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Why wine lovers should visit Chile now

Known for cheap and cheerful wines, a new crop of Chilean winemakers are creating an enviable fine wine industry that's ripe for oenotourism.



"Some think we're crazy," chuckles Erasmo's general manager, Caesar Opazo, of the yield from these vines. "If we were a big company, [the quality of our wines] would be impossible to recreate." (RENÉE S.

By **RENÉE S. SUEN** Special to the Star
Fri., Aug. 25, 2017

MAULE, CHILE — There's late harvest wine, and then there's this unlabelled treasure before me: A honeysuckle sweet elixir that **Erasmo's** general manager Cesar Opazo claims is extracted from the breathtaking golden canopy of raisinating Torontel grapes we walked under moments earlier. It's

an ancient practice the unusual winery uses to naturally concentrate the fruit's sugars before it's made into wine.

I shake my glass to dislodge the heavenly nectar clinging to its sides. Delicious.

I'm exploring this wine paradise with [Wines and Barrels](#), a company that connects wine lovers to some of Chile's best boutique wineries and winemakers. Our knowledgeable guide and trained sommelier, Gonzalo Moraga, has an infectious enthusiasm and an impressive network we tap into on our four-day trek through the Central Valley.

In contrast to the value-driven, mass-produced impression I had of Chilean wine, I encounter eye-opening wines with complex aromas and smooth tannins, some produced from vineyards that boast of 100-year-old head-trained, dry-farmed vines, others with grapes specifically selected by the vintner. Through dedication, and often unconventional methods, these oenologists have helped Chile emerge as one of the world's premier wine regions in the last quarter-century.

Many wineries subscribe to organic and biodynamic management. Besides sustainable cultivation and production standards, Erasmo adheres to the region's historical traditions. Its 55-hectare organic vineyard is maintained using ancestral methodologies (nonirrigation, grazing livestock). Grapes are manually harvested according to the lunar cycle and the wine fermented using wild yeast, but it's processed using modern Italian winemaking techniques (fun fact: Count Francesco Marone Cinzano of vermouth fame is the owner). The final award-winning blend explodes with fruit.

"There is no winemaker or viticulturist," Opazo confesses, "I let nature do its thing."

He notes most of the land is left wild for conservation purposes, expressing "what it has naturally, which is 3,500 kilograms grapes per hectare." In contrast, industry harvests average 16,000 kg/hectare.

Influenced by the Andes to the east and Pacific Ocean on the west, Chile's temperate climate, diverse geography and fertile soils permit a wide variety of grapes to grow.

Few regions can claim to have phylloxera-free, age-old rootstock, prized for their deep-penetrating roots which often result in rich, concentrated grape juice. Colchagua's terroir shine in ripe clusters of tannic thick-skinned Cabernet Sauvignon, and juicy bunches of Merlot dripping from their sun-drenched vines at [Vina MontGras](#). On another tour in mountainous Elqui, I sample candylike Muscat from Chile's highest commercial plantation, [Vinedos de Alcohauz](#).

Appreciation for old vineyards with undervalued varieties such as punchy Pais, food-friendly Carignan, or long thought extinct varieties such as Carménère, is emerging. I taste how the long, dry autumn brings out the latter's spicy potential in icon wines from Apalta subvalley's [Neyen](#), [Casa Lapostolle's](#) prestigious and inky Clos Apalta, and in [Vina Montes's](#) Purple Angel (that's serenaded by Gregorian chants while it ages in barrels).

Some of the oldest Carménère vines can be found in the Almahue valley. At [Alchemy Wines](#), they date back to 1945. Vintner Eduardo Camerati picks and processes the best fruit for, and even labels

every bottle of, their artisanal wines by hand. They offer winemaking workshops for curious oenotourists on-site.

Wine, they say, is made in the vineyard. Exercising their scientific prowess, a subset of oenologists performs precision viticulture pairing rootstock with ideal conditions to grow the highest quality of fruit possible.

