

I readily admit I have not always been kind to Chilean wine. Historically, they have been too green, notably in the area where Carmenère is concerned. Nor has it been high on my checklist of wine regions to visit. Recently, two events helped to alter my position. First, was a Wines of Chile tasting wherein a new generation of wines that were more fruit driven, with little or no herbaceousness were featured. Second, was Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations Chilean episode. During his visit to the ribbon shaped country, he experienced the gorgeous landscape, vinous jewels and gastronomy. Of all the food he sampled, there was one that item that caught my attention- the Hot Dog Completo Italiano- an oversized all beef frankfurter ('a terrifying Ron Jeremy-esque tube of meat', according to Bourdain wit), plastered with insane amounts of tomatoes, avocado and mayonnaise (the latter two being prodigious food groups amongst Chileans). Healthy? Definitely not. Delicious? Hoping to find out!

Carmenère, Big Hot Dogs, Seafood, Avocado and the Infamous Pisco- Chile's Heating Up!

My enthusiasm was high while packing my bags. An email from group leader David Rose soon put a damper on my mood. Workers at the Santiago airport had gone on strike. Flights were still arriving and departing, but he suggested we check in with Air Canada to find out what was happening. A quick call to the national carrier, and I discovered the half day strike was over.

Relieved, I went to the airport to catch the late evening flight. There I met with the rest of our entourage-Angelo Aiello from the iYellow Wine Club, wine writer Lindsay Groves, Graham Duncan from Now magazine and of course our fearless leader. We quickly boarded our flight and departed close to midnight. The new on demand in flight entertainment from Air Canada is fabulous. I chose to watch Pixar's Up. Can these guys ever make a bad movie? Sleep quickly followed. The last thing I remember before surrendering to slumber was Ed Asner's character saying "We are heading to Paradise Falls, in South America." A positive omen if there ever was one.

Day 1

Just before landing, we were given our entry documents. One of these was a warning about the importation of fruits, veggies and livestock. The penalty for any offence is \$25,000 and imprisonment. Being an isolated country, with the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Andes to the east and the Atacama Desert to the north, Chile has imposed some of the strictest quarantine rules to protect its ecosystem. This also helps to explain why phylloxera has yet to sneak its way into the country (almost all vines are ungrafted) in lieu of modern trade.

En route to the hotel, we learn some interesting facts from a Chilean wine representative. On average, there are 2 earthquakes a month-and they were expecting one during our visit. There are 21 different major climates in the world, and Chile has 18 of them. Or as the Chileans like to say, 'God put all the leftovers here.' To reinforce his point, he makes mention that certain vineyards contain cacti, palm trees and snow. His most interesting stat, besides all things earthquake, is that Chileans hardly drink wine -

only 17 liters per capita per year. Their libations of choice are cerveza and pisco, the national spirit (aka fire water), which finds its zenith in the famous pisco sour.

After a quick check in at the gorgeous Marriott Santiago, we ventured out for dinner, and our first pisco sour. Potent stuff! Its paint stripper qualities were kept in check via the sweet and sour of the mix.

Day 2

We met up with our Western Canadian counterparts for a tour of Santiago and lunch at the famous Mercado Centrale. This market is a must see for foodies. The country is famous for its seafood, and all manner of them are found here: King crab, spider crabs, salmon, oysters, conger eel, abalone, shrimps, spiny lobster and, of course, Patagonia tooth fish (aka Chilean sea bass.) These products which cost mucho pesos back home are fraction of the cost here.

Lunch was inside, at the landmark Donde Augusto restaurant. Of course, the meal started with the fire water cocktail, aka the pisco sour. As for food, copious amounts of all the aforementioned oceanic creatures were served. My favorite was the abalone with hollandaise. As we ate, we watched a waiter carve up a king crab, tableside, with a pair of scissors in less than minute. This was talent!

After lunch and a 'coffee with legs' (strictly for adults), we went back to the hotel for some R& R. Dinner was held at an Argentinean steak house in the fashionable Border Rio area. Yes, Argentinean. Chile might be famous for oceanic creatures, vegetable and fruit, but because of the mountainous terrain, the cattle use their muscles more, making for a tougher steak. Hence, they import their meat from their close neighbour.

The cuts were huge, perfectly tender and served with french fries topped with caramelized onions and fried eggs. There was no need to eat for the next two days. To wash it all down, another pisco sour and the Montes Syrah (beauty). The wine did wonders with the meat, and the meat did wonders to tame the taste of the cocktail.

