

Variations on a theme

Previously known for its consistency, Chile is experiencing increasingly varied vintage patterns as winemaking styles evolve and extreme weather makes an impact. Peter Richards MW offers a snapshot of recent vintages

BEING PLUNGED INTO darkness was a fairly common occurrence in Chile in the late 1990s. Drought and mismanagement meant less power than expected was generated by Chile's hydroelectric plants, hence rolling blackouts. It cost the country millions and was yet another reminder, in a nation prone to natural calamities from earthquakes to volcanic eruptions, of the humbling power of nature.

'We must never forget, we depend on nature and it is not under our control.' So says Marcelo Papa, who oversees the greatest wine output in the country as Concha y Toro's technical director, making him one of the planet's most significant wine figures. The reason for his fatalism, beyond being Chilean, is the unprecedented run of challenging wine vintages that has afflicted Chile of late.



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Calamitous spring frosts in 2014 saw yields plummet by up to 80% in some cases, while 2015 was torrid. The low point was 2016, which Papa terms 'disastrous', when torrential rain decimated the harvest, with Papa citing production losses of 25% to 60% depending on the variety. The sucker punch was 2017's heatwaves and rampant forest fires. Chile was burning, literally and figuratively.

While we've come to expect vintage rollercoasters from the likes of Bordeaux and Burgundy, Chile used to be known for its consistency of production. So what's going on?

'Chile has steady climatic conditions, meaning there's no rush to harvest and you can let the grapes hang if you like – hence, in the past, vintages tended to look similar,' comments Francisco Baettig, winemaker and

technical director at Errázuriz. 'But in recent years we've been looking for elegant wines with less alcohol and more acidity, meaning today the different climatic conditions have a more acute impact.'

In short, the shift in Chile towards fine-wine levels of elegance and complexity – which has also meant searching out more marginal terroirs and playing on the limits of maturation – has resulted in vintage variation coming more into play.

This is a welcome development, according to Rodrigo Soto, head winemaker for Veramonte. 'This idea that Chile is a viticultural paradise is changing – and it's good for us. We need more precision and effort in the vineyards, otherwise human nature is to be lazy. People are much more sensitive to farming properly now to mitigate climate effects; that's what you need to make great wines.' This point is echoed by Undurruga's winemaking manager Rafael Urrejola: 'We all need to be more in touch with the vineyards as the climate becomes more irregular.'

While the recent challenging vintages have undoubtedly impacted Chile commercially, this has mainly affected the bulk or basic end of the trade, which many are keen to move away from anyway. And for some, like Ben

'We must never forget, we depend on nature and it is not under our control'

Marcelo Papa, Concha y Toro

Gordon of Volcanes de Chile, starting to discuss vintages, even for the wrong reasons, represents progress. 'How can we talk about regionality, terroir or premium wines,' he asks, 'when we're not talking about vintages?'

While prices of Chilean wine may creep up as a result, and some wines may be rushed out to cover shortfalls, the lessons of 2014-2017 may also help winemakers in the long run. It could bolster the momentum towards earlier harvests and more elegant wines. 'People have learned a lot from these four years,' admits Fernando Almeda, head winemaker at Miguel Torres Chile. 'From unripe to overripe, from smoke taint to water stress – we're starting to think in different ways, trying to work the vineyard and make more elegant styles. That's good for Chile in general.' ➤

Workers in the vineyard of Luis Felipe Edwards in Colchagua Valley



2014: The big freeze

Initial reports following the devastating spring frosts of the 2014 vintage predicted damage to the Chilean fresh produce and wine industries worth close to US\$900 million (£684m).

Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir in coastal vineyards were particularly hard hit. As one distraught grower lamented: 'It's a disaster. I don't even want to think about it.'

But beyond the headlining frosts, many winemakers point to a fine vintage, especially for reds (whites are less successful). Low yields meant those grapes that did survive ripened fast and well, especially in warmer sites during the hot, dry end to the season. This made for intense, concentrated flavours. Maipo seems to be a quality hotspot, with wines showing power yet also elegance.

