



A taste of Chile

Chile's colorful countryside is a winemaker's paradise, and picture-perfect for outdoor-adventurers and wine-loving travelers.

JANIE ROBINSON

MY MOUNTAIN BIKE COASTS through the vineyard, gliding past grapevines bursting with purples, reds and greens; vivid rows rolling through the green valleys and sunnanned slopes. The sky beams brilliant blue, while white peaks lie ahead. Nestled between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes Mountains, not only is the scenery spectacular here in Chile's Central Valley, but the geography, climate, and soil are perfect for growing a wide variety of grapes.

Traditionally known for its affordable, mass-produced wines, Chile is now one of the world's premier wine regions. "Our unique landscape and weather conditions play a key role for the production of high-quality wines," says our guide Gonzalo Moraga, a trained sommelier who started Wines and Barrels Handcrafted Journeys to give wine and food lovers a "true taste of Chile."



Place of gold in Millahue Valley

GLEAMING LIKE A golden spaceship that's landed in the vineyard-covered hills, Viña Vik's titanium-clad boutique hotel, state-of-the-art holistic winery, and the over 10,000 acre sprawling vineyard are dazzling. No wonder the indigenous people call this area "Millahue" – the "Place of Gold".

This no-expense-spared project of Norwegian entrepreneur Alexander Vik, features 22 suites that are all totally unique, each designed by a different artist. Part art gallery and part wine spa, my favorite spot in Vik's avant-garde retreat is lounging by the infinity pool – I feel like I'm on top of the world with panoramic vineyard views under clear blue skies.

Descending from my heavenly perch to the corral below, I saddle up with one of Viña Vik's resident

wranglers, Raul, for a horseback ride through the scenic vineyards. My sure-footed mount Manzanita carries me up the rocky trails for more breath-taking vistas. The playful Pacific wind blows through both of our manes in this gorgeous Mediterranean-like climate and our gallop back through the vineyards to the winery is giddy-up glorious.

Viña Vik's winery is designed to express their holistic concept, starting with a hypnotic flowing installation known as the 'mirror of water'.

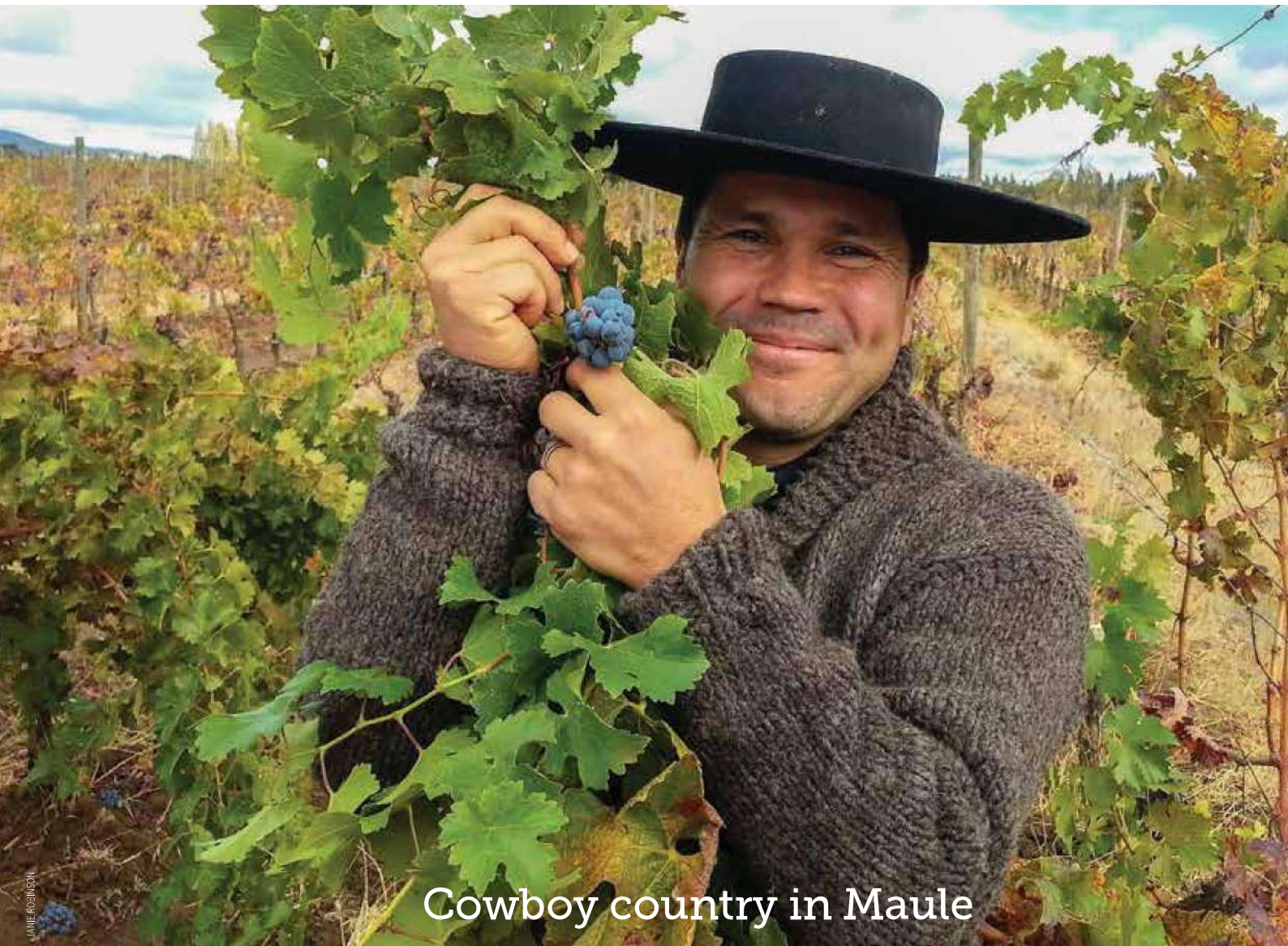
"The idea of this place is to relax you," says viticulturalist Cristian Vallejo of the giant reflecting pool, running like a mountain stream, strewn with big boulders and scattered stones. "When people arrive here, they can feel like free

