

a **spice** odyssey

With its powerful flavours and love of chilli, Indian food is about the hardest to match with food. But could Carmenère be your 'one size fits all' solution? **Chris Losh** joins a team of tasters to find out



Every country likes to have a point of difference or at least a key marketing message. So, think Zinfandel in the US, Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, and Aussie Shiraz. Chile's equivalent is Carmenère, but the problem is, as sommelier after sommelier pointed out to the Chileans during *Imbibe's* visit to the country last year, no one really seems to know what to do with it.

But as the group sat around shaking their heads in a 'don't ask me' kind of way, Michael Cox, head of Wines of Chile in the UK, leapt to the rescue: 'I think Carmenère is brilliant with curry,' he said.

It's nothing if not a bold claim. After all, the food and wine matching graveyard is littered with bottles that simply couldn't compete with the spices in Indian food. But, always up for a challenge on *Imbibe*, we decided to take this potentially ruinous assertion and run with it.

Our starting point for this tasting was not just 'Can Carmenère work with a curry', which would be hard enough, but 'can it work with curry in general'.

Since Carmenère comes in a pretty wide variety of styles, from light, jammy and red fruited to dark, heavy and spicy, we asked the guys at Wines of Chile to call in ten Carmenères that they felt covered the full gamut of flavours. That way we would be able to find out whether one style of Carmenère was more curry-friendly than any of the other styles.

Next, we needed a small panel of specialist tasters; people who were used to dealing with spice and heat in their food-matching. Vivek Singh kindly agreed to cook us a couple of basic curry dishes at The Cinnamon Club – broadly of the kind that are served in restaurants everywhere. It was, admittedly, a bit like asking Michelangelo to paint your kitchen, but we needed food that was representative, rather than unique.

THE TASTING

The ten wines were tasted blind, and it quickly emerged that there were two main styles. Three wines were in the lighter, juicier, more red-fruited area, and four were darker and spicier, a couple of them having a bit more oak.

Sadly, there was also a third, rather more depressing group that could be labelled 'faulty'. Three of the wines were reductive, with an unattractive farmyard-and-soap character that, coupled with sour

tannins, meant that these samples didn't make it as far as the food matching.

Since 30% of the samples suffered from this problem, we can only conclude that reduction is something of a particular hazard for Carmenère, and something that the Chileans perhaps need to work on a bit harder.

TIKKA TEST

Vivek's first dish was a chicken tikka: chicken wings and legs



the panel

'I want a balance between sweetness and freshness, herbaceousness and structure. If it's over-ripe, the danger is that you end up with jammy characters. Freshness is the key.' **Laurent Chaniac, The Cinnamon Club.**



'Carmenère has really lovely aromatics. It's a grape that can succeed as a totally single-varietal wine, which is unusual. It doesn't have a hole on the mid-palate, and can work on its own and with food. It's best when it shows a little bit of tannin, enough to bring it into focus.' **Christine Parkinson, Hakkasan.**



'I like the slightly lighter wines with that smoky character. The best producers can capture a unique aromatic profile – smoky, tarry but also floral and violet. For me, that makes it interesting. It has a softness and lushness that should work with food.' **Nigel Lister, ex-Asia de Cuba.**



'I was surprised in Chile last year by the multitude of expressions that could be obtained with this grape. For me, the best managed to have sweetness of fruit and a savoury mid-palate, but most importantly of all they had that slight green pepper tang to them. I hope they never lose that in the interests of over-ripeness.' **Chris Losh, editor, Imbibe.**



marinated in garlic, ginger, yoghurt and chilli then cooked in a tandoor. It was aromatic, spicy and hot but with no accompanying sauce. If our panel were surprised at having to match not just wine with it, but red wine, they kept a tactful silence.

And just as well, because the results were surprising.

The lighter wines generally had enough freshness to deal with the heat, just lacking the weight to carry right through with the food on the palate. In fact, the flavours were generally surprisingly well-matched.

'I like the smoky, leafy

character – that works,' said Laurent. 'Because there isn't enough fruit, the tannin becomes too noticeable but the flavours are harmonious.'

Key to the success was the

Key to the success was the herbal character that is innate to Carmenère

The flight of heavier wines was even more positively reviewed. The four wines were all popular, with their richness

and intensity counting very definitely in their favour.

'As a general rule, with hot food you need to make sure that the fruit is not bashed away,' said Laurent. 'You need round tannins and not too much oak. Sweeter fruit works best, but it's hard to find wines that are fruit driven but have enough freshness.'

Again, Carmenère's unusual flavour profile worked well here, with the slight smokiness in the wine

herbal character that is so innate to Carmenère: it gave the wines a mid-palate lift that helped to carry them along even though, strictly speaking, they were too light, and it chimed well with all the spices in the food.

'In the same way that you can imagine having grilled pepper with the dish, you can see why this wine works so well,' said Nigel.

Christine, meanwhile,

CONCLUSIONS

● Look at Carmenère's flavour profile on paper and you might expect it to work with curry. And it's good to see that the combination of sweet fruit, savoury pepper, smoke and tar, plus aromatic leafy lift, translates into a good match in practice, as well.
● But it's not just about the flavours. The structure is absolutely key too. Other grapes, such as Cabernet Franc also have the vegetal character, but unlike CF, Carmenère backs up its aromatic attack with a good, solid core of sweet and savoury flavours. Significantly, too, the tannins are usually subdued: enough to carry the wine, but not so much as to unduly exaggerate any heat in the food.

