

The Best New Wines from Chile

By Josh Reynolds

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One would be hard-pressed to name a country that is producing a wider range of serious wines in the under-\$20 category than Chile, especially over the last five years. The top Chilean producers—and their numbers are growing every vintage—are in the midst of an impressively steep learning curve, and prices in most instances lag far behind improvements in quality. That's especially good news now, when most wine lovers are being forced to watch their budgets—and, if they're smart, they're casting their buying nets in new directions. It should also be noted that as Chile's vines mature, the resulting wines are showing greater concentration and power, traits that were in short supply during the 1990s. As vineyards up and down Chile gain in age I have no doubt we'll be seeing more high-quality wines emerging at all price points.

Of particular interest to American consumers whose tastes run to a more restrained Old World style is the fact that most of Chile's premier growing regions are strongly influenced by the cold Humboldt Current, which originates at Cape Horn, at the southern tip of South America. This current flows northward along the length of Chile's western coast to Peru, and winds carry the cold air across all but the most inland of Chile's vineyards. Moreover, winds from the east travel down from the Andes mountains, providing a cooling influence and allowing for drawn-out growing seasons, usually without major heat spikes. Those extended seasons permit full grape maturity, usually without exaggerated sugar levels and with healthy natural acidity. Eurocentric wine lovers would be very pleasantly surprised by the balance and focus of a number of Chilean wines today, especially the white wines from the Leyda, San Antonio and Elqui Valleys. Also promising are many of the pinot noirs from the Bío Bío Valley, which lies 250 miles south of the better-known Maule and Maipo regions.

Chile's winegrowers have been particularly focused on their vineyards in recent years. They're paying particular attention to matching varieties and clonal selections to rootstock—and, especially, to soil types, site expositions and specific climatic situations. At Casa Silva, for example, trial wines are being made from what the winery calls "micro-terroirs" to better understand how the personalities of wines produced from parcels as small as a quarter of a hectare compare to adjacent sites that are planted on slightly different soils or that have a distinctly different exposure. At the enormous Santa Rita estate the entire home vineyard is monitored from the air by infrared imaging to determine vine health and to better determine the best sites for particular varieties. During my two-week visit to Chile's wine regions in January I was also struck by the vast number of pits that have been dug out of vineyards up and down the country to take soil samples and monitor vine health, a practice I rarely saw when I last visited just two years ago. While Chile has been a reliable producer of under-\$10 wines for some time, the most interesting activity right now is in the \$15 to \$20 category, where I found wines that can often compete with examples from Europe or the U.S. selling for twice those prices, or even more. Yes, there are still plenty of wines that are walloped by too much oak, but I found less of that type this year than in recent years. Another development that is both encouraging and troubling is the growing number of what the Chileans call "icon wines," their luxury bottlings. While it's nice to see that more and more winemakers are capable of making world-class wines when they are able to spare no expense, I wonder how much of their best fruit is being pulled out of the middle-range wines to produce what are ultimately vanity projects. Almost every producer in Chile, it seems, now has at least one wine that gets the full-bore low-yield, old vine, expensive oak treatment. Many of these wines are very good, even excellent, but at what cost to the other wines in the cellar—the ones that mortals can afford?

Recent vintages have been mostly kind to Chile, but I was less impressed with the 2008 sauvignon blancs than I was with the 2007s and 2006s. A number of producers pointed out that some late-season heat caused acid levels to drop precipitously in many sites and, based on my tastings, many of the wines were adjusted with added acid in the wineries. There are plenty of good, and some exceptional, 2008 sauvignon blancs, especially from the top names, but I didn't taste the sheer volume of good to very good examples that I usually expect. The 2007 vintage was strongly influenced by cooling La Niña conditions, which allowed for an even slower growing season than usual across Chile. Vine growth was retarded and yields were down by as much as a third in most regions. Rainfall was also lower than normal, which helped to concentrate flavors. The white wines from 2007 are proving to be impressively crisp, with healthy acidity levels and vibrant citrus fruit character. The best red wines from the warmer 2006 vintage, which was also drawn out, are looking good as well, typically offering impressive depth and fruit sweetness but without drying tannins. In most cases the 2006s should be drunk before the more structured 2005s, which are extremely promising as long-term cellar candidates by New World standards.

Elki

<p>2008 Elki Pedro Ximenez Elqui Valley (\$12) Pale yellow. Fresh, mineral-driven lemon and peach pit aromas are focused and vaguely salty. Brisk and tight, with racy citrus flavors and good cut. What this wine lacks in complexity it makes up for in vibrant, juicy freshness. Leaves a sweet nectarine note behind.</p>	<p>88</p>
<p>2008 Elki Sauvignon Blanc Elqui Valley (\$15) Light yellow. Sharply focused lime and grapefruit on the nose, along with notes of white pepper and anise. Fleeshy but energetic, with sweet pear and tangy citrus flavors underscored by dusty minerals. The herbal note repeats strongly on the spicy, impressively persistent finish. This wine's vibrancy and clarity are worthy of note.</p>	<p>90</p>
<p>2006 Elki Syrah Elqui Valley (\$15) Deep ruby. Fresh red berry and cherry aromas are complicated by dried flowers and smoky minerals. Cracked pepper and candied floral qualities come up with air and carry onto the palate, which features sweet black raspberry and blackcurrant flavors. The peppery note repeats on the finish, which is nicely focused and long. (Schneider Selections, New York, NY)</p>	<p>89</p>