

Chilean Syrah

With no official plantings in 1990, Syrah has gone on to become Chile's sixth most planted variety. Peter Richards MW thinks it could become its signature grape

SYRAH IS NOT the first grape variety that most wine drinkers would associate with Chile. The likes of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc resonate more – and understandably so. These are, after all, the four most widely planted varieties in the country.

And yet Syrah (or Shiraz) is definitely a variety to watch in Chile. Its plantings now stand at 6,887ha (hectares). Although this represents a measly 6% of the national vineyard, the total has been rising notably faster than most: up 200% in the decade since 2000 – compared with Cabernet (up 7%) and Merlot/Carmenère (up 15%).

It has gone from no official plantings whatsoever at the turn of the 1990s to become the fourth most widely planted red and the sixth ranked wine variety in the country.

And all this from an inauspicious start. Syrah's origins in Chile are not as clear as many claim. While it may have been present in Santiago nursery project Quinta Normal in the 19th century, its first commercial origins in the country are most commonly attributed to Alejandro Dussailant, a French émigré who arrived in 1874 and set up vineyards incorporating 'gross Syrah' in the Curicó region. These were then eradicated in the agrarian reforms of the 1970s.

Errázuriz is the modern name most associated with Syrah, having introduced the variety to its Aconcagua hillside Don Max site in 1992, grafting onto existing rootstocks. The first wine was the Errázuriz Syrah Reserva 1996. But this is not the whole story, as Fundación Chile, a now defunct state-backed project in Itata, reportedly brought Syrah clones to Chile in 1990, the first release being the Carpe Diem Syrah 1995.

Syrah, the return

Whatever the truth, Syrah's return to Chile was timely. The 1990s were a time of viticultural expansion and improvement. This era marked the advent of drip irrigation, hillside plantings, improved site selection and decent clonal selections. To put it simply, although Syrah is a relative newcomer to Chile, it hit the ground running.

It makes for intriguingly diverse styles of wine. Elquí is all about elegant florality, mid-weight and spicy savouriness; Limarí tends more to pure blueberry scents and engaging succulence. Coastal Casablanca and San Antonio wines are richly textured but enticingly scented, with aromas of violets, grilled meats, clove and black pepper. Maipo has a density and minty/leafy charm; Colchagua is ripe, gutsy and full bodied (as close as Chile gets to South Australian Shiraz). Maule is fresher but often more rustic.

Some commentators – me included – believe Syrah has the potential to become Chile's signature red. Not as sensitive as Pinot Noir, nor as four-square as Cabernet, its physiology is ideally suited to Chile's diverse terroirs featuring decomposed granites and red clays, beamed on by the sun at altitude but periodically refreshed by cooling breezes.

While Syrah can also make a flattering and highly complementary blending partner – its fleshy grace working particularly well with Cabernet – it will be as a standalone variety that it captures the headlines of the future. Because if there is one thing that is certain about Syrah in Chile, it is that it has much more still to give.

Peter Richards MW is the DWWA Regional Chair for Chile



Chilean Syrah: know your vintages

2011 Caught the tail end of a rare two-year La Niña. Dry and cool but a warmer end to the season gave elegant late-ripening reds, including Syrah.

2010 Dry, cool, long vintage. Some reds like Carmenere struggled to ripen but Syrah fared well in the best sites: floral, graceful styles are emerging.

2009 A wet winter and no spring frosts meant yields were 20%–30% up; wines are decent and ripe but not amazing. Easy, good, mid-term drinking.

2008 Cool season; wines are fresh and pleasant but less intense than 2007. The best wines are drinking very well now.

2007 An acclaimed vintage that gave dense, concentrated wines with an elegant structure. The best wines are still ageing gracefully.

2006 Unexceptional vintage. Needs drinking up if you haven't already.

2005 Low yields, ripe vintage. A naturally generous style. Drink up.

Chilean Syrah: the facts

(Source: SAG 2010 vineyard census)

Total Chilean vineyard area 116,831ha

Total Syrah vineyard area 6,887ha

Region IV (Elquí, Limarí, Choapa) 526ha

Region V (Aconcagua, Casablanca, San Antonio) 384ha

Metropolitan Region (Maipo) 1,053ha

Region VI (Cachapoal, Colchagua) 2,958ha

Region VII (Curicó, Maule) 1,873ha

Region VIII (Itata, Bío Bío) 93ha

The results

Despite the lack of Awards, this tasting was by no means a wash-out – judges could see great improvements, with cooler areas producing some ‘thrilling’ examples, writes Mark O’Halleron

Chile made its name with Cabernet Sauvignon, but unquestionably it's been Syrah that has been generating all the buzz in recent years. Is the hype justified?