'A good year for reds,' says Santa Carolina's winemaking manager Andrés Caballero. Papa touts 'classic reds' like Cabernet, Merlot, Syrah and Carmenere from 2014, differentiating them from 2015 and 2017 styles by citing their 'balance' and 'elegance'.

'Beyond the headlining frosts, many winemakers point to a fine vintage'

Highlights from the 2014 vintage

Sierras de Bellavista, Veranada Riesling, Colchagua 2014 93 NA/UK

<https://vinasierasdebellavista.com>

A beautiful vineyard high in the Andes making stunningly elegant, distinctive Pinot Noir and Riesling. Talking of tough vintages, the winery lost all of its crop in 2017 due to a heavy spring snowfall. This is a captivating, quirky Riesling aged under flor, with notes of fresh baked bread and ripe red apple compote. One for anchovies, or truffle chicken.

Drink 2018-2026 **Alcohol** 11.5%



Garage Wine Co, Vigno, Empedrado, Maule 2014 92 £23 **Bibendum, The Bishop's Cave**

Very young and somewhat inscrutable but there's a lightness and lift to this otherwise nervy, intense and complex Carignan that bodes well. This team does great work in the south of Chile and this

wine bears testament to their hard work. **Drink** 2018-2027 **Alc** 13.5%



Undurraga, Vigno, Maule 2014 91 £25 **Eurowines**

Maule Carignan can be off the scale in terms of intensity, so this deft blend adds juice and lift with a splash of Cinsault. Job done: intense dark fruit with herbal, floral and red berry tones. A big and spicy wine, but it's very engaging.

Drink 2018-2024 **Alc** 14.5%



Maycas del Limarí, San Julián Pinot Noir, Limarí 2014 90 £25 **The Wine Society**

A fleshy yet scented and elegant Pinot Noir from Limarí. The touch of age becomes it well, with earthy, dried plum aromas and a succulent palate. Great with lamb.

Drink 2018-2021 **Alc** 13.5%



Harvesting Syrah grapes in the vineyards of De Martino

2015: Torrid

'A year when choosing the right moment to pick was crucial,' read De Martino's harvest report. This masterful understatement is beautifully couched. This notably warm and dry year provided echoes of Bordeaux 2009 (and even 2010) given that many producers clearly revelled in the heat and the potential ripeness of their grapes, resulting in wines that can lapse into excess (of alcohol, fruit maturity and extraction). Choosing your producer with care is the key in this bountiful yet variable vintage.

For some winemakers, particularly those who are more focused on proportion than power, this proved a successful year. 'It's extraordinary: one of the best vintages ever from an Errázuriz perspective,' notes Baettig. 'The secret is that in a warm vintage, the flowering, fruit set and veraison is more even and if you manage the vineyard properly and pick early, the result is great.'

Similarly, De Martino champions the 'best Cabernets ever' from its Isla de Maipo estate. Why? 'Because we started to be more precise with irrigation and monitoring water stress, which helped us to unlock the potential so we could harvest earlier, with better acidity and fresh fruit, but without green or unripe flavours,' says Marco de Martino.

'Generosity' seems to be the buzzword for the 2015 vintage. Certainly, nature shone on the season after 2014's big freeze – yet results are not even across the board. The best whites are intensely flavoured yet also fresh; reds from top producers are ripe and fleshy, some are outstanding. ➤



Grape vines on a frosty morning in the Casablanca Valley

Highlights from the 2015 vintage



Viñedo Chadwick, Puente Alto, Maipo 2015 97 £ 223.33 (ib) **Berry Bros & Rudd, Corney & Barrow, Crump Richmond Shaw, Farr Vintners, Fine & Rare, Goedhuis & Co**

Stunning new-wave Alto Maipo Cabernet, pioneering in the way that it marries super-fine yet dense, abundant and immensely cultured tannins with an elegant and complex scent. Displays a wonderfully lifted freshness and admirable finesse. Young, epic and exciting – with a price-tag to match. **Drink** 2018-2036 **Alc** 13.5%

Garcés Silva, Amayna Syrah, Leyda, San Antonio 2015 95 £25 **Buckingham Schenk**

Vivid aromas of violets, black pepper and wild dark berries on the nose. Juicy, lifted, fine and spicy. It's a big wine but holds itself with poise and verve. Life-affirming stuff. **Drink** 2018-2023 **Alc** 15%

