

# Chilean whites: on the up

Breaking free from Chile's long association with red wines, the country's winemakers are going to extremes to find a greater diversity of terroir, in a quest for enhanced complexity and quality in their white wines, as Peter Richards MW reports



IMAGINE THE SCENE. Steeply rolling hillsides, dark forests in the background, the foreground a green sea of bush vines sprouting vigorously from rich terracotta soil. On a rickety table in the middle of the vineyard there is a glass of mysterious white wine. It smells of springtime and each taste is a modest but insistent invitation to enjoy more.

Neither wine nor scene is typical Chile. This is Itata, the deep south of Chilean wine country. The old vineyard belongs to De Martino and the wine – well, no one knows what the wine really is. It's a blend of Muscat and a variety known locally as Corinto (possibly Pedro Ximenez or Chasselas). Made with a discreet hand, it's deliciously unassuming – the gently

**Above: bush vines grow readily in the terracotta soils of De Martino's Itata Valley property, in the far south of Chile's wine country**

evocative, calming style is like drinking in this silent, scented landscape. It's Chilean white, all right – but not as we know it.

The landscape of Chilean wine is dominated by red. Just 35,841ha (hectares) of Chile's total vineyard is white, which represents 26% of the overall total 137,592ha. Although the red/white balance used to be more even in the past, the quality of the whites was often basic: oxidative, raulí wood-aged Central Valley Sauvignonasse was never going to set the world on fire.

Ironically, just as the balance shifted in favour of whites in the 1980s, with the advent of temperature-controlled, hygienic winemaking and the development of cooler

climate regions, the world developed a thirst for Chilean reds, especially Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon. One in every three Chilean vines is now Cabernet Sauvignon. Whites have been playing catch-up ever since.

It's easy to overlook Chile's whites in favour of its reds. But it's also a mistake. What the figures don't show is what attentive drinkers have already noticed – that Chile's new-wave whites represent a diverse, quality-led and intriguing offering, with the accent increasingly on attributes such as terroir expression, elegance and ageing potential.

As Enzo Pandolfi of Itata-based estate **Pandolfi Price** comments: 'Traditional Chile was a red wine producer. Now the New Chile is

*'The important thing is sticking to your guns and following what you believe in'* **Rafael Tirado, Laberinto**

emerging, which is much more diverse and interesting. This new Chile will produce more white wines.'

## A path less trodden

Chile's best white wines are all about extremes. The country's top white producers have left the comfort zone of the Central Valley and climbed high into the Andes foothills, struck out for the coast, or headed south in search of cooler, more marginal conditions and diverse soils. And it's not just about points of the compass, either – it's also about mindset. 'Today, technology has supplanted imagination in many winemakers,' asserts Pablo Morandé, a pioneer of Chilean whites who originally developed Casablanca and now produces mould-breaking wines at Bodegas Re. 'But to make great whites, you need to be absolutely free with your winemaking.'

The southern extremities of Chilean wine country are producing some particularly exciting whites, often majoring on brisk acidity and restrained, ageworthy characteristics. SoldeSol is an excellent line of wines made at **Viña Aquitania** in the Traiguén area of Malleco, by thoughtful winemaker Felipe de Solminihac.

'People know Chile as a warm country, a red wine producer,' muses de Solminihac. 'But SoldeSol wines are different, even from other Chilean wine regions. The [cooler] climate ensures low yields and concentrated, structured wines, the volcanic soils give a really interesting mineral edge to the wines, and musts are rich in acidity but well balanced. Traiguén whites are built for the long term, more similar to Burgundy or Sancerre than Leyda or Casablanca.'

Producing new-wave Chilean whites is a slow process, which often starts with a hunch and a pioneering spirit and then demands endless fine-tuning, commercial determination – and patience. The likes of **Casa Silva**, **De Martino** and **Undurraga** have developed experimental white wine projects far to the south of Malleco and it will be intriguing to ➤

see how these develop. In the meantime, the likes of **Alto las Gredas** and **William Fèvre** also make fine Chardonnay in Malleco.

### Rapid evolution

If Malleco's natural style harks back to the classics, Itata is altogether less orthodox. The hills around the port city of Concepción are home to some of Chile's most historic vineyards, originally developed in the mid-16th century, following the European influx. There is a wealth of dry-farmed old vines here, particularly Muscat. De Martino's Viejas Tinajas Muscat, Chile's first commercial venture into natural orange wine in the modern era, was groundbreaking.