spirits" he continues, explaining how this Zen-like reflecting pool also works as a cooling agent for the barrel rooms below. In typical Vik fashion, there is stunning contemporary artwork throughout the winery and in the tasting room too.

Next, we're off to meet Canadian-trained Chilean chef Rodrigo Acuña Bravo who welcomes us to his organic kitchen garden, picking produce for tonight's all-fresh, all-local dinner at Vik's restaurant Milla Milla.

Bravo's farm-to-table menu includes delicious grilled calamari fresh from the Pacific and slow-cooked lamb shanks sourced from one of the chef's favorite local farmers. Both are perfect paired with a glass of the elegant VIK wine. Rodrigo even sends us home with gift bags filled with local olive oil, sea salt and his own special mixture of Merkén – the classic smoked spice of Chile.

Clockwise from top left:
Vik Chile's infinity pool offers panoramic vineyard views.
The luxury retreat at Vik Chile.
Tasting Room at the Winery at Viña Vik.



Cowboy country in Maule



I DIDN'T GET TO RIDE with them, but *huasos* – Chile's traditional cowboys – still roam ancient Caliboro, the oldest wine region of Chile where Erasmo Winery follows the region's historic traditions on its 136-acre organic vineyard.

"I let nature do its thing," says Erasmo's general manager César Opazo of his biodynamic vineyard, adding with a laugh, "Some think we're crazy."

From the top of his traditional broad-brimmed huaso hat to his infectious smile, this cowboy shares a spiritual connection with the organic winery, where grapes are handpicked according to the lunar cycle, sheep roam the vineyards after harvest, and wild yeast is used to ferment the wine.

As we walk with César through his remote dry-farmed vineyard and along the curves of the gently



flowing Perquilauquen River, the winemaker's passion for this place beams as bright as his smile.

"This is a spiritual place to me. It's all about the land. As a Chilean, as a Maulean, as a peasant of this region, it makes me proud to work in this land because people here have an experience inherited from their grandparents and their parents".

Above: From the top of his traditional broad-brimmed huaso hat to his infectious smile, Erasmo Winery's fun-loving César Opazo shares a "spiritual connection" with this organic and biodynamic winery.

Far left: Huasos (Chile's cowboys) still roam the ancient land of Caliboro, the oldest, most traditional wine region of Chile.

Left: Fermenting grapes at the organic Erasmo Winery.

Rural charm in Almahue Valley

I'M CHARMED BY everything at Alchemy Wines, from the winery's sweeping valley views and rustic waterwheels, to its passionate young winemaker and his popular wine-making workshops.

