



The

BIG CHILE

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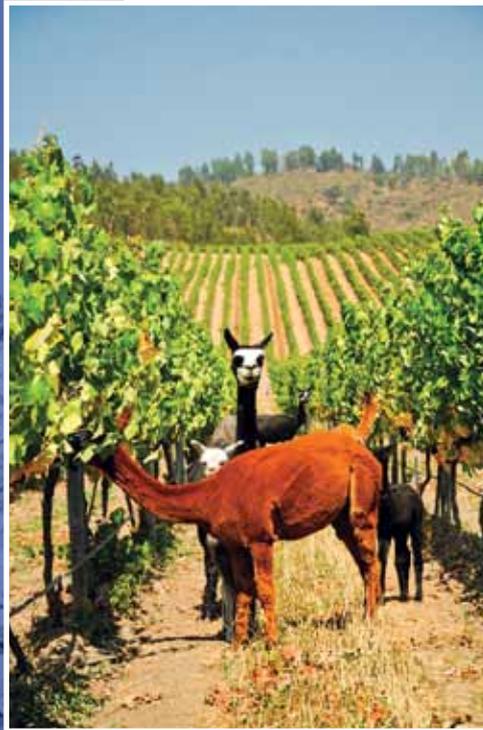
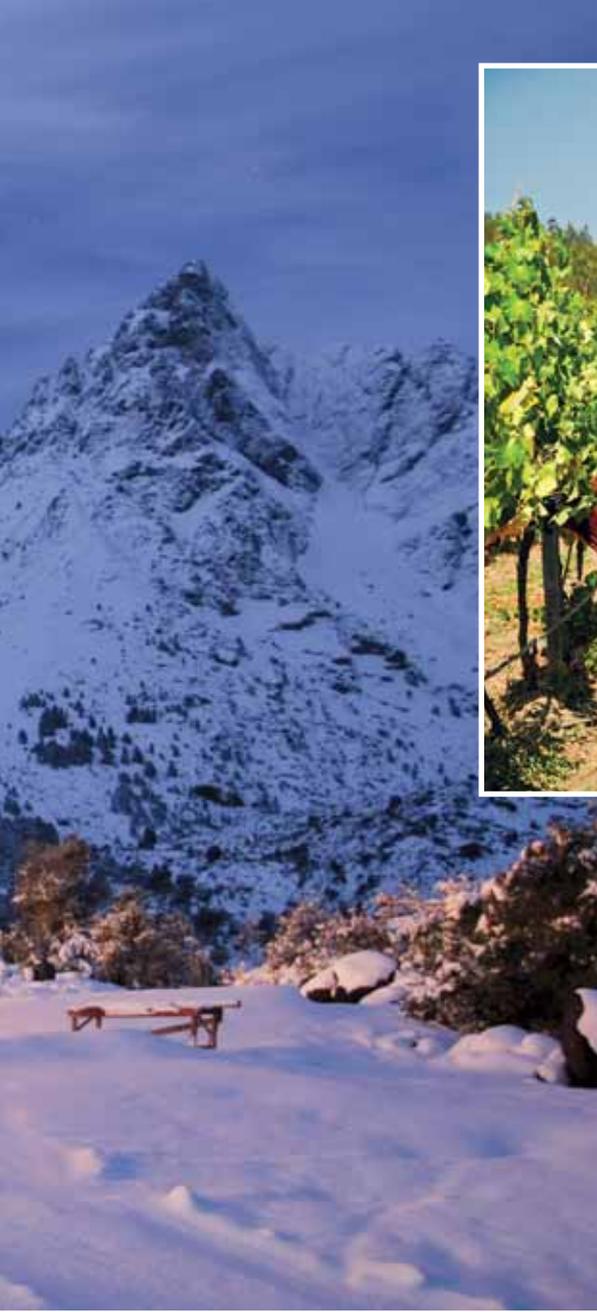
SOUTH AMERICA'S NARROWEST
COUNTRY OFFERS THE WINE-MINDED
TOURIST AN EXTRAORDINARILY
WIDE VARIETY OF THRILLING
EXPERIENCES.