Peter Richards MW certainly thinks so: ‘I’m a firm believer that Syrah has the potential to become Chile’s most rewarding and versatile grape variety. Cabernet remains by far the country’s most planted red and it doesn’t look like being overtaken any time soon. Plus, along with Merlot, it’s an easy sell. None of this makes it easy for Chile’s Syrah growers, but then, since when did an easy life lead to great achievements?’ Margaret Rand: ‘For the past two decades I have found Chile consistently disappointing but now, at last, with the advent of these cooler areas, I’m actually finding wines that are exciting, even thrilling.’

What are the causes of all this excitement?

The newest regions of Elqui and Limarí garnered much praise. One supporter was the converted Rand: ‘Hurrah for Elqui! It’s the tops, followed by Limarí. The vines, I guess, are on the young side, but young vines can produce remarkable flavours; really wild flavours, almost medicinal sometimes, with tremendous character. Syrah should be wild. If you want safe wine, there’s plenty of Merlot in the world.’ Annette Scarfe found the best ‘delightful; a very aromatic, northern Rhône-like style.’ Allan Cheesman agreed: ‘Limarí did show well.’

Any doubters?

Richards: ‘The best were ‘fluid, refreshing and succulent, with an intensely savoury, olive and violet character; but the worst were over-oaked and alcoholic. Some winemakers need to restrain themselves and aim for drinkability’. Beverley Blanning MW was also unconvinced: ‘It’s possibly invidious to say it considering the high overall quality of the wines, but I wonder if Elqui and Limarí will ever achieve greatness, even if they produce delicious wines for short-term drinking with excellent and distinctive fruit purity. Elqui feels like good potential material rather than really great wine, and Limarí was often marred by unbalanced alcohol.’

For those who still harbour doubts on Elqui and Limarí, what about the other regions – were there any gems?

Blanning was unequivocal in her praise for Casablanca and San Antonio, particularly the former: ‘They really had

The scores

98 wines tasted

0

★★★★★
Decanter Award

11

★★★★★
Highly recommended

61

★★★
Recommended

20

★★
Fair

0

★
Poor

6

Faulty

22

★ Good value
(under £10)

something to say and there are some great, serious wines from here that make you sit up; wine you feel you should have in your cellar. They had greater intensity and a better natural balance, and I wondered if the vines were older, with lower yields.’ On San Antonio, Richards also remarked on the wines’ naturally high acidity and potential, and while he griped about the worst Casablanca offerings as being ‘green and resinous’, the best sounded mouthwatering: ‘Full of wild herb and berry fruits, with bacon fat and grilled pepper complexity; always edgy in style’.

And what of the more established areas further inland?

Among the huge swathes of Colchagua wines that Scarfe found ‘less than impressive’, Juan Carlos Rincón found sanctuary in those from Apalta: ‘All the wines I tasted from Apalta were very good; these are top-quality wines’. Dirceu Vianna Jr MW was generally pleased with the balance in many Colchagua wines: ‘Extraction and acids were generally balanced and the alcohol was tamed, which is great, although depending on the price, I’m not sure all are worth it, certainly not if they’re over £10. Also – and I may get shot down for saying this as we’re always saying use less oak – I wonder whether winemakers should show more ambition and use a bit more oak. Consumers often like it and I wonder if it would add an extra dimension in some wines?’ Scarfe thought Maipo was ‘appealing for those who like the New World style, with ripe fruit, soft tannins and eucalyptus notes’. Sentiments echoed by Richards, who found ‘impressive, middle-of-the-road styles’. Blanning had some positives for the region as well: ‘Very variable quality but the best were delicious, reminiscent of the fine flavours of older Maipo Cabernet.’

Were there any stylistic or winemaking issues arising?

The main issue was alcohol, with few tasters complaining about heavy-handed use of oak. Rand, like Vianna Jr, was impressed: ‘Overoaking is much less prevalent. The mark of a great Chilean wine used to be enough oak to break your teeth on.’ Richards, however, felt it was still an issue: ‘The worst examples were where modest quality fruit had been dressed up in glossy oak.’

