

Peter Richards MW

‘Chile needs its wine heroes to be fiercely individual and ambitious’



The Latin American continent has long wrestled with the issue of identity. The seismic collision of indigenous and European (not to mention African) cultures caused immense upheaval from the 16th century onwards. Identity remains a theme hundreds of years later in arenas as diverse as politics, socio-economics, film, literature – and wine.

All over the continent, winemakers are re-examining the past and forging a fresh perspective on the future. In Chile this process is throwing up as many questions as answers. Does the future lie in the ‘Bordeaux’ model, majoring on Cabernet Sauvignon together with Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc, in heartlands such as Maipo and Casablanca? Or should the Iberian legacy of Pais, Moscatel and PX take precedence? Should the wines be modern and bold, or restrained and elegant? Equally, how does all the other stuff fit in, from old-vine Maule Carignan to Elqui Syrah, new-wave Pinot Noir, bright Cinsault, steely Riesling, ancient Malbec... not to mention the constant trickle of new varieties and terroirs?

Taking pride in diversity is one approach. Chile has an extremely varied geography, so it’s safe to assume that diversity will remain a defining feature of its wine offer. This future-proofs the industry, meaning that everyone can do their own thing rather than leaping on a bandwagon, as happened during the export boom of the 1990s. ‘Chile has diversity, more than many other countries,’ comments Miguel Torres Maczassek of Familia Torres, ‘and it should show it off.’

Not everyone agrees. Some argue that diversity risks confusion. Many of the bigger wineries in Chile, while dabbling in diversity, are content to give the market what it expects rather than risk losing distribution by challenging the Chilean stereotype. ‘There are loads of exciting things happening on the ground in Chile but the big companies aren’t changing,’ grumbled one grower to me. ‘They keep fuelling the low-price export segment and they dominate the promotional agenda so it’s hard to really change Chile’s image.’

And this is the heart of the issue. At a time when wine drinkers are more interested than ever in alternative varieties and styles, unique stories and experiences, Chile is well placed to capitalise. But where are the hero wines boldly encapsulating the ‘new Chile’? Where are the high-profile restaurants majoring on Chile’s unique cuisine as well as its wines? And where are Chile’s charismatic wine ambassadors championing the message of quality, diversity and excitement to receptive wine drinkers all around the world?

This is a big task and collaboration is essential, yet a collaborative spirit is often absent on the Chilean wine scene – perhaps a legacy of the 1973-1990 military regime, when simmering mistrust took unfortunate root. It’s true that the younger generation of innovative winemakers is starting to show the way here. VIGNO is a pioneering association for old-vine Carignan growers, MOVI unites smaller independent growers, and if you ever find yourself in Chile don’t miss a Chanchos Deslenguados wine event, full of fun young producers sampling their wares (including zany T-shirts).

Chile desperately needs its wine heroes: people prepared to go against the grain, to be fiercely individual and ambitious in the vineyard, to take the rebuttals on the chin but be collaborative, passionate and obstinate advocates. Chile needs its best wines to be seen and enjoyed in key places around the world. That needs scale, dedication and leadership. Julio Bouchon is one smaller grower in the proactive camp. He says: ‘We’ve got the wine; the market is receptive; everything’s in place, we just need to get out there and show it. But I can’t do it alone.’

The new Chile is increasingly diverse and delicious. That identity needs nurturing, promoting and – on the part of open-minded wine drinkers – embracing. If we do, the wine world will be a richer place for it. **D**

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WHAT I’VE BEEN DRINKING THIS MONTH

Any excuse to celebrate (birthdays this time). A duo of big-name 1997 Champagnes didn’t disappoint – Cristal was ravishing yet electric, while Salon proved mesmerising, impossible to put down. Raising a glass with Miguel Torres Maczassek, his new Priorat, Mas de la Rosa 2016, is stunning – tense, soaring, Burgundian – while the tangy Forcada (white) ancestral Penedès variety has potential as a tasty hedge against climate change.