Made using skin contact in large earthenware *tinaja* jars and minimal sulphur, this wine, along with its red counterpart made from Cinsault, helped kick-start Itata's revival. 'These are wines that have an historic viticultural value – wines for grown-ups who want to try something different,' explains Sebastián De Martino. The likes of **Rogue Vine**, **Zaranda**, **Koyle** and **Clos des Fous** have also been active in this area, while **Miguel Torres** makes a fine Muscat in Maule.

Also in Itata but taking a different tack is Pandolfi Price. The focus here is Chardonnay, made in a beautifully savoury, intense, nutty style with the winemaking input of François Massoc. 'There is huge potential for excellent whites in Chile,' asserts Enzo Pandolfi. 'The amazing thing about Chile is how it's evolving and learning extremely fast. We have a clear point of difference being in Itata.'

**Below: the Labertino vineyard in eastern Maule, on the shores of the Colbún reservoir. The cool climate produces taut, ageworthy Sauvignon Blanc**



Photograph: grapecollective.com

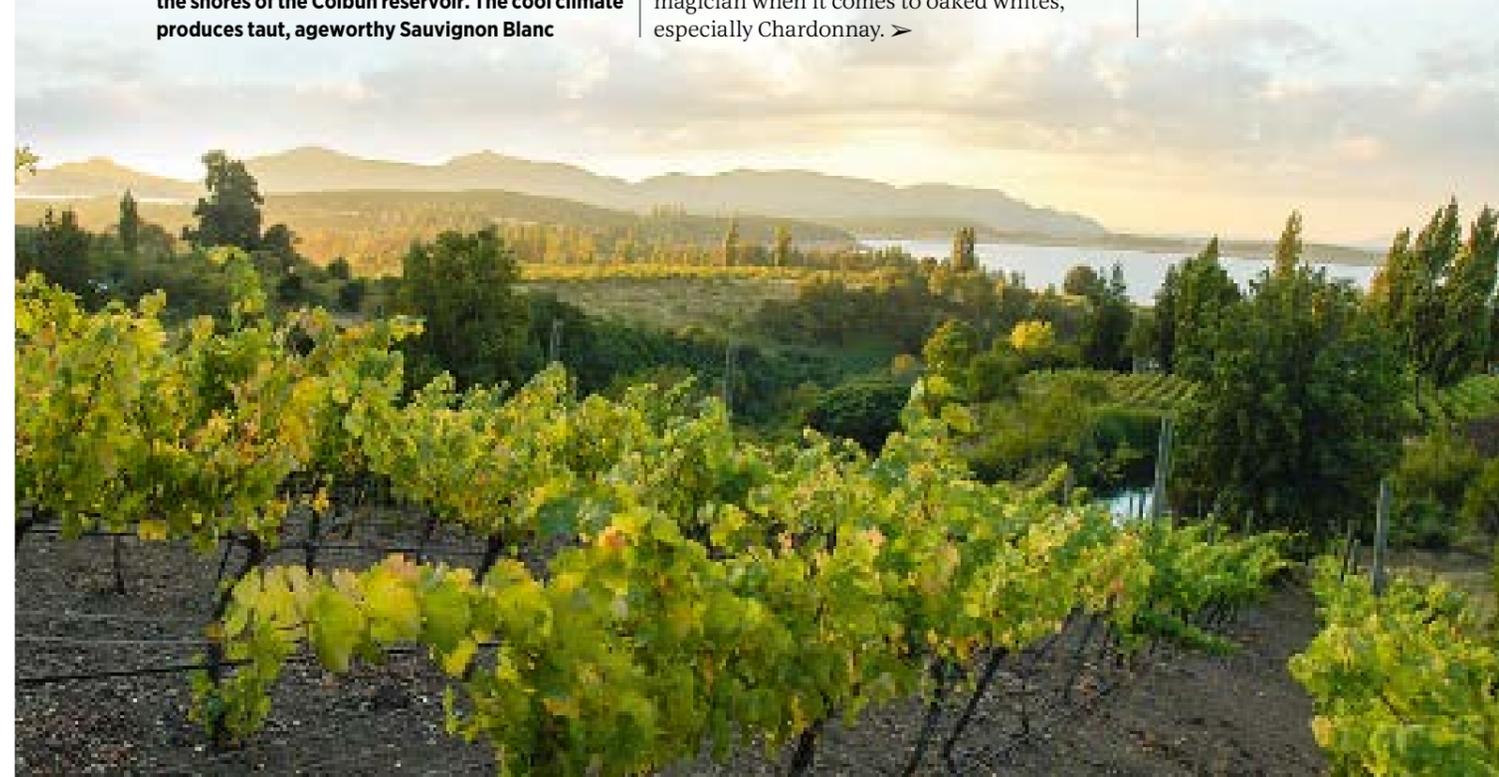
**Above: Enzo Pandolfi of Pandolfi Price believes Itata has a 'clear point of difference', and sees 'huge potential' in the region for top-quality white wines**