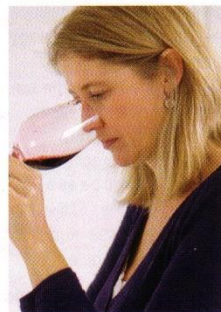
But overoaking got off lightly compared to the main negative from the tasting: faults – and lots of them

A flabbergasted Rincón pulled no punches: ‘We asked for



“Now at last I’m actually finding wines that are exciting, even thrilling”

Margaret Rand



“There are some great, serious wines from Casablanca and San Antonio”

Beverley Blanning MW

The tasters

Juan Carlos Rincón is a broadcast journalist, presenter and international wine judge

Dirceu Vianna Jr MW is South America's first male Master of Wine, and buying director for UK merchant Coe Vintners

Annette Scarfe consults for restaurants in London, Hong Kong and Singapore, including Princi, Busaba, Senkai and Myra's



Also tasting: Beverley Blanning MW is a regular *Decanter* contributor and author

Allan Cheesman is a wine consultant

Tom Forrest is the author of *The Complete Wine Course*, and the resident wine expert at Vinopolis

Margaret Rand is a wine writer, and general editor of *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*

Peter Richards MW is the *Decanter* World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Chile and author of *The Wines of Chile*

second bottles in almost 25% of the wines; it's not good – it's terrible.' Putting aside the odd corked or oxidised wine, reduction was the main offender, due to over-use of sulphur. 'There's no excuse,' exclaimed Scarfe. 'We normally talk about reduction with screwcaps, but most of the wines we tasted here are under cork. It's almost as if they've gone the other way and are worried about oxygen ingress with cork.' Vianna Jr agreed: 'Winemakers in Chile know that Syrah is a reductive variety so I think it's a lack of attention to detail.' Rand supported this opinion, but was determined to end on a positive note: 'They do need to get to grips with reduction, but at last Chile is taking chances and risking flavours that are quite extreme without feeling the need to throw oak and extra extraction at them. Chile is coming of age.'



“Maipo was appealing for those who like the New World style, with ripe fruit and eucalyptus”

Annette Scarfe



Highly recommended

16.5–18.49pts



Carmen, Gran Reserva, Apalta, Colchagua Valley 2009 17.63pts/20

£12.90 Slurp, Wineman

High-toned aromas of cream, raisin, cassis, dark chocolate, eucalyptus, sous-bois and vanilla. Aromatic palate with lifted redcurrant fruit, mineral and savoury notes and refreshing acidity. Layered and integrated – a lovely example of Apalta. **Drink:** 2012. **Alcohol:** 14%



Valdivieso, Single Vineyard, Aconcagua Valley 2010 17.17

N/A UK www.valdiviesovineyard.com

Sweet candied fruit, medicine cabinet, After Eight mint chocolates, eucalyptus and black fruit bouquet. Full, elegant and peppery with nice minerality. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** N/A



De Martino, Alto Los Toros, Elquí Valley 2008 17

£19.99–£23.99 Mail Life Wine Club, Smiling

Grape Co, Virgin Wines
Black fruit, oak, savoury, creamy, vanilla and floral perfume. Dense, juicy and very expressive. Has good weight and compelling density. Ambitious, aromatic palate with lots of oak and fresh acidity. **Elegant. Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14.5%



Falernia, Reserva, Elquí Valley 2008 17

£11.99 Great Western Wine

Restrained aromas of redcurrant, spice, herb, eucalyptus, flowers, meat and clove. Elegant style with concentrated red fruit, delicate tannins and refreshing acidity. Svelte, fluid, savoury and super-drinkable. Fabulous. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14%

ENTRY CRITERIA: to be eligible for this tasting, wines had to be latest release and labelled as single-varietal Syrah only (meaning that they have a minimum of 85% Syrah)

Decanter PANEL TASTING



Highly recommended (continued) 16.5–18.49pts



Emilian, Novas Winemaker's Selection, Casablanca Valley 2008 16.9

£13.99 Virgin Wines

Ripe dark fruit on the nose. Rich, intense wine with lovely spice, herb and red fruit flavours. Easy-going and open style with nice complexity. It is balanced, polished and characterful. **Drink:** 2012–2018. **Alc:** 14.5%



