

LETTER FROM CHILE

Peter Richards MW

'The irony is, the south is the true heartland of Chilean wine'

MY FRIEND STEVE Anderson died earlier this year. Car crash, southern Chile. A journalist, campaigner and all-round cranky man, he gave me my first proper job. His main role in life was to be a pain in the backside. Mainly to those in positions of power, in a country that sorely needed champions for the dispossessed, disappeared and disenfranchised. He also fought to protect the countryside, especially that of Chile's glorious yet imperilled south.

Why imperilled? The great poet Neruda described southern Chile as 'a vertical world: a nation of birds, a plenitude of leaves'. Yet those leaves weren't the needles of the vast, industrial pine forests that now smother the hills of Bío Bío and Araucanía, bleeding them dry of groundwater and muscling out other agriculture – historic vineyards included.

'A plague of pines', is how local vintner Roberto Henríquez puts it. This isn't the only issue in the region. There's contamination by heavy industry, plus social and political instability, as these are the heartlands of the indigenous Mapuche, long marginalised by the Chilean state and its private sector. Either way, pines have supplanted 100-year-old vines and the young generation is abandoning its farming legacy for cities or the pulp factory.

The irony is that this is the true heartland of Chilean wine. This is where it all began nearly 500 years ago, as the Europeans tamed the fierce hillsides around Concepción with vines. That legacy has endured. But it has not been valued. 'We've been bullied,' fumes Eugenio, a wine-grower of advanced years. 'The big wineries paid us a pittance, now my kids have left and I work the vineyards myself.'

But things may be starting to look up. The south is making its mark on the modern Chilean wine map, as more and more characterful, distinctive wines emerge from the likes of Maule, Itata, Bío Bío, Malleco, Osorno and beyond. This is fuelled by Chile's young generation of winemakers, who aren't afraid to live outside Santiago, engage with a different vision of wine, value the local community and take a punt on the south.

Many can take credit for giving this movement momentum. Frenchman

What I've been drinking this month

A reminder that wine is compelling because it is diverse. First off, a blind showdown saw the very fine **Cullen, Diana Madeline 2004** (exuberant and powerful) and **Te Mata, Coleraine 2005** (refined and cleansing) bested by a complex, poised and stunning **Château Haut-Brion 1995**, drinking beautifully now. Then to the London Wine Fair, where a motley band of small producers from Itata were making hay – two captivating wines were the funky, flor-aged field-blend rosé **Terroir Sonoro, Reptiliano 2016** and the scented, elegantly textured orange wine **Tierra del Itata 2016**.

Louis-Antoine Luyt was one of the first to 'properly value' the region and its wines. 'I tried to understand the ways of the old people,' he says. 'With wine, you can't be egocentric – you have to be part of something bigger, a region. You just pass through. You have to think about what comes after.' It's a common refrain. Marco de Martino's family winery helped to put Itata on the international wine map through its Viejas Tinajas label and now owns land in the area. 'Real commitment is to be there every year,' he says. 'Supporting growers, working collaboratively (not usual in Chile), not creating false expectations. That's how these projects make a difference.'

Meanwhile Miguel Torres Chile has not only helped to revive the fortunes of the País grape but also formed grower associations and invested. Elsewhere, Lomas Campesinas is a new government-backed scheme whereby small growers in the south make wines and develop brands in conjunction with bigger, more commercial wineries. Viticulturist Pedro Izquierdo says: 'This is sustainability at its best. Today, consumers are interested not just in wine and winemaking, but also how wine impacts the environment and society.'

Chilean titan San Pedro has teamed up with local Mapuche families in the Buchahueico community (Malleco) to produce Pinot Noir. 'The idea is to show another, exciting face of Chilean wine,' says overseeing winemaker Viviana Navarrete. 'It's an unprecedented public-private project, working with native people, creating trust and giving them a sustainable project so they don't have to leave for the city or the forestry industry.'

Where will this end? There have been false dawns in southern Chile before. Much will depend on whether the new Chilean government supports this vital sector while addressing key issues such as indigenous rights and forestry in the south. Chile's larger wine producers need to engage responsibly. Ultimately, it's up to us wine drinkers: will we buy, and keep buying the stuff? Well, I for one will be raising a glass. Both to Chile's glorious south – and to my friend Steve Anderson. **D**

Peter Richards MW is an awarded wine writer, author, consultant and broadcaster, and the DWWA Regional Chair for Chile