THERE'S ONE WAY TO RILE UP A CHILEAN, it's to order a pisco sour—the country's signature cocktail—and ask to have it made with Peruvian pisco. Of course, if you happen to be in Peru, the same applies in reverse: Chile and Peru have been at war over the grape brandy since the invention of fermentation. Peruvians trace their pisco to the Incan Empire and generally believe Chile “stole” the spirit from them during the War of the Pacific, in the late 1800s. Chileans, meanwhile, believe their marketing power has given the rest of the world pisco, and therefore that it is essentially as a Chilean product. Either way, who cares? Chile has Carménère.

The average José doesn't know much about Carménère, a cousin of Cabernet originally from the Médoc region of Bordeaux and widely considered to be one of that famous wine region's original six varietals. When Phylloxera, the black plague of wine, nearly wiped grape juice off the European map in a devastating 1867 outbreak, Carménère was thought to have become extinct. But unbeknownst to Chileans, and everyone else, the grape was inadvertently preserved in Chile. Clandestinely, Carménère thrived right under the noses of oenophiles the world over. Chile had itself a signature varietal, but it wasn't until 1998 that the Chilean Department of Agriculture slapped the official stamp on Carménère, opening the floodgates for Chilean wines' methodical climb onto the world's most selective wine lists and starting a new tourism sector, that of wine tasting, within the world's narrowest country.



(from left) Puma Lodge in the Andean peaks; llamas grazing at Matetic Vineyard; on the vine at Viña VIK

You can begin your day dropping in on 11,000-foot powdered peaks, head down the mountain for a little wine tasting, and close your evening with a sundowner on the beach.

The catalyst? *Wine Spectator*, of course. In 2008, when the 2005 Casa Lapostolle Clos Apalta Colchagua Valley, a red blend, topped *Wine Spectator's* highly coveted Top 100 wines of the world list, it catapulted a respected but often overlooked New World wine region to a status shared by just five countries: Australia, France, Italy, Portugal, and the United States.

But what most folks don't know is that winemaking in Chile dates back to the 16th century, when Spanish conquistadors brought common grape vines (*Vitis vinifera*) with them to the new world. In the 19th century, the French planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Carménère. Until the late Nineties, the Chileans kept their wine for themselves—and that was just fine with everybody given that military dictatorships, high taxes, and stifling bureaucracy made doing business with the country a real headache. Then Carménère was

rediscovered, and that flipped the script.

Wine tasting in Chile these days is remarkable: wineries not only have bucked architectural tradition, forsaking French-style chateaus in favor of striking, modern structures, but also sit conveniently sandwiched between majestic, snow-capped Andes peaks and calm, cerulean Pacific seas, with only a few hours' distance in between. That means you can begin your day dropping in on 11,000-foot powdered peaks, head down the mountain for a little wine tasting, and close your evening with a sundowner on the beach as you kiss the light of day goodbye over the ocean. Where else can you do that? Almost nowhere.

At the new Puma Lodge (www.pumalodge.cl; 56 2 375 4738), reached by a ragged, winding extended mountain service road originally built by a hydroelectric corporation, you'll find a bastion of comfort and clever design tucked deep into remote Andean peaks. Arriving here from Machali, a small town in the 6th Region, about 15 miles away, is a revelation in itself, but that pales in comparison to soaring off in a Eurocopter AS 350 B3 chopper, courtesy of Heli ski provider Chilean Heliski, as the sun rises over misty Andean mountaintops. Within five minutes, you're on top of the Southern Hemisphere, powering through ungroomed powder with nothing more between you and God than the occasional waft of a cold, lung-quenching zephyr.

"Skiing down virgin mountain slopes in the mythical Andes of Central Chile is a very privileged ski experience that doesn't disappoint," says Chilean Heliski founder Mark Jones, world record holder in vertical endurance skiing. "These are some of the most magnificent peaks of any mountain area in the world and certainly in the Puma Lodge region. We have some world-class mountains in terms of scale, majesty, composition, and shape, and a unique texture and abundance of powder snow conditions. Truly fabulous." He ain't lying.

The road back to civilization from Puma is irritating, so travellers will probably be itching for a drink somewhere along the route. This is where it gets good: world-class Chilean wines are churned out in the Cachapoal, Maipo, San Antonio/Leyda, and Casablanca Valleys, all of which are more or less on the way from the mountains to the beach, depending on the itinerary. Some 84 wineries dot these valleys, perhaps none more ambitious or promising than Viña VIK (www.vik.cl; 56 2 248 2218).



