

San Antonio Valley

Chile

A COOL-CLIMATE POWERHOUSE EMERGES ON CHILE'S PACIFIC COAST.



TOM HYLAND

Not far from the Pacific Ocean, a new identity for the Chilean wine industry has been slowly evolving over the past half-dozen years. A handful of vintners in the San Antonio Valley have been crafting vibrant bottlings of Sauvignon Blanc, along with sleek, beautifully focused examples of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. These wines are now taking their place alongside the Cabernet Sauvignons, Carménères, and Bordeaux blends of the Maipo and Colchagua Valleys, giving the country a more complete roster of world-class offerings.

Cool-climate varieties have been a focus in Chile since at least 1982, when Pablo Morandé first planted Chardonnay in the Casablanca Valley, 30 miles from the Pacific. Morandé was confident that the chilly ocean breezes and early-morning fog would result in a longer growing season, providing more acidity and structure in the wines, and he proved correct. In recent years, another two dozen vintners have followed his path to Casablanca, working not only with Chardonnay, but also with Pinot Noir, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, and Sauvignon Blanc.

Yet a few hardy souls wanted to produce more intensely flavored examples, so they turned to an area even farther west: the San Antonio Valley, only 5-7 miles from the ocean. María Luz Marín, a veteran of the Chilean wine

industry, cleared forests and planted vineyards at her Casa Marín estate in the small town of Lo Abarca in 2000. She released her first wines, Sauvignon Blanc and Sauvignon Gris, from the 2003 vintage; soon after, another three vintners established wineries in San Antonio.

A subregion of the Aconcagua Valley Denominación de Origen (DO), the San Antonio Valley DO includes four sectors: Leyda Valley, Lo Abarca, Malvilla, and Rosario. Its razor's-edge climate offers both advantages and disadvantages for viticulture, according to Viviana Navarrete, winemaker at Leyda Vineyards. Along with cool temperatures, averaging a high of 80°F throughout the year, and a lack of rain during harvest, she sees the maritime influence as a vitally important factor. "Constant direct breezes from the sea run through the vineyards," Navarrete explains, "refreshing the vines and, at the same time, acting like a natural fungus controller—meaning we have a lower use of chemicals and pesticides." The morning fog does create problems, she allows: "The humidity from the fog creates situations that could result in botrytis, while the high fogs mean a more focused canopy management in order to maintain proper airflow among the vines." The climate also dictates how the vines are regulated; as Navarrete points out, "Varieties such as

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APPELLATION

Syrah must be managed at low yields”—1.5-1.75 tons per acre—“in order to reach the correct phenolic ripeness.”

José Manuel Ortega, the Spanish owner of O. Fournier in Mendoza, selected San Antonio as the site for his cool-climate Chilean vineyards for several reasons. “When we first visited Lo Abarca,” he says, “we thought the soil and climate conditions were optimal for high-quality Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc. The soils are

EARTHQUAKE UPDATE

Although a few Chilean wine regions were seriously affected by the Feb. 27 earthquake—primarily Maule and Colchagua to the south—the San Antonio Valley suffered only minor damage. At Casa Marín, Nicolás Marín reports that some stored wine was lost, but everyone at the winery came through unharmed. At Garcés Silva in Leyda, Gómez says there was no structural damage, noting that the owners’ family and the employees were all safe and grateful for their good fortune.

Viña Garcés Silva vineyard (left); O. Fournier La Higuera del Maule Vineyard (below).



extremely complex, as the local mountain range is geologically very old. Also, organic material is very low, so it helps with concentration and quality. Finally, the extreme weather conditions help the aromatics, acidity, and balance.”

Sauvignon Blanc has been the most successful variety in San Antonio, thanks in large part to the introduction of clones that emphasize bright fruit while limiting grassiness. The two principal selections are Clone 242, from the Loire, and Clone 1, developed at the University of California-Davis; France’s Clone 107 is also part of the mix. As Navarrete explains, “Clone 1 is austere in the nose, but with saline and mineral character; on the palate, it is round, creamy, and long. Clone 242 is tropical in nature; it is shorter in the mouth than Clone 1, but has a sweeter palate. Clone 107 is citric and herbal in the nose, and on the palate, it is fresh, long, and green.” Her Garuma Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, with exotic aromas of gooseberry, mango, and snow peas backed by a lengthy, flinty finish, is testimony to the complexity derived from these individual clones.