### Eastern promise

While much of Chile's white wine activity is focused in the coastal west of the country, the cool elevations of the Andean east are showing promise too. **Laberinto** is a label made by Rafael Tirado high in the wilds of eastern Maule, on the shores of the Colbún reservoir. His house speciality is a peculiarly taut, tense Sauvignon Blanc that ages notably well, but he also makes a funky, *tinaja*-aged Riesling. 'I just love making and drinking good Sauvignon Blanc, so that was my motivation,' comments Tirado. 'The important thing is sticking to your guns and following what you believe in.'

One of Chile's finest white winemakers lives in the eastern hills of Cachapoal. François Massoc – Chilean by birth, French by extraction and inclination – is the craftsman behind labels including **Aristos**, **Calyptra**, **Clos des Fous** and Pandolfi Price, and he is a magician when it comes to oaked whites, especially Chardonnay. >

*'If Malleco's natural style harks back to the classics, Itata is altogether less orthodox'*





‘White wines are the most challenging to produce: you have less margin for error so it’s all about precision,’ Massoc reflects. When pushed on varieties, he notes the potential of Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling in southern Chile, before adding, ‘Chardonnay is close to Pinot Noir, so I believe that the finest Chilean whites will come from this grape.’

Another celebrated Chilean winemaker who shares this view is Francisco Baettig of **Errazuriz**. ‘The potential for Chardonnay is enormous since we have begun to pay more attention to soil and emphasising elegance, balance and tension in our winemaking,’ he says. Baettig hired terroir expert Pedro Parra and French geologist Françoise Vannier-Petit to study how the vines’ interaction with the mother rock in Aconcagua Costa could help imbue his wines with ‘verticality, “dryness”, saltiness, chalkiness – more length than width, so to speak’. He adds: ‘I find this super- exciting. This is about terroir – if you want to produce an outstanding white, you have to understand your soil. I can see whites becoming real, serious competition to the reds in Chile.’

Just to the south, Casablanca is the nerve centre of modern Chilean white wine production. There are many producers making fine whites here, including **Casas del Bosque**, **García Schwaderer**, **Veramonte**, **Viu Manent** and **Quintay**. **Cono Sur** also makes some of its finest whites here, in its El Centinela vineyard on the region’s cooler western fringes. Winemaker Adolfo Hurtado has long been recognised as a winemaker who takes whites seriously at all ends of the price spectrum, from Sauvignon Blanc to Riesling, Viognier and Gewurztraminer.

‘I’m a fervent enthusiast and optimist when

**Above: the winery at Bodegas Re in Casablanca, where clay-coated cement tanks in the form of large amphorae and American oak barriques are central to the production of Pablo Morandé’s Chardonnay and Velado wines**

**Below: Errazuriz Wild Ferment Chardonnay from Casablanca, the ‘nerve centre’ of Chile’s white wine production**



## Chile’s top 10 white varieties by hectareage (with most-planted regions)

- Total Chilean wine vineyard** 137,592ha
- White wine** 35,841ha (26%)
- Sauvignon Blanc** 15,142ha (Curicó, Maule, Casablanca, San Antonio, Colchagua)
- Chardonnay** 11,634ha (Casablanca, Maule, Colchagua, Curicó, Maipo)
- Moscatel de Alejandría** 3,574ha (Itata, Bío Bío, Limarí, Elqui)
- Semillon** 968ha (Maule, Curicó)
- Viognier** 878ha (Colchagua, Cachapoal, Limarí, Casablanca)
- Sauvignon Vert** 801ha (Curicó, Maule)
- Torontel** 636ha (Maule)
- Pedro Ximenez** 436ha (Limarí, Elqui)
- Riesling** 420ha (Bío Bío, San Antonio, Casablanca)
- Gewurztraminer** 366ha (Casablanca, San Antonio, Bío Bío)

