



In Vigno veritas

What started as a project to put Maule on the map by rescuing its old-vine Carignan has made a 'quantum leap' into sub-regional identity, self-regulation and producers working towards a common goal. Peter Richards MW reports

IT WAS AN enjoyable argument. This was many years ago but I remember it vividly: a heated but good-humoured discussion over dinner with my hosts, married winemakers Andres Sánchez and Daniella Gillmore. We were in the western heart of the Maule Valley and earlier had been admiring ancient dry-farmed Carignan vines and tasting some arrestingly intense, almost savage wines which defied the Chilean stereotype.

Sánchez was railing against the power of the big, established wineries in Chile. Playing devil's advocate, I asked him what he intended to do about it. His reply was delivered with sparkling eyes and a fiery passion: 'We want to put Maule on the map, with wines that are truly Chilean and which speak for themselves!'

Fast forward more than 15 years and I was back with Sánchez, tasting through a range of 15 wines from various producers, all of which had been made as part of just such an

Above: at more than 80 years old, Valdivieso's dry-farmed Carignan vineyards are in the Melozal sub-zone of Chile's Maule region

initiative designed to put Maule on the map. All the wines were based on dry-farmed, old-vine Carignan from western Maule and all proudly carried the name of the project that had sprung directly from Sánchez's words all those years before: Vigno.

Words are important in Chile. As one novelist Isabel Allende wrote: 'We're a people with poetic souls. It isn't our fault; that one we can blame on the landscape.' On the one hand, Vigno is a simple contraction, short for Vignadores de Carignan – winegrowers of Carignan. And yet it also contains, in its ambition and definition, the seed of a new kind of modern, associative and quality-driven denomination in the context of Chilean wine.

The idea was born when Sánchez gave an interview to Chilean journalist Eduardo Brethauer in 2008. The pair became enthused about the potential for old-vine Carignan to, in Sánchez's words, 'raise the profile of the



Photograph: Monty Waldin/Cephas; VIGNO; Viña Valdivieso

'It's the most significant innovation in recent Chilean wine history. What's more, it's replicable elsewhere in Chile' **Andres Sánchez**



Above: winemaker Andres Sánchez, whose idea of the Vigno project became a reality, and (left) the original 14 signatories of the project in 2011

Vigno: the facts

Founded 2001
Wines Old-vine, dry-farmed reds, minimum 65% Carignan, aged for at least two years prior to release
Region Dry-farming coastal area of Maule (*secano costero*)
Members 16 producers: Calina, Concha y Toro, De Martino, El Viejo Almacén de Sauzal, Garage Wine Co, García y Schwaderer, Gillmore, Lapostolle, Lomas de Cauquenes, Meli, Miguel Torres Chile, Morandé, Odfjell, Undurraga, Valdivieso, Viña Roja, and founding member Eduardo Brethauer

secano zone, a profoundly rural area, rich in culture and tradition – in a way, to use Carignan to rescue this place'. Suddenly, Sánchez's non-conformist spirit had an outlet that appealed to both the altruist and winemaking purist in him.

Forward thinking

At this point, it helps to recap on the history. It's believed that Carignan arrived in Chile in force in the early 20th century. After the devastating 1939 earthquake, the government pushed the planting of this high-yielding, hardy and flavoursome variety to help stricken growers improve the quality of their insipid País. Carignan eventually fell out of favour because yields dropped off as the plants matured and the vines proved susceptible to oidium (powdery mildew). Some vineyards were lost. Others were farmed in desultory fashion, their fruit sold for a pittance to local coops or larger wineries.

Then, as Chile jumped on the international bandwagon in the 1990s and 2000s, a few forward-thinking winemakers began to see the enormous potential in these dry-farmed old vines in the coastal hills – and a new phase began in Chile's wine history. As Undurraga winemaker Rafael Urrejola explains: 'Vigno is

a strong exponent of the "new Chile", inspired paradoxically by our past.'

The Vigno project was officially launched in 2011, with 14 signatories: Bravado, De Martino, Garage Wine Co, Gillmore, Lomas de Cauquenes, Meli, Miguel Torres, Morandé, Odfjell, Undurraga, Valdivieso and Viña Roja plus writer Eduardo Brethauer and viticulturist Renán Cancino. The rules are as follows. In order to use the shared Vigno trademark on a bottle, the red wine must be made from a minimum of 65% Carignan, with the balance made from old-vine varieties. All Carignan vines must be old (30 years or more) or be grafted over rootstocks themselves over 30 years old. All fruit is to come from a delimited area of the western Maule *secano* zone from dry-farmed, head-trained vineyards. The wines must be aged for two years prior to release for sale. Sánchez defined the basic idea as, 'raising a flag to say: here we can make world-class local wines!'

Such rules aimed at guaranteeing a very particular kind of authenticity are rare in Chilean wine, which, like most of the New World, has erred on the side of light-touch regulation based more on geographical and political boundary marking. (The Pajarete and Asoleado denominations are historical sweet-wine exceptions.) However, it's been interesting to note the growing chorus of voices in South America of late calling for the development of meaningful appellations. Vigno could prove trailblazing in this regard.

