



## THIS PREMIUM CABERNET CATEGORY SHOULD BE ON YOUR RADAR

March 7, 2017 By **Michelle Williams**

No doubt when Spanish conquistador Pedro Gutierrez de Valdivia founded the city of Santiago in 1541, he was not thinking of viticulture. However, today the Maipo and Colchagua Valleys produce some of the finest Bordeaux influenced wines in the world. Chile gained its independence from Spain in the early 1800's, by mid-century the Chilean economy was booming due to mining, and wealthy Chileans began traveling back and forth to Europe. These travels expanded Chileans taste for French food and wine. Prior to the phylloxera outbreak of 1855, Chileans began importing French vines from Bordeaux to grow Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Malbec. The success of these vines put Maipo Valley on the world's wine radar, resulting in Chile being known as the "Bordeaux of South America."



Maipo Valley takes the lead in producing high quality Bordeaux style wines. Maipo experiences an ideal Mediterranean climate, similar to Napa Valley, with hot, dry summers and cold, wet winters, and both regions struggle to meet their vineyard irrigation needs. Maipo, like Napa Valley, offers ideal growing conditions for Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, both of which are used in Bordeaux style blends. Within the northern area of Maipo Valley lies Alto Maipo, containing Puente Alto, also known as the Pauillac of Chile. Pauillac arguably contains the best terroir in Bordeaux, and certainly the best in the Medoc. Three of the top five first growth Premier Cru châteaux (Château Latour, Château Lafite Rothschild, and Château Mouton Rothschild) are located in Pauillac. Similarly, Puente Alto is considered the best growing region for Cabernet Sauvignon in Chile, with three of the top producers located here. The vineyards range in elevation between 1,200 to 2,500 feet. These hillside vineyards receive ideal sun exposure and grow in mineral rich, rocky alluvial soil allowing for proper drainage.

Located slightly south of Maipo Valley lies Colchagua Valley. Colchagua experiences the same Mediterranean climate as Maipo with some variations. According to Aurelio Montes Sr, Colchagua Valley receives “morning fog, winter rain (double of Maipo) but no rain in the summer, and cooler temperatures.” Irrigation is also an issue in Colchagua resulting in some wineries, such as Montes, practice dry farming the vineyards. Aurelio Montes Jr describes Colchagua Valley as “one of the most privileged valleys in Chile and in the world to produce Cabernet Sauvignon. It’s a very diverse area where you can find many different terroirs, altitudes and the coastal influence of the Pacific Ocean which produces many different styles of Cabernet. And the good news is that all of them have an exceptional quality.”

Wine journalist Amanda Barnes, a specialist in the region, adds further insight into Maipo and Colchagua Valleys:

“Colchagua and Maipo share many characteristics - both are in the warmer central valleys of Chile and can have a mountain influence in vineyards closer to the Andes. Colchagua can also have a coastal influence in certain regions, but most of the Cabernet comes from the warmer spots further inland. There is a lot of diversity within the wine regions, but if we take two of the most acclaimed Cabernet Sauvignon micro regions from each region - Apalta in Colchagua and Puente Alto in Maipo - we can draw some stylistic comparisons. Apalta Colchagua Cabernet tends to have red and black fruits like black cherries, plums and blackberries with a round and full body, sweet tannins and a warm tobacco note. Puente Alto has gravel soils which naturally lower the vigor of the vines making rich, concentrated grapes. Puente Alto Maipo Cabernet almost always has bright cassis aromas with a herbal note and expressions of graphite and licorice, the tannins are more defined, but elegant, and there is a more marked acidity. You’ll also find the vintage has a bigger impact in Maipo Cabernets whereas Colchagua tends to be a bit more consistent year on year.”

Chile was geographically created to produce high quality wine. Its wine production regions are ideally located between 27 degrees and 40 degrees south. Furthermore, Chile is in many ways like an island because it is surrounded by natural borders: Pacific Ocean to the west, Andes Mountains to the east, Atacama Desert to the north, and the glaciers of Patagonia to the south. These borders offered Chile natural protection from the phylloxera outbreak that spread across the globe in the 19th century. Because phylloxera has not affected Chilean vines many of the vines are 30+ years old and un-grafted. Some of the newer vines are being planted on grafted rootstock as a precaution for the future. This is confirmed by Michel Friou, winemaker of Almaviva, as he explains “the older [Almaviva] vineyards planted in 1978 are un-grafted; however, the new vineyards planted in 2001 were grafted to avoid any problems with phylloxera in the future.”



If you are unfamiliar with Chilean Cabernet Sauvignons why should you forgo your next Napa Valley or Bordeaux purchase to opt for a Chilean Cabernet instead? Chile offers Cabernet Sauvignon at its best. It produces a luxurious Cabernet Sauvignon that is full bodied with rich yet supple tannins. Michel Friou explains the Chilean terroir “helps the grapes reach their optimal ripeness without losing freshness. The wine combines complexity, opulence and freshness of fruit, with precision, finesse, purity and elegance. The quality of its tannins, smooth and silky, firm and present but always accessible, is probably its main distinctive mark.” When asked about the lack of wine regulations in Chile, Aurelio Montes Sr replied, “We want good wine not good laws. We (Chilean winemakers) are able to build the best wines...to suit the modern palate.” Both men speak of the role of the winemaker in producing high quality Chilean wines. Montes Sr said, “Chile is paradise to grow grapes. The soil is a perfect balance for Cabernet. Add the love of the winemaker and their skill to choose the right parcels and correct barrels” and you have great wine. Montes Sr believes in a winemaking philosophy of the less intervention the better, let the terroir speak through the wine. Friou shared a similar sentiment, “Although much is done in Chile to offer more diversity of varieties and new grape origins, the Cabernet Sauvignon is still the most widespread variety planted in Chile (around one-third), the most used and most well-known Chilean grape, successfully managed in the vineyard on appropriate soils and terroirs since a rather long time, the variety on which the Chilean winemakers have clearly the highest knowledge and experience, used on its own or harmoniously blended with other Bordeaux varieties to offer a perfect balance in mouth. A real and safe experience for Cabernet Sauvignon lovers!”

Here are six high quality Chilean Cabernet Sauvignons to begin your exploration.

**2011 VIK Millahue Apalta Colchagua Valley Chile** (\$140): 55% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Carmenere, 7% Cabernet Franc, 5% Merlot, and 4% Syrah; clear deep garnet with ruby hues; clean medium+ aromas of cherries, strawberries, raspberries, plums, sweet spice, dark chocolate, dried tobacco, black pepper, dried red floral notes; bold and juicy on the palate, a modern style wine that is well-structured with balanced medium+ aromas and tannins that feel like crushed velvet on the palate; full-bodied with loads of flavor and a long pleasing juicy finish; a real crowd pleaser.