

A man wearing a red plaid shirt and a straw hat is carrying a large red bucket filled with blueberries on his head. He is looking down at the bucket. The background is a blurred green landscape.

CHILL OUT

ROD PHILLIPS
DISCOVERS
CHILE'S COOL
CLIMATE REGIONS.

IN THE LAST FIVE OR 10 YEARS, CHILE HAS MADE A name for itself as a producer of inexpensive wines that capture the full flavours and style that are the essence of the New World. Although they've never quite reached the sales heights that Australia did, and that Argentine Malbecs seem headed for, Chile's wineries have taken a good share of international markets, especially with Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère.

Now, like other wine countries and regions that gained a reputation for entry-level wines for mass consumption, Chile is trying to promote the variety of its offerings. There's a stress on regionality, as many wineries want their wines associated with specific regions, rather than being thought of as generically "Chilean." They want to show that their higher quality wines are world-class, and therefore worth paying more for. And they want to show the diversity of the varieties in the country's vineyards and the wine styles they make.

Of the many facets of Chile's wine industry that are not widely enough known, one is that the country has a number of cool climate regions. If "cool climate" isn't what comes immediately to mind when you think of Chile, it's because most of its wine regions are warm. Most wine grapes are grown in the appellations of the Central Valley, a long valley that runs north-south between the Andes and a range of mountains on the Pacific Coast. For the most part, the coastal range protects Chile from the cold Pacific Ocean — cold because of the Humboldt Current that runs north from the Antarctic, up along South America's west coast, until it swings out into the ocean about halfway along Peru.

You can clearly see the effects of the Humboldt Current when you visit the beach at Viña del Mar, about an hour's drive from Santiago, Chile's capital city. In the middle of summer, with temperatures in the mid-thirties, the beaches at Viña del Mar are crowded with people tanning and playing

games. But you'll seldom see anyone in the water.

If you want to feel the Humboldt Current (without braving the numbing water) you can stand in one of the higher vineyards in the foothills of the Andes in the early afternoon. There, you feel the chilly winds that blow in from the Pacific and cool the vines during the hottest parts of the day. These same winds are critical for creating cool climate conditions for Chile's vineyards, and they are the basis for several newly developed regions that are producing wines acclaimed for their structure and freshness.

The oldest of these regions, Casablanca Valley, is not very old at all, as the vines that began to put the region on the map were planted by Pablo Morandé in the early 1990s. His winery, Viña Morandé, is still one of the stand-outs in the area. What distinguishes Casablanca (named for a town in the valley) is that a break in the coastal range allows for far more ocean influence than in the more sheltered Central Valley. Morning fogs are common, and satellite photos clearly show Chile clear of fog except for the clearly defined trident shape of the Casablanca Valley.

The fog cools the grapes as the sun rises and, after it blows off, cooling breezes come in from early afternoon and exercise their influence across the valley floor. There are quite significant variations within this small region itself, particularly between the slopes, which are better drained, and the lower parts, when there is higher vigour in the vines. But the condi-



Viña Matetic estate, San Antonio Valley



Preparing for harvest



tions are right throughout the region for the development of concentrated flavours and bright acidity, the hallmarks of Casablanca wines.

Two varieties in particular, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir, are making their mark here, and alongside their common features, they show a range of styles. At Casa del Bosque, which produced its first wines in 1998, New Zealand winemaker Grant Phelps says, “Casa has its own style.” He has made Sauvignon Blanc in eight countries, and the top Sauvignon he makes in Casablanca is rich and pungent in flavour with a full and textured mouthfeel. Compare it to the much more zesty offering, with spicy and tangy flavours, in the EQ Coastal Sauvignon Blanc from Viña Matetic. These are both lovely wines, definitely cool climate, but clearly divergent in style.

So it is with the Pinot Noirs from Casablanca Valley. The common characteristics are pure flavours, refreshing acidity and supple tannins, and the producers are careful to use oak judiciously so as not to interfere with the fruit. It’s a style that still allows for individual expression, from Loma Larga’s big Pinot with intense flavours to the more elegant Veramonte Ritual Pinot Noir, which is altogether lighter on its feet.

To the south of Casablanca Valley, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir are also the strong suits in San Antonio Valley region, with its sub-appellation Leyda Valley. Here the vines creep even closer to the ocean, as close as four kilometres to its cooling influence. Key wineries here include Casa Marin — whose 2009 Sauvignon Blanc shows the rich acidity the climatic conditions foster, but at no loss to the fruit — Garcés Silva (which includes the Amayna label), Matetic and Viña Leyda.

These cool climate regions — Casablanca and San Antonio/Leyda — lie within Chile’s main viticultural region, and they’re easily accessible from Santiago. Much farther to the north, however, lie two up-and-coming regions, the Elqui and Limarí valleys. Both are distinctive, in that they run east-west, rather than north-south, and both are appellations to watch for.