Remarkable may be underselling the unorthodox viticulture at [Vina Vik](#) in Cachapoal's Millahue ("place of gold"), an ultra-modern holistic winery and sleek titanium-clad boutique hotel from deep-pocketed entrepreneur Alexander Vik. Using data collected from weather stations and 6,000 soil samples across the 4,325-hectare property's 12 valleys, winemaker and viticulturist Cristian Vallejo selects only 30 per cent of the nighttime hand-harvested grapes from Vik's 383-hectare vineyard to use in his three Bordeaux-style blends.

I try the elegant (and pricey icon) VIK in a vertical, and barrel samples of the blend's varietals. But its big bouquet of balanced flavours shine most when paired with winery chef Rodrigo Acuna Bravo's garden-inspired cuisine.

"We speculated it had good potential from the terroir, but today we can taste it," Vallejo says of wine from Vik's young vines which have been topping international blind tastings.

The evolving wine scene isn't only financed by the rich. A generation of passionate winemakers are making outstanding wines by building new knowledge on past achievements.

I love the wines from [Maturana Wines](#) near San Fernando. The family-owned operation's success is essentially due to Jose Ignacio Maturana, the former head winemaker of Chile's most awarded winery, [Casa Silva](#).

It's at the humble winery — a sort of concrete warehouse next to his family home — where I discover how good natural wines can be.

"To make good minimal intervention wines, you kind of have to make a better product," explains my travel companion, Nils Bernstein, food editor of Wine Enthusiast Magazine.

I fall for their icon, MW, that's made from the best grapes that are hand-harvested from specific old vines across the region. Every bottle expresses Colchagua's terroir of velvety ripe dark fruits.

"When we started in 2011," Maturana tells me, "The idea was to make natural wines that would surprise with excellent quality at a great price. Our philosophy is that great wines are made in the vineyard, not in the winery. There's no additional yeast, no sulphates."

MW's first vintage was awarded 91-points by the revered Descorchados wine guide.

Then I met the Naranjo Torontel.

I have a do-not-love relationship with orange wines, finding them off-putting and sour.

Maturana began to flirt with orange wines last year.

Maybe it has something to do with the grapes from 70-year-old vines, or other magic that happens during its 6.5-month maceration (hello, skin contact), but the wine is soft and silky, bursting with grapefruit and apricot, and floral aromas. It's wonderful. I buy a bottle. (Descorchados gave it 95 points.)

Opazo says: "It's about being honest with who we are and what we do. It's all about the land."

I'd add it's the intimate relationship these small producers have with their vines that make their wines a worthwhile investment.

Renée S. Suen was hosted by Turismo Chile in April 2017, which didn't review or approve this story.

When you go:

Get there: I flew American Airlines from Toronto Pearson to Santiago International Airport, with a stopover in Miami or Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, daily. The wineries mentioned are all within a 2.5-hour drive from the Chilean capital.

Stay:

Santiago's [Luciano K](#) in tourist-friendly Barrio Lastarria is a boutique hotel that features 38 bedrooms and a rooftop terrace bar with views over Parque Forestal in a comfortable environment that blends 1920 elegance with technology.

[Vina Casa Donoso](#) near Talca in Maule has three guest suites in its well-equipped facility that can host small functions and weddings.

In Colchagua, [Noi Blend's](#) cosy and spacious rooms offer garden views in a peaceful surrounding, while [Hotel Santa Cruz Plaza](#) is an eclectic hotel that's fused with exhibits from the [Colchagua Museum](#) (it's the owner and former arms dealer Carlos Cardoen's private collection) that includes access to a lounge, children's club, pool and spa, and Colchagua Casino.

Tour arrangements: For day trips that include shared transportation from and to your hotel, set tour itineraries through Colchagua or Maule wine valleys, or bespoke food and wine excursions with private transfer from Santiago, check out [Wines and Barrels](#). Each tour is hosted by a specialized wine guide and includes lunch, refreshments, winery visits and tutored tastings. They can also help with hotel and restaurant reservations, or other activities like cooking classes, spa days, etc.

Do your research:chile.travel/en.