Chardonnay has also enjoyed some success here, although the wines are less intense than the Sauvignon Blancs. Navarrete uses two clones—Clone 4 from California and a massal selection of the best plant material at the estate—while

at nearby Matetic Vineyards, winemaker Paula Cárdenas employs Dijon clones 76, 95, and 130 and the Mendoza selection. Navarrete credits the creaminess in her Chardonnay to the massal selection; Cárdenas likes the Mendoza selection because it “develops complex flavors and aromas during barrel fermentation and barrel aging, despite the lack of aromatics at harvest.” The most successful Chardonnay from this area, however, is probably the Amayna bottling from Viña Garcés Silva. Winemaker Claudia Gómez selects the finest grapes from an estate vineyard only 8 miles from the ocean, then ages the wine in 50%-new French barriques.

Pinot Noir should be a natural for this environment, but as in many regions around the world, the results have been inconsistent. Too many bottlings from San Antonio have been disjointed, displaying admirable ripeness yet lacking proper structure. With the maturation of the vines and a shift toward lower yields, a few winners have emerged, such as Lo Abarca Hills from Casa Marín, EQ from Matetic, and Las Brisas from Leyda. Again, clonal selection is crucial: Navarrete employs two Dijon clones (115 and 777), as well as the Concha y Toro clone developed at that famous Chilean winery. She finds that the Chilean clone provides dark fruit and soft tannins, the 777 offers fresh fruit with



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Amayna Sauvignon Blanc, Leyda Valley 2008 \$24

Exotic aromas of spiced pear, gooseberry, and juniper dominate the nose. The wine is medium-to-full-bodied, with beautiful balance throughout. A lengthy finish features lively acidity, ginger notes, and minerality. Very stylish.

Casa Marín Sauvignon Blanc Cipreses Vineyard, San Antonio Valley 2008 \$24

Intense aromas of pink grapefruit, lime, and asparagus are followed by a full-bodied palate with great fruit intensity. The long, long finish is marked by distinct minerality and vibrant acidity. A world-class Sauvignon Blanc that should peak in three to five years.

Leyda Sauvignon Blanc Classic, Leyda Valley 2008 \$12

Grapefruit and Anjou pear aromas on the nose; medium-bodied, with varietal character, lively acidity, and an elegant, tingly finish. A sipper meant for consumption over the next year, but amazingly flavorful and well made for the price.

Leyda Sauvignon Blanc Garuma Vineyard, Leyda Valley 2008 \$20

Fragrant aromas of gooseberry, mango, and snow peas lead to impressive concentration on a generous midpalate and a lengthy finish, with excellent fruit persistence, vibrant acidity, and flinty notes. Best in two or three years' time.

Matetic Sauvignon Blanc EQ Coastal, San Antonio Valley 2008 \$18

Lovely aromas of honeydew melon, grapefruit, and snow peas persist on a medium-full palate. The lengthy, ultraclean finish shows lively acidity and distinct notes of fresh lime.

MontGras Sauvignon Blanc Reserva, San Antonio Valley 2009 \$12

Bell pepper, lime, and freshly mown hay emerge on the nose. This is a medium-bodied, fresh, delicious Sauvignon Blanc to enjoy over the next 12-18 months. Offers wonderful character for the money.

O. Fournier Sauvignon Blanc Centauri, Leyda Valley 2008 \$18

The fruit-driven nose displays lime, spearmint, and hints of apricot. A medium-bodied wine, it offers varietal character, vibrant acidity, and a clean, flavorful finish. Nicely styled, though a bit lean overall.

Amayna Chardonnay, Leyda Valley 2006 \$24

Lovely, concentrated mango and papaya aromas are backed by outstanding texture. This Chardonnay has a lengthy, persistent finish with lively acidity and a light saline note. Well-integrated oak adds complexity.

Matetic Chardonnay EQ, San Antonio Valley 2008 \$22

Concentrated Anjou pear, golden-apple, vanilla, and lemon-peel aromas jump out of the glass. The generous midpalate is highlighted by creamy, nicely integrated oak. A lengthy, beautifully structured finish provides notes of lemon custard.

Casa Marín Pinot Noir Lo Abarca Hills, San Antonio Valley 2006 \$49

The nose features dried cherry, cedar, and nutmeg; on the palate, the flavors are well concentrated, backed by lively acidity and balanced tannins. The persistent finish adds notes of cardamom and red-pepper flakes. Best in five to seven years.

Leyda Pinot Noir Las Brisas Vineyard, Leyda Valley 2008 \$21

Sensual wild-cherry, raspberry, and cardamom aromas are followed by a midpalate with excellent concentration and acidity and medium-weight tannins. Quite complex, with admirable varietal character and red-spice notes, this ripe Pinot Noir will be best in three to five years, but should hold longer.

