

THE ART OF FINE WINE LIVING
LE·PAN

THE CHILEAN ‘WINE PARKS’ YOU WON’T WANT TO LEAVE

By Joe Yogerst on July 14, 2015

TAGS

Chilean wine

Wine tourism



Many Chilean wineries now offer full-blown vacation experiences, on top of wine tastings.
Photo by: istockphoto/TimAbbott

Story highlights

- Chile's wine tourism has never kept pace with global benchmarks, but a few Chilean wineries are looking to change that
- Several now offer a variety of activities and experiences beyond just tasting good wine

Perched in my driver's lap is an elaborate hand-drawn chart that resembles a treasure map – a mosaic of roads, arrows and hastily written Spanish directions.

We pass through the village where they found the mastodon bones, hang a sharp right at the whitewashed Christ statue and eventually reach a large wooden gate with no signage, address or any other indication that we've reached our destination.

But we've arrived at a magic kingdom of wine, a resort called [Viña Vik](#) that's hoping to revolutionize the Chilean wine tourism scene.

A gleaming, mountaintop manse resembles a giant alien spacecraft and tucked into a vine-filled valley, is the equally futuristic winery.

The place is like nothing I've ever seen before, in the wine world or elsewhere.

And that's the whole point.

While Chile's incredible array of microclimates and soils attracted foreign investment and new technology to allow the country to become a winemaking region in the same manner as California a generation earlier, Chile's wine tourism didn't keep pace.

Rather than an organic, laissez-faire approach similar to Napa, Bordeaux or the Hunter Valley, Chile's wineries were content with cookie-cutter daytrips with busloads of tourists.

Few people drove themselves through the wine country and almost no one stayed overnight.

Destination wineries



The brainchild of Scandinavian billionaire Alexander Vik and his wife, Carrie, Viña Vik combines artistic design with commercial ambitions.
Photo by: Viña Vik

Viña Vik — Chile's first "destination winery" — is offering guests a variety of activities and experiences beyond just sipping good wine.

The brainchild of Scandinavian billionaire Alexander Vik and his wife Carrie, the hotel could double as a modern art museum.

All 22 rooms were personally designed by Latin American, European and Asian artists, reflecting a variety of styles from graffiti and pop art to Nordic and Japanese.

The hotel's titanium roof is an artwork unto itself, crafted to resemble the wind flowing over the nearby mountains.

"Our goal is creating the best wine in South America," says chief winemaker Cristián Vallejo, "and also the best visitor experience."

Vik produced its first vintage in 2009, a blend of six different grapes grown on the estate that sells for US\$130 a bottle at the futuristic winery, a low-slung concrete-and-glass structure with a massive, semi-translucent Teflon roof.

"The design is low profile so the building doesn't break the continuity of the vineyards, the valley and nature," says Vallejo. "And having most of the winery underground makes it easier to control the temperature and humidity at lower cost."

Food-wine combinations



To Chile, and beyond? Viña Vik's infinity pool brings five-star amenities to the winery experience.

Photo by: Viña Vik

The food is European-style dishes made with the fresh local ingredients. Out back is a cool infinity pool with views across the vineyards.

The Viña Vik concierge can arrange visits to the archeological zone where those mastodon bones were excavated, paintball sessions, mountain biking, spa treatments, or horseback trips to [Lapostolle](#), another visitor-friendly winery on the other side of the Coastal Range.

I explored the region with Jaime Gonzalez, who leads bespoke tours of the Chilean wine country for Borello Travel.

Our first stop was [Viña Cousiño-Macul](#), a small but historically significant winery in suburban Macul. Opened in 1856, it's the only 19th-century Chilean winery still owned and operated by its original family.

"The founder was Luis Cousiño, a coal mining tycoon and one the pioneers of Chilean winemaking," Gonzalez explains as we stroll a tree-flanked avenue beside the vineyards.

After his death from tuberculosis at age 38, his wife Isidora Goyenechea assumed responsibility for the winery. "She was a famous philanthropist who tried to improve working conditions for the miners and improve children's health in Chile. She also expanded Cousiño's wine business."

More than 100 years later, the estate is still run by the Cousiño clan. Daily English-language tours take visitors through the vineyards, winery and a small museum, culminating in a tasting room where one can sample half a dozen wines including a Riesling named for Isidora.

Where wine isn't just for tasting



*Vina Cousiño Macul - the only 19th-century Chilean winery still owned and operated by its original family.
Photo by: Vina Cousiño Macul*

The Maipo wine region wraps around the southern edge of Santiago, renowned as the cradle of Chilean winemaking and location of most of the larger wineries. One of those is [Santa Rita](#), founded in 1880 and another estate that's trying to take wine tourism beyond mere tasting.

In addition to a large wine shop, Santa Rita features a restaurant decorated with Spanish colonial art and antiques, a 40-hectare garden that boasts replica Roman baths and the world's second largest bougainvillea, and a museum with pre-Columbian artifacts.

Visitors can also spend the night (or several days) at the winery's handsome Hotel Casa Real, in a building that resembles a Spanish cathedral.

"Santa Rita is also famous for the rediscovery of Carménère," says wine shop manager Ailsa Cullen. "The grape disappeared in the rest of the world because of the Phylloxera plague. It survived in Chile but people here thought it was a strange kind of merlot.

"French oenologists came here in 1994, did an investigation and realized our strange merlot was actually Carménère."

Naturally, several types of Carménère are available in the Santa Rita wine shop.



*The shop at Santa Rita sells many varieties of Carménère wines, originally misidentified as 'strange Merlot.'
Photo by: Santa Rita*

Other wineries around central Chile are also ramping up their visitor experience.

[Casas del Bosque](#), in the Casablanca Valley near Valparaiso, offers tram and bike tours of its vineyards, as well as a gourmet dining experience that pairs dishes and wines.

Nearby [Emiliana Organic Vineyard](#) gives visitors a chance to blend their own wine, pair wines with chocolate or cheese, or interact with native Andean animals.

[Viu Manent](#) winery in the Colchagua Valley has horseback riding, cooking classes and an artsy Chilean handicraft shop.

"This country is very blessed by nature," Gonzalez tells me as we drive back into Santiago. "If you live in the countryside, you can't go hungry."

And with Chile's wine tourism expanding so rapidly, neither will you go thirsty.

New York-based [Borello Travel](#) offers bespoke Chilean wine country tours with a private driver and guide, as well as a fixed 4-day itinerary that includes visits to wineries in Santa Cruz, Colchagua and the Maipo Valley.