Source: SAG Catastro Vitícola Nacional 2014, Origo, Chilean wine regions

it comes to the potential of Chilean whites,’ laughs Hurtado. ‘Where else in the world can you find the kind of bright, dry, cool conditions of coastal Chile? This gives long maturations and concentrated, expressive whites. I’m convinced the most significant future developments in Chilean wine will come from white wines.’

### Redefining the future

Also in Casablanca but notably different in stylistic terms is **Bodegas Re**, the brainchild of Pablo Morandé, who pioneered this region in the early 1980s and now produces delicious, category-defying wines. With the likes of Re’s Velado and Chardonnay, this is one of the country’s most inspired white wine producers – and it’s interesting to note that both of these wines, though white, use Pinot Noir.

‘It’s not easy to make good Pinot Noir, even in Casablanca,’ explains Morandé. ‘So I turned my attention to other styles: whites, rosés and sparkling wines. Personally, I’m very optimistic about premium whites from Casablanca, but winemakers need to have an open mind and believe in the potential of the grapes. For the moment I will continue being Quixote fighting against the windmills.’

Since it emerged in the early noughties, San Antonio has made characterful, intense whites its speciality, with notable producers including **Amayna**, **Matetic** and **Viña Leyda**. One of Chile’s very best white wine producers is **Casa Marín**, rightly celebrated for its uncompromising white wine portfolio >



Mariluz Marín in the cool-climate Casa Marín vineyards at Lo Abarco, San Antonio Valley

including punchy Sauvignon Blanc, lush Sauvignon Gris, elegant Riesling and textured Gewurztraminer.

Owner Mariluz Marín says: 'It has been difficult, from a commercial point, to position our icon white wines to compete in a world that is so used to praising icon reds. But I've made white wines part of my life in Lo Abarco – it's the terroir, and nature, doing its work.'

It's a similar argument in the north of Chile, where the likes of **Tabalí**, **Tamaya**, **Maycas del Limarí** and **Tara** are crafting intense, savoury whites from specific, often limestone-rich terroirs close to the coast. Tabalí's Felipe Müller points to potential for Viognier and Riesling, as well as excellent results for

Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc in the limestone soils of Talinay.

Chile's whites have been a key part of its recent wine development. As Sebastián De Martino says: 'It's all part of the process of maturing as a winemaking country. We're just starting to push the boundaries and understand how to make great whites in different terroirs.'

Just as there are many varieties, terroirs and styles for Chile to exploit, so the evolution of its white wine landscape will be fascinating to witness – redefining, in the process, Chilean wine as we know it. **D**

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

## Richards' picks: best Chilean whites



**Bodegas Re, Velado, Casablanca 2012** 96/100  
£52.95 **AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd, Christopher Keiller**

The second version of this epic white Pinot Noir is even better than the first (2009). Its delightfully yeasty, savoury, intense style is both unique and inspiring.  
**Drink 2016-2035 Alc 12.5%**



**Aristos, Duquesa d'A Chardonnay, Cachapoal 2010** 95  
£51 (2009)

**Justerini & Brooks** Sumptuously nutty, savoury Chardonnay grown at altitude and made by magician François Massoc. Big-boned and baroque but with an elegant poise. The Henry VIII of Chilean Chardonnay. Compelling.  
**Drink 2016-2020 Alc 14.5%**

**Aquitania, SoldeSol Sauvignon Blanc, Malleco Traiguen 2014** 94  
£19.95 **Winety**  
Beautifully understated yet

resonant Sauvignon from southern Chile. Piercing citrus acidity with a discreet, creamy succulence and mineral complexity. Taut, cultured and beguiling, this is great value.  
**Drink 2016-2020 Alc 13.5%**



**Calyptra, Gran Reserva Sauvignon Blanc, Cachapoal 2012** 93  
N/A UK **www.calyptra.cl**

Bold oak-aged Sauvignon reminiscent of top Graves. Richly layered flavours of tangerine, clotted cream and orange blossom underscored by vivid acidity. Accomplished and ambitious.  
**Drink 2016-2022 Alc 13.5%**