● So while Cabernet Franc, for instance, might work aromatically with curry, it lacks the generosity of weight and softness of structure. 'Spices are two things,' said Christine. 'There's heat and spice. Rogan Josh, for instance, is not hot, but it is spicy. Carmenère works because it goes with both elements. Plus it often blossoms with the aromatic elements. That's what's so unique with Carmenère.'

● In other words, an all-round triumph. It wasn't simply that our panel found a wine to match each dish perfectly, but that none of the wines were actively bad, or, indeed, were ever anything below 'perfectly acceptable'. It's quite an achievement for such difficult food – and for two such different dishes.

● All of which means that we can say with a certain amount of confidence that Michael Cox was right: the best wine match for curry is, indeed, Carmenère. It should be your starting point every time.

.....
Many thanks to Laurent Chaniac, Vivek Singh and the team at the Cinnamon Club for hosting the tasting so efficiently and providing such wonderful food.



CARMENERE: THE FACTS

- Carmenère's original home was Bordeaux, where it is all but extinct. It was brought to Chile in the 1850s.
- Although the vine leaves have distinctive red tips, for years the Chileans thought that the grape was Merlot.
- It's a temperamental grape to grow, particularly susceptible to coulure and millerandage.
- Carmenère's biggest challenge, though, is the lateness of its ripening. Pick too early and it is decidedly vegetal.
- But get it right and it is softly structured and deeply, spicily flavoured: cedar, tobacco, cassis.
- In Chile's fabulous climate, there is a feeling that the grape has found its natural homeland.

the slight smokiness of the wine matches brilliantly with the tandoor notes

matching brilliantly with the tandoor notes on the chicken, and the wines inherently having sufficient weight to carry through the food. In fact, though there was fruit sweetness, it was the more savoury elements of the wine – cocoa and minerality – that made this such a success.

There were no bad matches in either flight, but the most popular wine, the Echeverria, was the top match because it had perhaps the most definitely Carmenère-like characteristics: cheerful fruit, soft tannins and a lick of green pepper. All of which augurs well for the grape with this kind of food.

LAMB COURSE

The main course was a restaurant staple across the land: lamb with yoghurt, tomato and onion sauce. The dish was sweet, spicy and fairly rich, but with no great heat.

The lighter wines matched

pretty well. If they were slightly overwhelmed by the richness of the lamb, there was, again an affinity with the flavours. The Cefiro was the best match. Though a touch too light, it had reasonable weight and the herbs and spices of the wine came through to add an attractive layer to the meat.

In the heavier wines, the Estampa and the Montes Purple Angel were both perhaps a little sweet and rich (though again, eminently acceptable) but Chocolan and (again) the Echeverria really sang. The leafy, green notes of the wine acted almost like sprinkling coriander leaves on the dish, making a really attractive counterpoint.

'The wines are coming out with a smoky, tarry note that is a beautiful match with the food,' said Christine. 'I gave the Echeverria ten out of ten. I really can't think of any other wine that would go better with this dish.'



IN A NUTSHELL

'Carmenère is not a blank canvas with the food: it adds to it. It's that hearty spiciness, and that wonderful herbal note that means it sits so well with this kind of food.' **Nigel Lister**

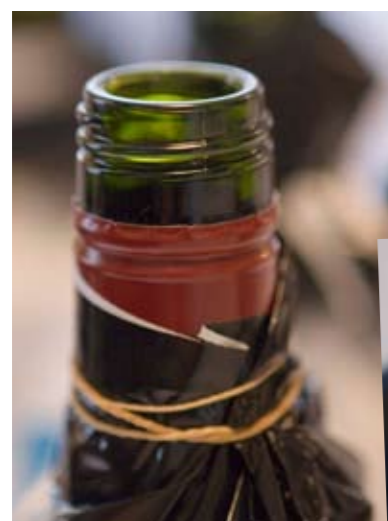
'As long as they don't over-oak, these work. They can go with sweet elements like lamb, though the wines with herbaceous flavours are the best. They work with the smoky elements in the food, too.' **Laurent Chaniac**

'On this evidence, Carmenère is ideal curry wine – mainly because of that ideal vegetal character (and I mean that in the best senses of the word). Those capsicum and bouquet garni flavours meant that it really sang with the food we tried today.'

Christine Parkinson

'This was a revelation. I don't think I've ever tried a tasting where so many of the wines have worked to a greater or lesser degree. It wouldn't have been the case for any other varietal or region. Carmenère really should be your default wine for curry!'

Chris Losh



WINES TASTED:

Casa Silva Los Lingues Gran Reserva Carmenère 2007.
£7.25, Jackson Nugent, 020 8947 9722.

Viña Casablanca Cefiro Carmenère 2008.
£4.90, Source Wines, 01672 519 390.

Errazuriz Estate Carmenère 2008.
£5.08, Matthew Clark, 0870 600 0640.

Estampa Gold Carmenère 2004.
£7.60, McKinley Vintners, 020 7928 7300.

Montes Purple Angel 2006.
£17.50, Montes UK/PLB, 01342 318 282.

Chocolan Selección Carmenère 2008.
£6, Liberty Wines, 020 7720 5350.

Echeverria Carmenère 2007.
£5.81, Hallgarten Druitt, 01582 722 538