Matetic Syrah EQ, San Antonio Valley 2007 \$35

Expressive dark-chocolate, raspberry, and molasses notes are displayed on the nose. The palate is moderately full-bodied and densely packed; the finish shows persistent fruit, acidity, and notes of Earl Grey tea. A New World Syrah with admirable balance, it should drink best in five to seven years.

Casa Marín Syrah Miramar, San Antonio Valley 2006 \$64

Lovely red-cherry, orange-peel, and plum aromas signal a graceful entry to a medium-full palate, with silky tannins, beautiful acidity, and long-lasting fruit. Sleek and supple, this Syrah will be best in three to five years.

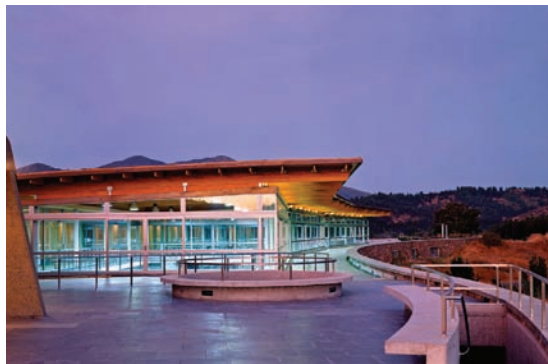
Prices are current estimated retail.



Casa Marín winery (top) and vineyard (middle); María Luz Marín (above).

less concentration than the Concha y Toro selection, and the 115 delivers red-cherry and raspberry aromas, but with a shorter finish than the Chilean clone.

Perhaps the most pleasant surprise from San Antonio has been the quality of its Syrah. Cárdenas says that Syrah “has worked incredibly well, especially considering that the vines are so young. It’s a variety that expresses itself with great eloquence.” For Cárdenas, San Antonio Syrah “is always elegant and balanced and reminds me of the wines from the Rhône Valley.” The Matetic family was the first to plant Syrah in San Antonio, choosing the small Rosario Valley, a few miles north of Lo Abarca. Today, Cárdenas produces three bottlings, each offering attractive dark-chocolate notes to accompany the



Matetic winery (top left, middle); winemaker Paula Cárdenas (above).

sensual black-fruit flavors. Another noteworthy Syrah is the supple, multilayered Miramar bottling of Casa Marín—further proof that San Antonio is becoming an important zone for well-structured, ageworthy Syrah.

If there is a spiritual leader among the vintners of San Antonio, it is Marín. Quiet, self-confident, and driven, she was the first to demonstrate the quality of San Antonio with Sauvignon Blancs from her Cipreses and Laurel vineyards. The former is the closest vineyard in South America to the Pacific Ocean, only 3 miles away. That makes it difficult to ripen the grapes in some years; harvest always begins seven to 14 days later than at the Laurel Vineyard, even though that site is less than a mile farther from the ocean. Tasting the two wines side by side of-



José Manuel Ortega, owner of O. Fournier.

fers great insight into the terroir. While the Laurel sends up seductive lime, mango, and pear aromas (Marín calls it “a more crowd-pleasing wine”), the Cipreses simply explodes with notes of bell pepper, asparagus, and pink grapefruit on the nose. Both wines are deeply concentrated (the average yield in these vineyards is less than 2 tons per acre), but the Cipreses is an assertive, almost aggressive style of Sauvignon Blanc that has caught the attention of wine writers worldwide and has thus become a model for what San Antonio can achieve with this variety.

Besides producing premium bottlings of Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Syrah, and a few other varietals (as well as moderately priced versions of Sauvignon Blanc, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, and Pinot Noir under the Cartagena label), Marín is looking to expand the industry’s image of San Antonio. One reason is that “if you go to a restaurant and look at the list, the premium wines are always red—always,” she says. “White wines are like second class. So it becomes very difficult for me to target my wines as premium wines.” Hence, her inclination to plant new red varieties such as Merlot and Cabernet Franc at her estate: “I am getting clones from St. Émilion; I think these varieties will do well here.”

Sensing the uniqueness of this valley, a few of Chile’s major wine estates have planted vineyards in the Leyda subzone; both Montes and Santa Rita produce Leyda Sauvignon Blancs, while Santa Rita also uses Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the valley, the former in its Reserva.

The promise of San Antonio is being delivered, and as the wines improve, the possibilities are endless. “When we first arrived here 10 years ago,” Navarrete recalls, “we had very little information and no neighbors with experience in viticulture. Today, after much research, planting with different clones and at various exposures, we are starting to realize the maximum potential of this place.” 🍷

KEY PRODUCERS

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