Day 3

Our adventure into wine country starts. As we leave Santiago, we realize the immensity of the industry. Vines are all around us, nestled between the two mountain ranges. Stealer's Wheel 'Stuck in the Middle with You' comes to mind (sans straight razor), as I gaze out the car window. Most wineries count their holdings in the 1000s of acres. Also, every vineyard is irrigated via the Andes run off. Water is the life blood of the industry, as the Mediterranean climate is frugal with rain. The biggest change has been from flood to drip irrigation, allowing the wineries to control the amount of water the vine takes in, making for less dilution.

Also, because of the dry climate, all vineyards are farmed organically, with an ever increasing amount converting to biodynamic.

We arrived at our first stop, Vina Santa Alicia in the Pirque sub-region of Maule. We were greeted by Cristobal Socias, Export Manager and his assistant Tamara Vasquez, an ex-pat Canadian. Our tour takes us into an area where ancient Raule wood barrels have been transformed into tasting rooms-a gorgeous sight to be had. A tasting with winemaker Eduardo Gajardo followed. He informed us that he had spent some time at Kendall Jackson before taking over the reins at Santa Alicia.

We tried twelve wines. My favorites for the price were the 2009 Chardonnay Reserva, Rose Reserva and Carmenère. All scored 85 points and are under \$12. My tops were the 2006 Gran Reserva Cabernet Sauvignon (87 pts), for its cassis, plum, peppermint and spice. The tannins will allow it to age 5 years. Even better is the Millantu (90) 2005- a blend of 48% Cab Sauv, 34% Cab Franc and the rest Carmenère. It is a full bodied cassis, cherry and meaty wine that still needs a year in bottle, and will age until 2020. Fabulous homemade empanadas were served before we left.

Our mid afternoon appointment was a Concho y Toro, the behemoth of the industry. It produces 27 million cases a year, or if you will, almost 1 case per Canadian. After tasting twenty wines, through eight tiers, I gave 88 points both to the Marques de Casa Concha Carmenère 2007 and Cabernet Sauvignon 2007, as well as Casillero del Diablo Reserva Privada (70% Cab Sauv and 30% Syrah) . The flagship Don Melchor Cabernet Sauvignon scored 93 points. It was a mouthful of plums, cassis, spice, raspberry liqueur and mint. The fruit on the palate is jammy and the finish is super long. It will last for 10 to 15 years.

Famished, we partook of a traditional Chilean assado (BBQ)- beef, pork, chicken and sausage served with empanadas and avocado in many forms. As a bonus, winemaker Ignacio Recabarren joined us, pouring his soon to be released Trio Merlot 2008. It is pure berry fruit encased with cocoa. It merits a solid 88 points and for under 15\$, it mandates a case purchase.

Our final appointment was in Colchagua Valley at the pioneer of biodynamics in Chile, Emiliana Organico. After a tour of the different applications, including a roaming chicken coop, a homemade manure/compost heap and stuffed deer bladders/cow heads with manure we settled down for a tasting. Some might consider all these things modern day voodoo, but the wines were undeniable. Seek out the super value Adobe Sauv Blanc and Viognier for \$12.95 each. Both garner 88 points. The Novas Chardonnay Viognier Marsanne (90) is a concentrated oak bomb with pineapple and honey. For reds, the Novas Syrah, with its cassis liqueur, raspberry, smoke, cinnamon and meaty qualities earns 87 points, and the Coyam, their icon wine, a solid 90.

Before leaving we make mention that temperature had dropped. Winemaker Antonio Bravo von Bischoffshausen tells us that this is a daily occurrence. There are even areas that hit 30C plus in the day and then drop by 20 degrees in the evening. The cooling effect from the coastal mountains and Andes causes this. The bonus is that the long ripening makes for wines that have extra depth of color, tannins and flavour.

I also learned that pisco can only be made from four authorized aromatic grapes, and comes from three certified regions. I am quite sure that my stomach lining is now satiated by this knowledge. Dinner included lamb and the ubiquitous pisco sour.

Day 4

We had a chance to sleep in before heading south to Curico and Via Wines. They produce three labels- Chilcas, Chilensis and Oveja Negra. Top wines from Chilcas were the Single Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc 2008 (88), Single Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon 2007 (89), and Red One (88). From Chilensis, the Reserve Carmenere (89) is a keeper with vanilla, raspberry, herbs, cassis and cocoa and caramel.

During our lunch, which consisted of turkey, salads and avocado in many forms (the Chileans love avocados), the conversation turns to winery employees. We learn that the average vineyard worker earns \$400 to \$600 a month, but because of the abundance of agriculture, no one goes hungry.

Our second and final knock on the door for the day was at J.Bouchon. Owner Julio Bouchon was there to greet us and take us on a horseback tour of the main property. He tells us that his consultant/winemaker is Patrick Valette, ex of Chateau Pavie fame. Dinner is wild hare with an avocado salad. With this we were served his 1999 Mingre (93). A superb pairing as the maturing flavours and fruit of the red matched beautifully with the game.