Viñedos de Alcohuz, La Era de Alcohuz, Elqui 2015 92 £32.50 **Indigo**

This perfumed, bittersweet Malbec is grown at a breathless altitude of almost 1,800m in the stark, intense landscape of the upper

Elqui Valley. Tense, floral and food-friendly, it's beautifully poised. A real star for the future. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 13%



Ventisquero, Tara Red Wine 1, Atacama 2015 91 £37 **The Wine Treasury**

What drives this wine is its tangy, insistent acidity. It's an unapologetically light, scented style of Pinot that needs a bit of age to come into its own. The unique Atacama terroir makes for a unique wine. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Photographs: Emma Wood/Alamy, Matt Wilson/Cephas

2016: The deluge

‘The perfect storm – a catastrophe,’ is how Undurraga’s Urrejola defines 2016. The vintage was looking good with a cool spring, a slow season gently warming up. And then El Niño came knocking. From mid- to late April the heavens opened, brutally interrupting the wine harvest mid-flow. Santiago received more than 10 times its usual total rainfall (118mm versus 11.5mm), the majority falling in just a few days. The result was flooding, rivers that burst their banks and even fatalities.

In the vineyards, chaos ruled. Grapes split and began to rot, especially in high-yielding basic vineyards on waterlogged soils. Panic set in among inexperienced winemakers – who had gone for many years without facing anything like this – as the pressure of harvesting logistics, tank space, press capacity and rotting fruit spiralled out of control. There was reportedly a rush on harvest machines. Manuals were hurriedly consulted on the use of winemaking aids to counter the worst effects of dilution and rot.

Around 30% of production was lost, at an estimated cost to grape-growers of US\$220 million (£167m). Some didn’t make wine. ‘It was a really hard vintage,’ laments Caballero. ‘It gave us no time to mature the grapes and we had to harvest two to three weeks earlier than expected.’ Urrejola talks of ‘sacrificing’ some grapes and vineyards in agonising decisions to try to achieve the least bad outcome, describing it as, ‘by far the most challenging vintage of my career.’ Meanwhile,



Above: Rafael Urrejola

Top: a vineyard worker and his dog survey rain-damaged grapes, which couldn’t be harvested, in Maipo

‘The early picked 2016s are unbelievably good’

Rafael Urrejola, Undurraga

according to Patricio Celedón, Viu Manent’s chief winemaker, ‘We learned a lot in 2016.’

The silver linings in 2016 were those wines harvested before the rains – whites, Pinot Noir and some early-season reds like Merlot. It was also a vindication for those who had shifted towards earlier harvesting. ‘It’s looking like our best year yet for Aristos Chardonnay,’ enthuses winemaker François Massoc, who joined forces with Burgundian Louis-Michel Liger-Belair and terroir consultant Pedro Parra to produce Aristos in the Cachapoal Valley. Massoc sees it as a ‘great’ year for whites and Pinot Noir, as the vines had a gentle season after 2015’s heat. ‘The early-picked 2016s are unbelievably good,’ adds Urrejola. ➤

Photographs: Matt Wilson/Cephas

Highlights from the 2016 vintage



Casa Silva, Lago Ranco Riesling, Austral 2016 93

£20 Jackson Nugent

From one of Chile’s most southerly fine wine vineyards, this cultured, succulent Riesling stops you in your tracks. Vibrant and invigorating, with green apple and toasty aromatics leading into a dry, tense yet well rounded flavour profile. Very exciting. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 11.5%

Volcanes de Chile, Tectonia Chardonnay, Malleco 2016 92

£12.99 Majestic

The best Malleco Chardonnays marry

steely acidity with generous red apple fruit and a rounded, buttery character. You can feel the sun and the earth here; it’s revitalising, helped along by a touch of spice, making it ideal to go with a fish pie.