**Errazuriz, Las Pizarras Chardonnay, Aconcagua Costa, Aconcagua 2014** 93  
£45 **Hatch Mansfield** Released in 2016, this is beautifully subtle yet complex. Brooding notes of red apple and woodsmoke on a savoury, profound, elegant palate.  
**Drink 2016-2025 Alc 13%**

**Bodegas Re, Chardonnair, Casablanca 2014** 92

£35.50 (2012) **Berry Bros & Rudd** This blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is like a delicious Chilean take on Chablis. Restrained aromatically, but follows through with a cascade of leesy, tangy, nutty flavours.  
**Drink 2017-2030 Alc 12.5%**

**Casa Marin, Cipreses Vineyard, Sauvignon Blanc, Lo Abarca, San Antonio 2014** 92

N/A UK **www.casamarin.cl** Consistently one of Chile's outstanding Sauvignons, this punchy white has abundant, vibrant flavours of pink grapefruit, nettles and pea shoots. A serious, expressive and engaging wine.  
**Drink 2016-2019 Alc 13.5%**



**Casa Marin, Miramar Vineyard Riesling, Lo Abarca, San Antonio 2015** 91  
N/A UK **www.casamarin.cl**

Very young and slightly inscrutable but seamless in its laser-like focus and elegant texture. Give it time and this wine's mineral-inflected, apple-and-lees style should unfurl.  
**Drink 2017-2025 Alc 13%**

**Errazuriz, Wild Ferment Chardonnay, Casablanca 2014** 91

£12.99-£14.35 **Cambridge Wine Merchant, Majestic, Stone Vine & Sun, Whole Foods Camden** A stylish and savoury, Puligny-esque Chardonnay showing toasted nuts and lemon pith. Fruit is a touch sweet on the finish, but it's very moreish and good value.  
**Drink 2016-2019 Alc 13%**



**Laberinto, Cenizas de Laberinto, Sauvignon Blanc, Maule 2015** 91  
N/A UK **www.laberintowines.cl**

An invigorating, mineral-laden style of Sauvignon Blanc that flirts with austerity and will benefit from some time in the bottle. Hints of smoke, gooseberry and roasted peppers.  
**Drink 2017-2024 Alc 12.5%**

**Casa Marin, Casona Vineyard, Gewurztraminer, Lo Abarca, San Antonio 2014** 90  
N/A UK **www.casamarin.cl** Lush and exotic without being overpowering. Wonderfully

juicy flavours of lychees and rose on the palate, along with with pear and peach. Another beautiful Casa Marin white.  
**Drink 2016-2020 Alc 14%**



**Cono Sur, 20 Barrels Sauvignon Blanc, Casablanca 2014** 90  
£12.99-£15 **Asda, The Drink Shop, Wine Rack**

This reliably expressive, complex Sauvignon is typical of Cono Sur's excellent value white range. The new vintage is zippy, pure, long and uplifting. All chargrilled peppers and ripe lemons. Benchmark stuff.  
**Drink 2016-2017 Alc 13%**

**Errazuriz, The Blend Collection White, Aconcagua 2012** 89  
£18.99-£22.50 **The Halifax Wine Co, Waitrose Cellar** This pithy, nutty, food-friendly blend of Marsanne, Roussanne and Viognier is an assured and distinctive break from the Chilean norm. Notes of candle wax, aniseed and lees emerge with time in the glass.  
**Drink 2016-2017 Alc 13%**



**Maycas del Limarí, Reserva Especial Chardonnay, Limarí 2014** 89  
£12.95 **The Wine Society**

Uncomplicated style that majors on freshness, with a succulent and moreish character. Displays aromas of ripe peach, melon and dried nut, leading into a juicy palate profile with savoury inflections. Good value.  
**Drink 2016-2017 Alc 13.5%**



**De Martino, Viejas Tinajas Muscat, Itata 2014** 88  
£15.49 **Les Caves de Pyrène**

Edgy, 'natural' style. Aromas of stewed pears, gingerbread and wild fennel. Flavour-wise, it's profoundly dry with a kick of tannic texture. Great with gruyère, belly pork or truffle and mushroom pâté.  
**Drink 2016-2017 Alc 13%**

*For full details of UK stockists, turn to p111*



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