Post dinner, we were introduced to a new incarnation of pisco- the piscola. The combination of the fire water and cola was a much more palatable experience. Sleep was at the Bouchon ranch.

Day 5

It was an early beginning to the day at the Valdivieso winery. New Zealand born winemaker Brett Jackson was there to meet us. He informed us that it has been the coolest and wettest season he can remember in his 15 years in the country. He also tells us that Valdivieso was South America's first sparkling wine house, created back in 1879, and that even today, in Chile, it is a synonym for sparkling wine. Pretty impressive branding!

We started with a barrel tasting of twelve wines, the best being the Carmenère, Carignan and Syrah. After a palate cleansing with the exceptionally affordable Blanc de Blanc and Extra Brut (88 points each), the still wines were poured. The best of the lot were the Merlot Single Vineyard (88), Malbec Single Vineyard 2007 (90), Eclat 2006 (89), La Primavera 2004 (92) and La Primavera 2005 (93).

As noon rolled in, so did the sun and heat. The 'Pinot Machine', Cono Sur was our destination. The visit began with a bike tour of the oldest Pinot Noir vines in Chile (first planted in 1968). It's this genetic material that has been used to propagate most of Chile's Pinot plantings. It continued with a tasting which reinforced my perception that CS makes solid wines at solid prices, notably in the realm of Chardonnay, Viognier and of course Pinot. Lunch included a phenomenal avocado/cream cheese/

pistachio dip as appetizer, followed by filet of beef with asparagus, and then homemade apple torte for dessert. Does anyone ever do small lunches in this country, or for that matter, ever heard of salad? I took a nap in the car.

Thirty minutes later and my siesta ended. We had arrived at Casa Silva. The winery serves as a microcosm for the entire industry - large production of bulk wine to quality. Reinforcing this notion was export Manager Arnaud Frennet who took us to one of their many vineyards to show experimentation with Carmenère. The winery is doing research with 42 selected clones, as a means to isolate the best (read fruit driven and concentration.)

After this we were taken to see Chile's two favorite sporting events, both on the winery grounds, a Chilean rodeo complete with Wasos (cowboys) and the polo field. A quick unpacking at the stunning hotel on site, and we were back to tasting. The Sauvignon Gris was crisp and delicious (87) and so were all the different Carmenères. The star was Altura, a blend of Carmenère, Cabernet and Petit Verdot- a solid 92 point wine with a decade of life ahead of it.

Dinner was yet another meat fest, this time cooked over vine cuttings. The assado of beef, pork and chicken were succulent and smokey. Note to self: buy Lipitor. These were served with salads (finally) and more avocado. After dinner, it was more self punishment in the form of pisco, and then bed.

Day 6

Today was the most anticipated day of our visit as the heavy hitters of the industry were on tap- Montes and Lapostolle. But first we went to Luis Felipe Edwards, whose vineyards are the highest in all of Chile, reaching 1000 meters. Why? During expansion in the 90s, land prices for the prime flat lands in Colchagua were (and still are) dear. A cost benefit ratio showed that planting vertically on existing mountain property, even with seven pumping stations for irrigation and recruiting the army to blow up the rocky mountainside, was cheaper than the alternative. I am also pretty sure that Latin pride and tenacity came into play as well.

The mountainsides also offer poor fertility which forces the roots further into the ground to find minerals and nutrients making wines with more concentration and intensity.

As for the wines, from the Gran Reserva line, the Sauvignon Blanc 2009, Chardonnay 2008, Carmenere 2008 and Malbec all received scores of 87. The Dona Bernarda 2006, their flagship wine merited a 90, and is ready to drink.

Around the corner is Montes, the Mondavi of Chile. The winery, located at the base of the Apalta mountain, is a testament to Feng Shui, including the lavish 'Symphony' cellar where the best wines age in an amphitheatre setting to Gregorian chants. A study conducted at the winery showed that this type of music, as opposed to hip hop, country and heavy metal (to name a few), helped smooth out the molecules in the wine.

Regardless if you believe in this practice or not, the quality is undeniable. Seek out the Cherub Syrah Rose 2009 (87), the Alpha Carmenère (88), the Alpha "M" 2006 (94) and Folly 2006 (93). A bistro lunch was accompanied by the 2005 Folly- a stunning 96 point wine made from 100% Syrah. If you can find any, do buy it.

Casa Lapostolle (as in Grand Marnier) was in party mode as they were hosting a Carmenère symposium when we arrived. The word impressive does not do justice in describing the facility, which was built into the Apalta mountain side. The barrel cellar looks like a set from Star Trek-all futuristic with certain alcoves reminding me of a transporter room. We even see a new oak barrrique (one of only 60) that was made from a singular 350 year old French tree. The cost- 7000 dollars per barrel!

