Itata makes for a funky, earthy, juicy-fruited white with a nice bit of density and purpose. £11.50, *Indigo Wine*, 020 7733 8391

GARCIA + SCHWADERER VIGNO 2011, MAULE

This dense, vigorous red is thrilling. The best Vigno so far for my money. *Looking for UK on-trade importer*

MIGUEL TORRES RESERVA DE PUEBLO 2013, ITATA

Beaujolais meets spicy Chilean Syrah: juicy, honest, joyful and heavenly with a plate of charcuterie. £6, *Fells*, 01442 870900

MONTES OUTER LIMITS OLD ROOTS CINSAULT 2014, ITATA

Floral, crunchy red from a reinvigorated producer. £11, *Liberty Wines*, 020 7720 5350

