A Chilean MYSTERY SOLVED

By Tony Aspler

The year was 1993. Claude Vala knew something was wrong in the vineyards of Chile. The oenologist could see a large expanse of Merlot from his office; or so he thought.

Over the years Vala had watched the vines from bud burst to harvest and noted some performed very differently than others. He had walked the vineyards, studied their leaves and growth patterns. He saw the young shoots of some vines were reddish, their leaves had five holes (created by overlapping points that formed a 'ghost' face), which were most significant at the stem. They were not as deep a green or as brittle to the touch as the leaves of neighbouring vines and their backsides were not as hairy. The grapes produced ripened two or three weeks later and, in April, their leaves turned a crimson colour — as brilliant a red as maple leaves. That should have been the first clue. The second should have been the wine produced from these errant vines. It did not even taste like Merlot.

For generations Chilean farmers had explained away these differences in Merlot vineyards by suggesting the original plant material imported from France in the mid-19th century had mutated in Chilean soil. They had become Chilean Merlot. But Vala was not satisfied with this explanation, so he contacted an ampelography colleague, Jean-Michel Boursiquot, at the University of Montpellier in Languedoc-Roussillon, France, who is the world's foremost authority on French grapevine varieties.

In 1994, Boursiquot flew to Chile and walked the vineyards with Vala. The Frenchman immediately recognized what Vala had long suspected — the vine that turned red in the fall was not Merlot. Three years later after the leaves, wood, pits, berries and roots had been subjected to DNA 'fingerprinting,' Boursiquot's findings were proven scientifically. The vine that looked and behaved so differently was, in fact, a rare Bordeaux variety called Carmenère, which was also known as Grande Vidure.

Boursiquot told Vala the French word for crimson, the colour the leaves turned in fall, was 'carmin.' In 1998, Chile's Department of Agriculture officially sanctioned Carmenère as a variety in its own right — one that would become the country's signature wine. The grape that would not behave like Merlot became, in a few short years, a national treasure.

Rodrigo Alvarado, the general manager of ChileVid (now part of Wines of Chile), said at the time, "To discover Carmenère in Chile was a gift of heaven. And we have it and the rest of the world doesn't."

But what exactly is Carmenère and why did it take nearly 150 years to come into its own?

The answer goes back many centuries. The city now known as Bordeaux was founded around 300 BC by a Celtic tribe from northern France, called Bituriges Vivisques. They settled on the left bank of the Gironde and called their community Burdigala, a name that survived several centuries even after the city was swallowed up by the Roman Empire. When the emperor granted the inhabitants the right to plant vines they created a varietal, which they named Biturica after their tribal name. The earliest recorded mention of this grape is by Pliny the Elder in the first century AD. Over the years the name Biturica became corrupted to Bidure and eventually to Vidure. In Bordeaux in the 18th century, Cabernet Sauvignon was known as Petite Vidure and Carmenère as Grande Vidure, which suggests a family resemblance between the two grapes. In fact, the first Carmenère to be sold in retail stores in Ontario was labelled Viña Carmen Grande Vidure 1996.

Originally prized in Bordeaux for its depth of colour, Carmenère is a difficult grape to ripen in cool, damp climates. It proved to be the hardest of all the Bordeaux varieties to mature properly. Even in a warm growing region like Chile, it won't be fully ripe if harvested at the same time as Merlot. This explains why some of the Chilean Merlots first exported to Canada had a green pepper flavour, similar to under-ripe Cabernet Franc. The grape also has an unfortunate predisposition to 'shatter' — what the French call 'coulure.' If there is rainy or cold weather during the flowering in spring, the lack of sugar content in the vines will force the flowers to stay closed and prevent pollination. Grapes can't develop and bunches may be irregular and more sensitive to disease. Also, yields will be lower. Merlot, ironically, is also very prone to 'coulure.'

For these reasons, Carmenère fell out of favour with Bordeaux growers. And when phylloxera (sap-sucking insects that feed on the roots and leaves of grapevines) devastated the vines of Europe in the latter half of the 19th century, it was not replanted. Today, there is only 10 hectares of this variety in France. But Chile received its plant material from Bordeaux in the 1850s, before phylloxera struck. The cuttings of Bordeaux varieties were imported by wealthy landowners who hired French winemakers to plant their vineyards and make wine (history's first instance of 'flying winemakers'). Carmenère arrived along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec and Petit Verdot and was planted as Merlot. And since Chile is phylloxera-free (protected as it is from the arrival of the phylloxera louse by the arid Atacama Desert to the North, the ice-bound fiords of the Antarctic to the south, the Andes range that runs like a spine to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west), the Central Valley became the nursery for the 'lost grape of Bordeaux.'

There is much debate today among Chile's winemakers as to how best to employ their 'native' grape to full advantage. Many oenologists believe the grape performs best when it is part of a blend (as it was of yore in Bordeaux), so Carmenère is found in the most costly Chilean wines, such as Clos Aplata, Altair, Montes Cabernet Carmenère Limited Selection, Casa Silva Quinta Generacion Red and Casa Silva Syrah Carmenère Rosé. And even if the wine is labelled as a straight Carmenère, consumers will find up to 10 per cent of Cabernet Sauvignon or Syrah in it for structure.

Also, there is no definitive spelling of the grape in terms of accents, even in pronunciation. Some producers, like Eduardo Chadwick of Errazuriz, pronounce the name as if there is an acute accent on the final 'e.' But regardless of how it is spelled or pronounced, Chile has a winning wine in this grape that came in out of the cold.

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CARMENÈRE UNCORKED

Chile is not the only country that produces Carmenère. There are plantings of this grape in Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy, and small acreages in California (Guenoc and Langtry Estates in Lake County has produced a varietal wine) and in Washington state (Reininger Winery). Canada's first Carmenère — and only so far — was produced by Black Hills Estate Winery in British Columbia. In 2005, Black Hills made 75 cases of the wine from three-year-old vines. Two other B.C. wineries, Sumac Ridge and Twisted Tree, have since planted the variety.