Lagar de Bezana, Limited Edition, Cachapoal Valley 2007 16.83

N/A UK www.lagardebezana.cl

Malt, dried fruit, cream, cocoa, raisin and Port bouquet. Black fruit, spice, medicinal coffee and woody flavours on the palate which is pleasant and slightly grainy. Good. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14%



Mayu, Reserva, Elqui Valley 2009 16.8
£9.99 (2008) Sainsbury's

Intense Syrah perfume of herbs, spice and red berry. Complex wine with nice tannic grip and peppery fruit. Ripe and juicy with good balance. Has some personality – really very good. **Drink:** 2012–2013. **Alc:** N/A

“At last Chile is taking chances and risking flavours that are quite extreme. Chile is coming of age”

Margaret Rand



Errázuriz, Max Reserva, Aconcagua Valley 2009 16.67

£11–£12 Hailsham Cellars, Leamington Wine Co, Wine Rack

Red and black berry, cherry, plum, prominent vanilla, raisin and chocolate bouquet. Nice minerality, refreshing acidity, high, ripe tannins and a long length. Integrated. Will improve. **Drink:** 2012. **Alc:** 14.5%



San Pedro, 1865 Limited Edition, Elqui Valley 2008 16.6

N/A UK www.vspt.cl

Aromas of eucalyptus, herb, solid oak, deep, dark fruit and herbaceous notes. Flavours mimic the nose, with good tannins and plenty of fruit and weight. Tarry, rich and a bit flashy. Very good. **Drink:** 2013–2018. **Alc:** 14.5%



San Pedro, Kankana del Elquí, Elqui Valley 2007 16.6

N/A UK www.vspt.cl

Ripe, dark berry, spice, oak, herb and mint bouquet. Rich, intense and crisp cassis fruit, lovely black olive and a light, peppery spice on the palate which is balanced and powerful. Sings. **Drink:** 2013–2016. **Alc:** 14%



Maycas del Limarí, Maycas del Limarí Reserva Especial, Limarí Valley 2008 16.5

£13.99 D Byrne & Co, Harrods, Majestic, SH Jones, Waitrose, William Morton

Ripe fruit, herbs and spice bouquet. Lovely balance and herbal, stony fruit. Complete and fresh wine with ripe berry and pepper spice notes, good acidity and a fine structure. Very good length. **Drink:** 2012–2017. **Alc:** N/A

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Peter Richards MW

3-STAR WINES Recommended 14.5–16.49pts

| WINE | SCORE | TASTING NOTE | ALC | DRINK | PRICE | STOCKISTS |
|--|-------|---|-------|-----------|---------------|--|
| Veranda, Oda, Apalta, Colchagua Valley 2009 | 16.25 | Earth, cassis, blackberry, cherry, stone and violet perfume. Rich, succulent, easy-going and full bodied with good balance, integrated oak and vibrant acidity. | 14.5% | 2012 | N/A UK | www.dosandeswines.com |
| Lapostolle, Cuvée Alexandre, Las Kuras Vineyard, Cachapoal Valley 2009 | 16.17 | Aromas of blackcurrant, damson, grilled herb, white pepper and wood. Complex, powerful and heartwarming with firm, grainy tannins. Needs cellaring. | 14.5% | 2013 | £19.99 | Berkmann Wine Cellars, Majestic |
| Matetic Vineyards, Matetic, San Antonio Valley 2008 | 16 | Dark fruit, spice and pepper bouquet. Well made. Rich, oaky, juicy and balanced palate with dark berry fruit, herbs, minerality and peppery spice. | 14% | 2012–2018 | £36.99–£37.99 | AG Wines, Armit |
| Tabali, Reserva Especial, Limarí Valley 2009 | 16 | Blackcurrant, marmalade, creamy oak and floral perfume. Spicy red and black fruit, coffee, toast and chocolate fruit with soft acidity, good balance and potential. | N/A | 2012 | £11.99 | Noel Young, Reserve Wines |
| Loma Larga, Casablanca Valley 2007 | 15.9 | Aromas of spice and confected blackcurrant. The palate offers flavours which are very characteristic of the garrigue. Terrific, but could do with more density. | 14.5% | 2012–2018 | £16.67 | Justerini & Brooks |