

A Nichols Worth of Wine

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Searching for Value in South America

If there is a silver lining in today's otherwise dark economic clouds, it is that there are bargains galore for wine consumers. Supply, always a hedge against escalating prices, is good even as demand increases year over year and wine quality improves every vintage. Industry analysts report that while on-premise, meaning *restaurant*, wine sales are down (significantly in some markets), the wine buying public, here and abroad, continues to buy and consume wine.

Inconspicuous spending has become fashionable for those who can still afford to. For the rest of us, bargain hunting is a way of life. We may not be buying new cars or taking extended vacations but wine sales remain strong and low-cost options are plentiful when you're buying South American wines.

South America is a large continent, fourth in the world overall. When it comes to wine production though, we're really talking about Chile and Argentina. These two countries combined produce about 300 million cases annually and it is estimated that as much as 25% of that production is exported to the US. But the back story is not about volume, it's the remarkable improvement in quality for the price from these two countries over the last few years.

A number of factors contribute to Argentina and Chile's skyrocketing wine popularity, and it's due largely to lower cultivation costs and vastly improved vineyard and cellar management. Both countries benefit from near perfect grape growing conditions. Separated by the vast Andes mountain range, days are filled with bright sunshine, temperatures rarely reach 90 degrees, mountain snow furnishes an abundant source of water to both countries and remote vineyard locations offers immunity to common vine diseases and pests.

Argentina, the fifth largest wine producer in the world, also has a currency that against the dollar still remains a good value. Vineyard land in South America sells on average at about \$30,000 an acre, a tenth of that of Napa Valley, certainly keeping costs in check. Overall, wine production costs are estimated to be just a fraction of that of France and California.

At the center of Argentina's wine region is the city of Mendoza, sitting near the base of the distant snow-capped Andes Mountains. Vineyards here are the highest in the world, reaching elevations of 10,000 feet. With more than 1300 bodega's (wineries) and a population of 130,000 people, wine is Mendoza's principle industry.

Malbec, the country's signature varietal, came to Argentina from France in the 19th century. A major player as a blending grape in Bordeaux and in American cabernets, here with its intense deep garnet color and rich flavors of dark fruits and licorice, malbec stands proudly on its own. Cabernet sauvignon also does particularly well too, and there is promise for pinot noir from the cooler southerly region of Patagonia.

If malbec is Argentina's flagship red wine, *Torrontes* is its indigenous, but otherwise virtually unknown, white wine. Best described as somewhere between sauvignon blanc and viognier the aromatic *torrontes* is just beginning to attract the attention of wine lovers. There also are many delicious and outstanding chardonnays coming from the region.

Some of the better Argentina producers I have found and their wines include the following, but with a string of successive stellar vintages, most anything you find on your shelves is going to satisfy. Sticking with these labels, you can't go wrong!

Bodega Colomé. Organically farmed malbec and torrontes grown on the highest elevation vineyards in the world (9,000 feet) in Argentina's Salta Province.

Catena Zapata. One of the few producers in the world whose every wine you can trust. Focused primarily on malbec, cabernet and chardonnay, Catena is a mega-producer, making premium wines in prices from under \$20 to well over \$100 a bottle. Quality never suffers across this broad lineup.

Clos de los Siete. World renowned viticulturist and consultant, Michel Rolland, produces some of Argentina's finest malbec blend wines at value packed prices under \$20.

Oyikil 2007 Malbec and the 2007 Cabernet. Oyikil, one of Argentina's "off the radar" wineries, produces stunning limited-production reds from 3,000 feet high vineyards in the Uco Valley.

Achaval Ferrer 2006 (and 2007!) Malbec. These back-to-back vintages of malbec offer astounding quality for the money and their *Quimera*, a Bordeaux-blend, is one of the best wines I tasted last year (see the October 2008 Wine Reviews issue @ www.napleswinenews.com).

As malbec is to Argentina, Chile also has its signature red wine, carmenère, and Chile's cabernets are always recognized for their consistently high quality and value. Wine Spectator's number one ranked wine for 2008, was the carmenère rich, *Casa Lapostolle 2005 Clos Apalta*. Red grapes account for a large majority of Chile's annual production, up to 75%, but the rise in quality of the white varietals has been dramatic thanks to increased vineyard plantings exposed to the coastal influences of the nearby Pacific Ocean.

Chilean cabs are typically more lush and softer than those of Bordeaux and California making them almost immediately accessible, while the best can also age for a decade or more. The merlot-like carmenère grape produces structured, seductive, full-bodied reds, and top producers have also had impressive success with syrah.

Referred to as the Bordeaux of South America, a number of top French chateaux, including Lafite-Rothschild, Mouton, Chateau Margaux and Cos d'Estournel, have invested in Chilean vineyards, as have a number of American wineries. Prime vineyards occupy the Aconcagua and Casablanca Valley wine regions in the north, while the country's central vineyards include the

Maipo, Rapel, and Maule Valleys. Chile's primary grapes are cabernet and chardonnay, but it's the sauvignon blanc and carmenère I find most exciting.

Sauvignon blanc from the vineyards planted closest to the coast can exhibit classic gooseberry flavors similar to the best vineyards of the Loire under the guidance of the better winemakers, like those from Montes and Casa LaPostolle. The Ledy Valley in particular, is well suited to sauvignon blanc, and I find many of Chile's mineral-rich chardonnays come closer to true White Burgundy than what many California vintners produce. Great examples of this style can be found from Concha y Toro, and in the super value category, Cousino Macul.

Look for these producers of top-value and quality wines from Chile.

Montes. It is impossible to talk about the wines of Chile and not first think of Montes, whether it is the ethereal carmenère-based *Purple Angel*, the *Folly*, perhaps the best example of just how well syrah can do there, or *Montes Alpha*, a cabernet blend made in a few different price points from under \$20 and up. And it is the *Ledy Valley Sauvignon Blanc*, that at about \$13, should be a template for new world sauvignon blanc.

Casa Lapostolle. From the Colchagua Valley, the carmenere-based 2005 Clos Apalta scored 96 points and was awarded Wine Spectator's *Wine of the Year* in 2008. But many of the outstanding lower price-tier wines get consistent praise from critics and collectors alike.

Concha y Toro. One of Chile's oldest and largest producer, Concha y Toro has vast holdings in all of Chile's grape growing regions, making reds and whites, but it is cabernet, especially their top wine, Don Melchor, that is most prized.

Cousino Macul. A century-plus old winery, located in the north of the Maipo Valley, Cousino Macul is regarded as Chile's leader producer of high-quality, low-cost wines. The cabernets and chardonnays consistently score well and sell in the \$10 - \$12 price range.

In the under \$20 a bottle category, Chile and Argentina continue to be your best source for quality, recession-busting wines. Look for the producers mentioned here.

Eat, drink and be merry!

Bruce