

Chile's Heroic Vintage

As Chile's 2010 bottles begin to appear on store shelves in the United States, writer Jon Fine reflects on this remarkable vintage--interrupted by a devastating earthquake--and considers the trends shaping the country's new wine scene.

By Jon Fine

If you were a winemaker in Chile, lying awake in the wee hours of February 27, 2010, chances are you were thinking about the weather. Summer had been cold. Harvest was going to be several days late. This meant that, like every other southern-hemisphere winemaker, you hadn't started picking yet—not a disastrous situation, but worrisome. Maybe a week or two late, but so be it. Harvest wouldn't start until early March.

But if you were still awake that morning at precisely 3:34 a.m., any worries about the weather suddenly would have seemed inconsequential. That's when an earthquake that measured 8.8 on the Richter scale hit south-central Chile. The quake lasted about two minutes, and that was more than long enough.

Chileans are by and large well acquainted with earthquakes. Stoic from experience, they expect to see more than one major quake in their lifetimes; indeed, a 7.1 quake rattled the country just this January. But last February's was one of the 10 strongest earthquakes ever recorded, not just in Chile but in the world. More than 700 people died, hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed and wineries in key wine areas—notably the south-central Maule valley region, which was closest to the epicenter—were badly damaged, or in some cases leveled.

As a result, though, the atypical lateness of last year's harvest was actually a huge stroke of good fortune. Had winery tanks been stuffed to capacity with just-crushed grapes when the quake hit, it's very likely that many 2010 wines from some of Chile's most famous labels wouldn't exist. Instead, the results of Chile's earthquake vintage are now landing on store shelves here in the US. The best of the 2010s currently available—thus far, Sauvignon Blancs and Chardonnays primarily intended to be consumed young—are packed with the intensity and sunny lemoniness that's characteristic of many New World whites.

Clearly, it's a bit of a miracle that these wines exist at all. Chilean winemakers labored under extraordinarily difficult circumstances during the days after the earthquake, with major repairs and reconstruction of damaged facilities often taking place right alongside the destemming and crushing of grapes. Such work went on against a particularly nerve-racking backdrop: After the initial earthquake, there were weeks of steady aftershocks, rattling both buildings and nerves. Even if you don't adore Chilean wine, it's hard not to be awed by the heroics that went into the vintage.

Centuries of seismic activity have helped make the Chilean wine map a crazy quilt of terrains and microclimates. Yet all that variety is actually a strength, and the country's long winemaking tradition has allowed its producers to gain a nuanced understanding of the land they're working with (Chile has grown grapes for longer

than any other North or South American country). The country also has a surplus of the old vines that winemakers cherish—some still-producing vines are over 100 years old—and a pair of signature varieties in the red grapes Carmenère and the lesser-known País. True, Chile may be best known for big, strapping and affordable (if somewhat anonymous) reds from the Colchagua and Maipo valleys... But in recent years, enterprising producers have been planting vineyards in new, cooler-climate regions, as well as exploring different wine styles.

Last May, not too long after the earthquake, I rented a car and crisscrossed the length and breadth of Chile. I wanted to see how its winemakers were dealing with the quake's aftermath, but even more, I wanted to get a broader sense of the state of Chilean wine. The country was decidedly up and running—Chileans are definitely not slackers—and while flattened houses were everywhere, so were people out for afternoon strolls, carefully stepping around piles of rubble. And amid all this, Chilean winemakers were still working, bringing in the 2010 grapes, perfecting their craft. In my view, three of the winemakers I met represent much of the country's potential.

Andrés Sanchez, who runs Gillmore Winery & Vineyards in the Maule valley, is keen to change the perception of his home region, one long associated with quantity rather than quality. Gillmore got walloped by the earthquake, but Sanchez displayed a very Chilean acceptance of what rebuilding would involve. He's part of Chile's cheekily named vignadores del Carignan, a loose group of producers making wine from this spicy, southern French grape. "Its potential here is amazing," says Sanchez, who imagines a day when it could be his country's answer to Zinfandel. Maule valley wine varies wildly in quality. But Gillmore's reds showcase what these wines can be: earthy, food-friendly and distinctive. Gillmore's 2007 Hacedor de Mundos Old Vines Cabernet Franc, a medium-bodied red made with old-vine fruit, is delightfully balanced, redolent of raspberries and framed by a fresh acidity that makes it terrific with food.

An hour or so further south in the Maule valley, near the town of Cauquenes, I met with Louis Antoine-Luyt, owner and winemaker at a tiny winery named Clos Ouvert. Antoine-Luyt, a French émigré in his thirties, is another winemaker trying to rewrite the Maule's reputation, in his case by single-handedly bringing some new approaches to Chilean winemaking. Antoine-Luyt was inspired to make natural wine—wine made without any manipulation, filtration or added sulfites—by legendary Beaujolais producer Marcel Lapierre, and he is currently Chile's only significant winemaker following this rigorously anti-industrial approach...When the

quake hit...Antoine-Luyt lost significant amounts of his 2008 and 2009 wines. But the wines that survived are among Chile's most interesting. Clos Ouvert's 2008 Loncomilla Carmenère is meaty, packed with generous sour-cherry flavors and spiced with the tiniest hint of natural-wine funk. It's a unique expression of a Chilean red grape that, in my opinion, far too often disappoints.

Then there are the winemakers in Chile who are truly walking the edge. That is, the edge of the country—those regions that are right up against the windswept Pacific coast, or close to Chile's northern or southern borders, where cooler climates are yielding some of the country's most fascinating wines. Viña Casa Marín's María Luz Marín is a perfect example. In 2000, she founded the winery in the relatively undeveloped San Antonio valley, no more than a couple of miles from the Pacific. Today, she runs one of Chile's star wineries, one that demonstrates most vividly the promise of this narrow country's edges.



Casa Marín has won acclaim for its intense, minerally Sauvignon Blancs. The 2009 Cipreses Vineyard is all slate and grapefruit; the 2009 Laurel Vineyard is a touch sweeter, with passion-fruit flavors. Both wines are exemplary, but my favorite Chilean white is the Casa Marín Miramar Vineyard Riesling. The 2008 and 2009 are both thrilling amalgams of rock, lime and Riesling's classic petrol-tinged aromatics. Casa Marín also produces Pinot Noir and Syrah, the latter from a vineyard site so cold that it's a struggle to ripen the grapes in some years.

Next door to the San Antonio valley are the Casablanca and Leyda valleys, which produce many of the country's most interesting and reliable lower-priced Sauvignon Blancs. Also, promising white wines are now being made from far-flung vineyards in Chile's extreme north, in the Limarí and Elqui valleys. In the latter region, vineyards in the Andes thousands of feet above sea level are beginning to produce an austere, flinty style of Sauvignon Blanc...

Despite all of its old vines, Chile remains a young wine country that's still charting its possibilities. And don't mind the earthquakes—after all, most winemakers in Chile don't seem to.