The Elqui Valley is the more remote of the two and is still

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a small producing region, with only 500 hectares of vines and two wineries. If you fly in (by private plane or charter, as there’s no commercial air service) the valley floor shows as a bright green strip lying at the bottom of steep, grey, barren mountainsides. The valley lies on the southern edge of the Atacama Desert, and gets only three to nine days of rain each year. This is an old fruit and grape-growing region and the heart of Chile’s production of pisco — a grape-based distilled alcohol mainly used for the pisco sours (essentially pisco, lime juice and sugar) that precede many a meal in Chile. The skies over the Elqui Valley are brilliantly clear by day and night — the area is famous for star-gazing and there are two observatories — conditions that foster the development of fruit and acidity.

Falernia, one of the two producing wineries in the valley, cultivates vines on the bed of a former river, where the big, round stones (reminiscent of Châteauneuf-du-Pape) capture the day’s heat and radiate it during much of the evening. Falernia grows a wide range of varieties, the most surprising being Pedro Ximénez (spelled Pedro Jimenez here). This variety is best known for making black, viscous, sweet sherry, but in Elqui Valley Falernia uses the variety to make just the opposite, a light, crisp white. Like all the other whites (which include Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Chardonnay) and the reds (Syrah, Carménère, Merlot, Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon), it’s marked by freshness of flavour and texture. The same goes for the wines of Mayu, an independent part of the Falernia winery.



French oak barrel, Viña Matetic



Morning fog has a cooling influence on grapes

The Syrahs are especially worth looking for here (and this is true of Chile as a whole). Although Carmenère became Chile's signature grape after it was rediscovered there in 1994, it's a tough variety because it needs such a long growing season in order to ripen fully. Syrah, on the other hand, does well in many conditions, and cool-climate Syrahs are some of the country's best reds. They show classic Syrah character, with good complexity and structure, tanginess in the texture, and are shot through with lively, clean acidity.

Further south of Elqui is the Limarí Valley, rather better established and with four times Elqui's area of vines and operating wineries. This is a broad, flat, semi-arid valley that grape vines share with citrus and avocado orchards and olive groves. Although this was one of the first regions planted by Spanish missionaries in the middle of the 16th century, it's a relatively new appellation; the Tamaya winery was the first to label its wines Limarí Valley, and its first vineyards were planted as recently as 1997. There are now eight wineries in the valley, including key players like Maycas del Limarí and Tabalí.

The influence of the Pacific Ocean is paramount here. The fog (called Camanchaca) generated by the Humboldt Current rolls in during the morning and hangs around, cooling the vines, until about noon. But the winds from the ocean are constant (as you can tell from any of the few hills on the valley floor), and the relentlessly blue skies deliver pure sunlight all afternoon. There's a wide range of red and white grape varieties on offer and the harvest is correspondingly long. At Tamaya, it lasts from mid-February (when Sauvignon Blanc is picked) to early June (the Carmenère). They can afford to wait for the Carmenère to reach maturity, because there is no risk of rain in the fall. Maycas del Limarí has almost as long a season, harvesting its last variety, Syrah, at the end of May.

Wines from Limarí Valley, says José Pablo Martín, winemaker at Tamaya, show high acidity and minerality. He describes them as "vertical," because of this structure, rather than the "horizontal" that comes from wines that have "fullness in the mouth." Here again, the whites and reds

show a clean and refreshing style, far from the high-fruit and low-acid style that's characteristic of many entry-level wines from Chile and the rest of the new world. Tamaya also makes a late-harvest dessert wine, called Sweet Goat, from Muscat of Alexandria vines that were originally used for making pisco. But only a small parcel is used for the sweet wine, as pisco is still part of Tamaya's production.

These regions are not the only sites providing cool conditions for viticulture in Chile. The country is riddled with microclimates, and it's only recently that they've started to be explored and exploited systematically. Vineyards are being planted in sites that were unimaginable for viticulture just five years ago. What this means is that Chile is starting to realize the promise of its diversity in growing conditions, grape varieties and winemakers' skills. We can no longer count on wines from Chile conforming to one or two predictable styles, and that's a measure of a fast-maturing wine region. ☰

Tourism

THE CASABLANCA AND SAN ANTONIO/LEYDA VALLEYS ARE easily accessible from Santiago by road (about one hour's drive) and close to the vacation areas of Viña del Mar. Increasingly, wineries in these regions are open to tourists.

The Elqui and Limarí Valleys are more distant, but not difficult to reach. It's a four-hour drive or you can fly LAN, Chile's national airline, which has flights from Santiago to La Serena, about an hour's drive from Limarí Valley. The valley is not only worth visiting for the wineries, but for archeological sites, such as ancient pictographs.

The Elqui Valley is another two hours' drive north, and is dotted with villages, pisco distilleries and artisans' workshops. A must-do there is a night at Elqui Domos, an 'astro lodge' where you stay in canvas geodesic domes and can sleep under the stars, because the roof above the bed folds back. Visit www.elquidomos.cl.