Owned by a Norwegian, Alexander Vik, who is seemingly unfazed by the fact that his native country appears nowhere on the list of the world's top 25 wine-producing regions, Viña VIK occupies 10,000 acres on the north slope of Chile's Cachapoal Valley. Vik made his fortune during the Internet boom and is possessed by a single, burning desire: to produce nothing less than "the best wine in the world." To this end, he has employed Christian Vallejo, a Chilean winemaker who has produced vintages in five countries, and Gonzague de Lambert, a lifetime wine guy whose family has owned Château de Sales in Bordeaux's Pomerol region since the 17th century.

"It's a very big challenge, but not impossible," says Vallejo, one of the nicest and most humble winemakers you'll ever meet. "In France, I worked four vintages at Château Margaux, and two at Léoville Poyferré and Berliquet, and I sincerely think that our wine has the elegance and fineness of Margaux and Poyferre, the gentleness of Berliquet, the fashion-forwardness of Italy, the passion of Spain, and all the technology of the U.S.A. But in addition to that, it is the structure, body, round and soft tannins, full color, and very refined fresh and ripe fruit with the exceptional nose and mouthfeeling of Chile that makes our wine able to be considered one of the best wines in the world."

Vik's debut red (left) and vineyard in Chile's Cachapoal Valley

Vallejo is certainly working with some suitable terrain. On Vik's 10,600 acres in Millahue, they are blessed with 12 different valleys with 12 unique terroirs. Vik has planted 345 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carménère, Syrah, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot, with another 100 acres in the pipeline. The views over the various hills, valleys, and vineyards are impressive from the expansive open dining room of Viña VIK's striking charcoal-black lodge, which blends somewhat into the hillside in almost Explora-like fashion. A larger, more boutique lodge is currently at the blueprint stage, and the winery itself—a stealth, underground, sustainable temple of aspiration and eco-ethos—is currently under construction. For Viña VIK's 2009 vintage, therefore, Vallejo and his team used their neighbor's facilities at Viña Neyen in Apalta, only adding to the ridiculousness and lore.

If Vik is a driven aspirant, Matetic Vineyards (mateticvineyards.com; 56 2 595 2661) is a founding father. Situated in the Rosario Valley, a subdivision of the San Antonio Valley 75 miles southwest from Santiago, Matetic dates all the way back to 1999. Here, architect Lawrence Odjell (Norwegian, funnily enough) has designed a clean-lined structure of local *rauli* wood, stone, glass, and copper that partly penetrates the hillside. It

GOOD VIBRATIONS For these denizens of Chile, there's no better buzz than pairing music and wine.

IT'S HARDLY BREAKING news that a bottle of wine tastes better with a soundtrack, but a few notable winemakers/audiophiles in Chile have taken that pairing to the next, *next* level. Aurelio Montes, chairman and winemaker at Montes Wines in Curicó and Colchagua, has long given his wines some musical accompaniment during the maturing of his casks in his feng shui barrel room. "I think that Cabernet and Syrah achieve interesting improvements when exposed to music—the response of Syrah to *Carmina Burana* in my opinion is the best," Montes explains. "Rock and roll is too intense. It creates molecular

movements that do not help at all."

An altogether different concept is being spun by Kiwi transplant Grant Phelps, chief winemaker at Viña Casas Del Bosque (www.casasdelbosque.cl; 56 2 656 7300) in the Casablanca Valley for nearly a decade *and* a professional DJ. Phelps has carved a unique niche for his skills in Chile: pairing wine and song. "My hope is that the combination of a new musical experience, which impacts primarily on the sense of hearing, along with a new vinous experience, which obviously covers smell and taste, will have a kind of synergistic effect and

thus produce a whole new, hopefully out-of-body experience," explains Phelps, who pairs wines only with obscure vinyl.