Drink 2018-2021 **Alc** 13%

Errazuriz, Las Pizarras Pinot Noir, Aconcagua Costa, Aconcagua 2016 98

£80 Atlas, BI, Corney & Barrow, Cru, Farr Vintners, Fine & Rare, Hedonism, IG Wines, Stone Vine & Sun

‘I want something more than pure fruit – I want structure, grip and bones,’ says Errazuriz winemaker and technical director Francisco Baettig. This Aconcagua Pinot adds another dimension to Chilean wine:

it’s piercing, tense, aromatic; exponential yet elegant. Glorious, in a word. **Drink** 2018-2032 **Alc** 13%



Lapostolle, Vigno, Empedrado, Maule 2016 94

£21.99 Berkmann, Lay & Wheeler

The arresting floral aromas hit you first – similar to the Lapostolle Collection Mourvèdre 2017, which is also beautiful. Then comes the insistent and sleek red fruit in a moreish, tense, appetising style. Long, fine, elegant; this is a triumph. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

2017: Up in flames

A unique wine was made in 2017: Phoenix Ferment by Derek Mossman Knapp's Garage Wine Co. It's a País made as a white wine in order to avoid the worst of the smoke taint from the forest fires that ravaged wine regions all over central and southern Chile, burning well over 400,000ha of land between July 2016 and February 2017, according to reports.

So prolific were the conflagrations that the smoke can be tasted in the wines, especially in reds. Mossman Knapp had previously made a virtue out of the devastating 2010 earthquake so decided to do something similar for 2017, supporting afflicted producers and making no bones about the vintage issues. 'It helps the community,' he says. 'The well-tended vineyards were ones that acted as firebreaks, so we want to celebrate that.'

Many producers have sensibly decided to blend away potentially smoke-tainted wine, or sell it on. Some have not made certain wines: De Martino skipped its Vigno and Viejas

Highlights from the 2017 vintage

Lapostolle, Collection Semillon Torontel, Apalta, Colchagua 2017 94

NA/UK www.lapostollewines.com
Lapostolle's Andrea Leon is a winemaker on fire and her Collection line is consistently delightful. This is a new one, a quirky white blend with skin contact, ageing under flor (and a touch of solera). Richly aromatic (yeast and orange marmalade), complex, layered and utterly beguiling. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 13%

Ventisquero, Grey Sauvignon Blanc, Atacama 2017 92

£14.25-16.95 **Corking Wines, Davy's, TJ Wines**
The Ventisquero team is refining its craft in these pioneering Atacama

vineyards. Nuanced and structured, this was aged in oak foudres for more texture and complexity. Smoky, subtle, piercing. Cries out for fresh shellfish. **Drink** 2018-2021 **Alc** 12.5%



Longaví, iGlup! Cinsault, Itata 2017 93

£18 **Gourvid**
Pure joy, as expressed through red wine. The joint venture between the revitalised Bouchon and David Nieuwoudt of Cederberg in South Africa is a seriously exciting project. And this Cinsault is certainly a thing of beauty. **Drink** 2018-2019 **Alc** 12%

Scorched earth and ash: wildfire damage at Miguel Torres Chile



Tinajas wines; Torres decided not to make its Estelado sparkling. Others have resorted to winemaking trickery – nanofiltration, carbon treatment, reverse osmosis – or simply used shorter macerations. (Though, as Urrejola of Undurraga playfully puts it, 'But what can we do with millions of litres of rosé?!')

This low-yielding vintage had been hot even before the fires struck, meaning ripe styles and variable quality (Sauvignon Blanc looks particularly weak in 2017). It's still too early for many quality wines, but some young reds are looking decent. **D**

How 2018 is shaping up

After the upheavals of recent years, everyone in Chile was hoping for a calm, generous vintage in 2018. It wasn't quite to be, though the consensus is cautiously positive. A coolish, late season (especially in the south) gave variable results with some long-season varieties such as Cabernet and Carmenere struggling to fully ripen. The flipside is fresh fruit, low alcohols and lighter styles. 'One of the best vintages in many years,' enthuses Undurraga's Rafael Urrejola, who touts it as a red vintage for 'fresher' styles. Marcelo Papa from Concha y Toro cautions fellow producers to keep stocks back, 'since we don't know what the climate has in store'.