"Alchemy winery was the old cheese factory here many years ago," says 31-year-old vintner, Eduardo Camerati of his rural enterprise. "In fact, one of the cheesemakers now works here at the winery." Eduardo proudly shows us how everything is done by hand to create his artisanal wines, from picking and processing only the best fruit, to hand-labelling every single bottle.

Some of the oldest Carménère vines come from the fertile Almahue Valley. In fact, Alchemy Wines has vines of this variety – once thought to be extinct – that date back to 1945.



JAMIE ROBINSON

Clockwise from above: Alchemy's Eduardo Camerati is one of the youngest winemakers in Chile. Everything is done by hand to create Alchemy's artisanal wines, from selecting only the best fruit, to hand-labelling every single bottle. The Almahue Valley is home to the oldest Carménère vines in Chile.

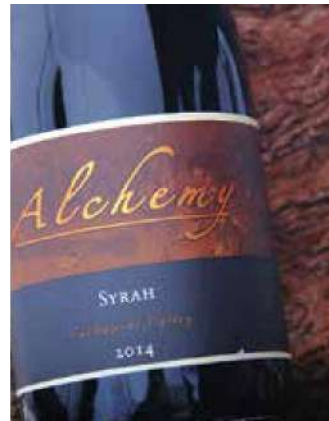


PHOTO COURTESY ALCHEMY WINES



Lush oasis, paradise for stargazers and New Age vibe in the Andes

CHILEAN WINE-GROWING has also spread up into the Elqui Valley, 420-kilometres north of the colonial capital city Santiago and an hour and a half from the popular Pacific beach resort city of La Serena. The vast valley is a lush oasis in Chile's sun-baked landscape, stretching from the Pacific Ocean eastward into the rugged Andes Mountains and the Argentinean border.

The Elqui Valley's famous clear skies are home to some of the most important scientific observatories on Earth. Named the world's first



PHOTO COURTESY ALCHEMY WINES



international dark sky sanctuary in 2015, it's a stargazing pilgrimage for astro-tourists from around the globe. The valley is also known for its mystical new age communities and seekers of the cosmic energies. And maybe not surprisingly, frequent UFO sightings too.

With an average of 300 sunny days per year, solar cooking makes a lot of sense here. Villaseca restaurant in Vicuña cooks everything on their menu in solar ovens, taking up to four hours to cook tasty traditional dishes like pastel de choclo – ribs and lamb.

With all that sunshine, warm days, cold nights, and irrigation canals fed by the Puclaro and La Laguna dams, everything from papayas to oranges and avocados flourish in this scenic valley. Grapevines love it here too, producing the country's northernmost wines, as well as the area's traditional pack-a-punch pisco (grape brandy).

Viña Falernia was the pioneer when it came to making fine wines in the once-desert Elqui Valley. The winery estate nestles on the shores of windswept Puclaro Lake – a reservoir created in 2003 when a dam was built – now a popular place for kitesurfing.

Elqui Valley is also home to Chile's highest altitude vineyard – Viñedos de Alcohuaz. We stroll this stunning winery, past grapevines thriving in the Andes Mountains at 2,200 meters above sea level in a wild landscape where quaint mountain-side villages share the stony slopes with vine-covered valleys.

Alcoholauz's partners, Juan Luis Huerta and his wife, Helia Rojas, know this remote corner of Elqui intimately. Both born in the valley, they have obviously dedicated their lives to the land on which they live.

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one must first and foremost be humble, for in the end it is Earth herself who decides the outcome of all our endeavors" says Juan Luis, to which his wife Helia adds: "With each bottle of wine that leaves the winery, we see how a little piece of the valley itself travels to new shores, meets new people and, in some way, transcends." ■

IF YOU GO Air Canada has five direct flights per week from Toronto to Santiago, an 11-hour non-stop journey of 8610 km with a one-hour time difference. www.aircanada.com The currency is Chilean Pesos, and \$1 Canadian dollar is worth around 500 Pesos. You'll find Scotiabank Chile ATMs throughout the country. For more Chile Tourism information go to chile.travel/en/ and see your preferred travel advisor.

Clockwise from above left: Chile's Elqui Valley is home to the first international dark sky sanctuary, a stargazer's paradise.

Viñedos de Alcohuaz is Chile's highest altitude vineyard at 2,200 meters above sea level in this stunning, Andes landscape.

Winery partner Juan Luis Huerta stands on the stone pools, where grapes are crushed by foot and fermented at Viñedos de Alcohuaz.