The social aspect of Vigno shouldn't be overlooked. There is thought to be about 500 hectares of Carignan in the *secano*. At one stage, the price per kilo for old-vine Carignan was the equivalent of 20p (\$0.30). A kilo can now fetch anything up to five times that much. This added revenue gives growers a motivation not to grub up the low-yielding old vines, >

thus maintaining a tradition rooted in the local culture. There is now a move to encourage smaller local growers to make their own wines and join the group – a project that De Martino winemaker Marcelo Retamal is heading up.

‘In the future we want to have a good diversity of styles within Vigno, and it’s important that it can be flexible to incorporate all comers,’ says Retamal. ‘Vigno isn’t just about rescuing Carignan and its traditions. It’s about more than just wine – it has a social purpose too.’ On a social level, it’s also important to note the value of getting people to work together towards a common goal in Chile, a country where parochial rivalries are endemic and damaging.

A new phase

And yet, for all the laudable talk of social good and associative aims – or even old vines and dry farming – what of the wines themselves? To my mind, the early Vigno bottlings suffered from over-exuberance. This part of Chile can make reds with an almost Italianate feel: bright acidity, firm tannins, almost sinewy. When this style is exacerbated by the intensity of old-vine fruit and by over-enthusiastic winemakers, the results can be impressive but lack elegance, subtlety or charm.

Recent tastings confirm a change of emphasis as both the wines and winemakers have matured. There is now a recognition of past excesses and a desire for more finesse and focus in the wines – albeit within a context of a natural intensity given by old-vine Carignan



Above: at Morandé, the Vigno Carignans are now aged in large oak vats instead of barrels to reduce the wood influence and better express the fruit purity and terroir

Below: enjoying the Carignan harvest at Garage Wine Co

in this part of the world. Ageworthy styles may ultimately prove the most interesting.

‘We’re entering a new phase with Vigno,’ says Morandé winemaker Ricardo Baettig. ‘Some of the early wines were quite similar and oaky. Now at Morandé we’re ageing them in large oak vats rather than barrels, making them less caustic as we understand the places and grapes better.’ Sánchez adds: ‘Mediterranean varieties are like a sponge with oak. The mistake we made was taking the Bordeaux approach to winemaking. We’re reassessing – but the regional style will always be an expression of intensity.’

As the winemaking throttle is eased back, it’s also interesting to note an increased focus on, and discussion about, the various sub-zones within the *secano* including Melozal, Cauquenes, Sauzal and Loncomilla.

‘The initial idea wasn’t particularly to >



Photograph: Matt Wilson



Photographs: Nicholas Gill/Alamy; VIGNO



Above: a dozen of the 16 members of Vigno who have revived old-vine Carignan in Maule

Top: Calina's Carignan vineyards are in the *secano* (dry-farmed) sub-zone of Cauquenes

express the local areas, just to rescue the heritage of Carignan,' explains Miguel Torres Chile winemaker Fernando Almeda. 'But this might be the next step. Vigno can help us relate this uniqueness and identity.' Sánchez adds: 'What Chile needs is territorial wines that speak of their local identity. Vigno is a quantum leap for Chilean wine – 12 producers reaching a consensus, deciding to self-regulate and create a common image: it's the most significant innovation in recent Chilean wine history. And what's more, it's replicable elsewhere in Chile.'

Such a notion is intriguing. For now, Vigno continues to evolve, and the initiative received a significant boost when wine heavyweights Lapostolle and Concha y Toro recently got behind it. There is talk of an international seminar on Carignan, other new members and maybe even a new category for earlier-release

Richards' pick of the group's wines



Lapostolle, Vigno, Empedrado, Maule 2013 18 (93)
 £23.99 **Berkmann**
 Vivid, focused, fresh style with a sleekness and fine-textured succulence that's utterly winning. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 13.6%

De Martino, Vigno, Maule 2012 17.5 (91)
 £23.95 **Berry Bros & Rudd**
 Majors on tension rather than muscle, sustained by a thrillingly taut core of juicy berry acidity. This has tremendous potential. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

Garage Wine Co, Vigno, Maule 2013 17.5 (91)
 POA **Bibendum PLB**
 Young, tense and invigorating. Rustic edge to the tannins but it has wonderful focus and engaging character. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 14%

García & Schwaderer, Vigno, Maule 2012 17 (90)
 £24.99 **Naked Wines**
 The 2011 sold like hot cakes and the 2012 is rippling with lithe energy. Beautifully judged. **Drink** 2015-2023 **Alc** 14%



El Viejo Almacén de Sauzal, Vigno, Maule 2012 17 (90)
 N/A UK www.vigno.org
 Wild, edgy, funky, not entirely clean – but exciting! Lovely lightness and lift. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 14.5%

Gillmore, Vigno, Loncomilla, Maule 2011 17 (90)
 £20.99 **Naked Wines**
 Big, bold and juicy, with creamy inflections. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p111

wines. It's a far cry from the early days of anti-establishment angst, and a worthy vindication of these venerable old vines and the people who tend them. You get the sense that the real story of old-vine Carignan in southern Chile is only just starting to be told – many years after it first began. **D**

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