

Grape escape

A tour of Chile's wine regions is an experience to savor

By Kim Foley MacKinnon



Biking through expansive vineyards with the Andes Mountains as a backdrop is one of the best ways to experience Chile.

There may be better ways to explore Chile than to tour through its wine regions, sampling wine where it's made, biking or horseback riding through gorgeous vineyards with the Andes as a backdrop, but none comes immediately to mind.

This South American country, a long, narrow strip of land sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes Mountains, is known for its inexpensive and delicious wines, but last year's 8.8-magnitude earthquake threatened the industry. Millions of gallons of wine and equipment were

lost in the destruction. Almost immediately, though, when the debris settled, the wine industry began to rebuild and production is almost back to normal.

A visitor can't go wrong planning an itinerary around visiting some of the wine regions. And while you don't need to be any sort of expert to enjoy yourself, one word you'll come to find familiar is Carmenere. This is a French varietal of grape that was thought lost to the ages until a French scientist discovered that what Chilean growers thought were Merlot grapes were actually Carmenere. It is now a unique Chilean grape, having survived here while going extinct elsewhere.

South of Santiago is the so-called Central Valley, the heart of the wine country. Grapes are picked between late February and early May, so that is a perfect time to see wineries in action crushing grapes and bottling wine – and to enjoy harvest festivals. Still, you don't have to be locked into that timeframe: Most wineries offer tours and tastings year-round.

One of the most visited regions is the Colchagua Valley, where wineries worked together to form the "Ruta del Vino," or Wine Route, making touring easy. My favorite stops included Casa Lapostolle, Viu Manent, Casa Silva, Vina Montes, Vina Santa Cruz and MontGras, all of which offer special experiences to enjoy along with their wine.

At Casa Lapostolle, which is owned by the famous French Marnier family (think Grand Marnier), besides sipping wine, you can arrange to ride bikes through the vineyards. The tasting tour in the extremely modern cellar is like something out of a science fiction film. With a press of a button, part of a glass table rises, revealing a hidden cellar beneath.

A special treat is to book a cooking class at the Food and Wine Studio located at Viu Manent, run by famous Chilean chef Pilar Rodriguez, who is as charming as she is talented and a great teacher. After assisting her in the kitchen while you learn to prepare some Chilean dishes, you'll enjoy them with the wine from the vineyards just outside.



Traditional cowboys display their skills during rodeos at Casa Silva.

Casa Silva is known for its rodeo and its wine. Traditional cowboys display their skills for visitors in a ring most days. Montes is famous for its feng shui architectural elements and its award-winning wines. MontGras offers a blend-your-own wine class, where you can try your hand at mixing and matching varietals and bring your creation home with you. When you visit Santa Cruz, you can take a cable car up a mountain to admire the views and star-gaze in the observatory. There's also a small replica of an indigenous village, with exhibits and displays.

In the nearby Cachapoal Valley, there are also a couple of wineries not to miss. Vik, a relatively new business that just bottled its first vintage, offers tours and tasting visits, where you can add the option to ride horses or bikes and picnic in the vineyards. While you can't get their wine in the States just yet, you may be familiar with the wines from Anakena, which exports thousands of cases of wines here. Wine-pairing lunches or picnics are add-on options.

Since most visitors spend at least a couple days in Santiago, some sights not to miss include Parque Metropolitano, where you can ride a funicular to Cerro San Cristobal for stunning views of the city and the Andes; Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda's house-turned-museum; and the Mercado Central, where you can dine in the bustling market with the locals who make up most of the crowd.