

CHILE'S CABERNET IN A CHANGING MARKET

Over the last decade, Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon has joined Californian Cabernet Sauvignon, New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and Australian Shiraz as one of the more widely recognised styles of New World wine.

In the early 1980s Cabernet Sauvignon was the only variety that was widely exported from Chile, and it benefited from the story that the Andes Mountains and the ocean had combined to provide Chile with unique protection against the Phylloxera louse. This was in fact false – South Australia also has large areas of ungrafted, phylloxera-free vines – but its widespread dissemination certainly did Chile no harm.

In more recent years, the focus has often shifted away from Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon, to Merlot and, more recently to Carmenere. However, as the taste for varietal wines has developed internationally, Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux blends have gained a following. Credit for this must go in part to Eric de Rothschild of Chateau Lafite, who was an early outside investor with Los Vascos, and Philippine de Rothschild of Mouton Rothschild who followed in her cousin's footsteps at Almaviva, a joint venture with Concha y Toro. Just as important in the development of Bordeaux blends was Eduardo Chadwick of Errazuriz who has hosted numerous blind tastings that set three of his Cabernet Sauvignon based reds – Don Maximiano Estate Special Reserva, Chadwick and the Sena he launched as a joint venture with Robert Mondavi – against the top guns of Bordeaux. The success of the Chilean wines in these contests has certainly helped to build the prestige of the style.

These, however, are like the first growths they outscored, are more often read about than tasted. For most people, Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon comes bearing a widely available brand name such as Concha y Toro, Montes or Chileno. Never subliminal or difficult to

understand, they speak as soon as you lift the glass: opaque in colour, intense in their black currant aroma, with soft but impressive tannins. In other markets, it is the name of the retailer on whose shelves it is sold that are better known. Some of these wines share the intense black currant character of their higher profile counterparts; others display the green weediness that comes from irrigation and over-production.

Exports slowdown

Chilean wines are still doing reasonably well in many export markets. While their success is purely based on value for money in some markets, such as the US, in others such as the UK and Ireland, it is related to skilful promotion and distribution and in a few, politics has played a part. Thailand, for example, grants Chile special exceptions from custom duties, which makes it a bargain. Korea has recently done the same. Discussions with the Japanese government are now also being held, which could radically change consumption patterns in that enormous Asian market. Other markets are so congested that there is but little room for many of producers who were at the last Vinexpo.

As background to this feature, our panel sampled 38 Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon sold for under € 10, sourced in 9 countries. Among the successes were the 2004 Hacienda Araucano from Lurton, bought at € 3.76 in France at Carrefour and one of the cheapest wines in the tasting. Other winners included the widely distributed Casillero del Diablo, Montes and Cousino Macul. High profile wines such as Los Vascos proved less impressive than their makers might have hoped. ■

COMMENT

» Cabernet is the pride of the Chilean nation. «

Ana María Barahona

If there is a single variety that provokes patriotic pride in the Chilean soul in the same way as the poetry of Pablo Neruda or Roberto Matta, it is cabernet sauvignon.



The Maipo Valley has been fundamental for the destiny of cabernet sauvignon, in particular the region of Alto Maipo – Alto Jahuel, Macul, Puente Alto, Buin, Pirque – that produces wines of full body, personality and with those nuances of black-currant that are sometimes mentholated, sometimes more of wild game and that rouse so many divisions among critics. If Maipo has established itself as the natural home of the best and most elegant cabernet of Chile, it is not alone: sweeter and of more muscular nuance are those from the warm Aconcagua valley; elegance and concentration are the characteristics of the Alto Cachapoal; strength and ripe fruit permeate the best examples of Colchagua.

Two years ago at Wines of Chile Michael Cox, now director of Wines of Chile in the United Kingdom, encouraged the industry to pursue new ground, but never to forget how marvellous the cabernet sauvignons are. No other variety has adapted so well to our Mediterranean climate, to the poor soils of Maipo and to the large variations in temperature during the ripening period of the grapes.