As for the wines, surprisingly, they were a tad disappointing. Normally I am a fan, but the whites were flat and the reds excessively tannic. The one bright side was the 2007 Clos Apalta, a Carmenère based wine (91).

It was a two hour drive back to the Santiago Marriott, dinner and then sleep.

Day 7

The toll of travelling and lack of sleep was taking its toll. We entered the van at 8 am for the one hour drive north east to Casablanca. Upon arriving, we noticed a marked difference in temperature, from Santiago. The region, located some 25 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean and the cool Humboldt Current, is not sequestered by the coastal mountain range, making it an ideal climate for aromatic whites and elegant reds.

Carolina Brands was our host and we sampled wines from their Casablanca and Santa Carolina portfolios. All were friendly and easy drinking.

Late morning saw us at Undurraga, an old name putting on a new face of quality. Pick up the 2006 Founder's Collection Cabernet Sauvignon (88) and the delicious 2008 Terroir Hunter Carignan (89), made from sixty year old vines. It is a black/purple coloured wine that tastes of plums, cinnamon, custard, cherry jam, hickory and fudge. A picnic in the vineyards ensued under the hot southern sun.

The discovery of the trip was in the afternoon at Garces Silva, in the newish Leyda appellation. They produce five wines under the Amayna label, and the quality is amazing. In order of preference- 2008 Syrah (92), 2007 Barrel Fermented Sauvignon Blanc (91), 2007 Chardonnay (90), 2008 Sauvignon Blanc (89), and 2007 Pinot Noir (88).

Dinner was at La Mare, a killer Peruvian restaurant, where the civiche and seafood were some of the best I have ever had.

Day 8

Our last day and a chance to catch a couple of extra winks before a tasting of 30 wines of producers not visited on our recent excursions. The highlight was the Vina La Rosa Ossa 2004 (92), a wine starting to

show some mature elements within its plum, cherry, menthol, anise, vanilla and blueberry character. It still has another decade of life ahead of it and is a testament to the longevity of Chilean wine. Others were Neyen 2005 (90), a blend of Carmenère and Cabernet Sauvignon, and the Haras de Pirque Character 2006 (88).

We then started our trek to the Errazuriz winery, but not before a quick snack, and the realization of the dream... Italian hot dogs at the locals place of choice...Dominó! The copious amounts of avocado, tomato and mayonnaise was indeed an interesting combination with the wiener.

Two hours later, we had arrived in hot Aconcagua, Chile's only transversal (east to west) valley. Even though it was Saturday, construction was in full swing, as a new winery is scheduled for completion in 2010.

Owner Eduardo Chadwick was the first to prove that Chile was able to make premium wines. Enter Sena, Chile's first icon wine, one that has consistently bested first growth Bordeaux and Super Tuscans in blind tastings. Since then he has added a few more top performers to his portfolio, including Shiraz La Cumbre and Kai. I had a chance to taste the 06 versions of these wines plus the Don Maximiano Founder's Reserve. The Sena and Don Maximiano both scored 93, La Cumbre 91 and the Kai 94. The later was the best Carmenère of the trip and it paired beautifully with lunch-roast pork, mushroom ceviche and fresh bread with avocado oil.

Day 9

Before heading for the airport, we do some souvenir shopping, notably Alpaca clothing, which can be had for a song. Once checked in, I grab a final pisco sour and a lomito- the national sandwich of Chile, and a testament its Germanic past- a bun piled high with marinated roast pork shavings, sauerkraut, cheese, avocado and tomato. A word of warning, do not attempt to eat this with your hands, a gastronomic mess will ensue and you will be spotted as a gringo.

While indulging in my last local meal, I contemplated the past eight days, and come to the following conclusions, other than my skin being silky soft from all the avocados. Better canopy management, reduced yields, longer hang times and drip irrigation have allowed the industry to butterfly out of the cocoon of mediocrity. Gone are the overt green qualities that were so prevalent just five years ago. Stylistically, the wines are very much new world, with fruit forward personalities. The industry has come of age and is realizing its full potential with world class wines. With a myriad of new vineyards, many in new cooler regions, and the ability to ripen any grape, things are just starting to really heat up.

As for Carmenère, it is indeed the calling card and one that Chile has a monopoly on. That being said, the two grapes that really impressed me, and that I feel have great potential are Syrah and Carignan, especially when the later is made from old vines.

I would also be remiss in not mentioning the Chileans themselves who are friendly, well spoken, educated and most hospitable. If I dare to make an analogy, they are the Canadians of South America. Or are we the Chileans of North America? Regardless, it is a country worth visiting for the culture, wine, food and, some pretty impressive hot dogs.