"The concept is definitely a little abstract," Phelps continues. "But as long as I can explain why the combination works for me, people tend to understand the sometimes wacky logic involved. For me, one of my favorite pairings so far is Serge Gainsbourg's classic *Je T'aime...Moi Non Plus*' with our Sauvignon Blanc Reserva, or Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes' brilliant 'Don't Leave Me This Way' with our Syrah Gran Reserva." —KR



Barrels at Matetic; (below) La Casona, the vineyard's sumptuous retreat

Emiliana Organic Vineyards (www.emiliana.cl; 56 2 353 9130). It was here that 2003's Gê vintage marked the release of South America's first-ever certified biodynamic wine. It's a

more humble operation than Matetic, with a small brick bodega just off the main road to Valparaíso/Viña del Mar.

Say what you will about biodynamic viticulture, with its adherence to a moon calendar and talk of energies, zodiac signs, and voodoo viticulture, but a visit here will make you a believer. Most poignant, perhaps, is the liberal use of alpacas, guinea hens, goats, sheep, and *colloncas* (South Chilean tailless chickens that lay blue eggs) to rid its vineyards of unwanted pests. But Emiliana's wine does most of the talking: its Coyam 2009 vintage is a blend of 41 percent Syrah, 29 percent Carménère, 20 percent Merlot, seven percent Cabernet Sauvignon, two percent Mouvedre, and one percent Petit Verdot; its Gê 2007 vintage is a 90+ points blend of 61 percent Syrah, 21 percent Carménère, and 18 percent Cabernet Sauvignon. Both wines are a testament to the growing organic trend and are certified carbon neutral.

It's another hour northwest by car to the twin cities of Valparaíso/Viña del Mar, a Unesco-designated artistic enclave sitting on eight historic hill districts reached by an unusual system of funicular elevators. Viña del Mar is Chile's answer to Uruguay's beach playground of Punta del Este, and it's not hard to reach the sands of its popular Reñaca Beach by sunset. You could order a wine from one of the many atmospheric kiosks set up along the various divided sections of sand, but it might be a more appropriate time for a pisco sour, as it pairs better with the South American sunset. They won't have Peruvian pisco.

Back at Viña VIK, the moment of truth has arrived. A decanted bottle of the winery's debut red is on the table. It's the 2009 blend of 63 percent Carménère, 35 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, .3 percent Syrah, 1.5 percent Cabernet Franc, and .2 percent Merlot. It will not make its debut in the market until spring 2012, so for now only a privileged few have made its acquaintance. The wine sits. Breathing. Waiting. A young woman serves a hearty lunch of American-style breakfast potatoes and gorgeous Chilean-style prime rib.

The wine is poured. We discuss the label, a modern take with VIK boldly slapped across the bottle in a stick-figure Albertus MT font of dynamic red. They've been told it's too contemporary for the Russian market, which apparently equates classic black-and-white sketches of traditional French chateaus with quality, price, and lifestyles of the rich and famous. It doesn't matter—the entire vintage is sold out anyway (no Russians bought any). We discuss price. One hundred dollars—no table wine by most folks' standards, but still relatively modest in the grand scheme of the world's top wines.

We taste. And then discuss. The best wine in the world? Maybe not yet, but a fantastic first attempt, and one that that should definitely have the best wine in the world looking over its shoulder. **CA**



might fit right in around the hills and fjords of Norway, but it contrasts startlingly with the green vineyards of the Rosario Valley, and that's exactly what makes it gorgeous. The mostly transparent above-ground retaining wall creates a panoramic viewpoint to the valley below.

As Chile continues to position itself as a world leader in organic and biodynamic wine production, Matetic holds the trump card, producing the best catalog of organic wines that passed these lips in Chile. The organic EQ Syrah 2009, aged for 13 months in first-use French oak barrels, is a game changer, so intensely colored with deep red fruits that it appears nearly black. It's an elegant ride to vino salvation (and for under \$50 at that).

But amazing wines do not a destination winery make; ridiculously comfortable beds do. On Matetic's 27,000-acre property—complete with swans, Asian-leaning peace ponds, and riding trails—there is a stylish wine retreat called La Casona, a 100-year-old colonial manor house flanked by beautiful but oddly pot-bellied endangered Chilean palms. Rustic yet luxurious, it completes the Matetic trifecta: tour, taste, and pass out in comfort.

About 10 miles north of Matetic lies the pioneer of Chile's biodynamic industry,