

# Worldly Tastes From a Quiet Corner of Chile

By JAY MCINERNEY



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Casa Lapostolle vineyards, Chile

**WHEN AURELIO MONTES** first visited a remote part of Chile's Colchagua Valley called Apalta in 1972 to buy grapes for his employer, he was struck, as I was 35 years later, by the dramatic beauty of the place, by the quality of the light, which seems to pool in the bowl of a five-mile-wide amphitheater framed by a crescent outcrop of the Pangelillo hills. Although grapes had been planted here since the time of the Spanish conquistadors, the Colchagua Valley was a remote region little known to outsiders. Twenty years later, Aurelio and his partners bought up 500 hectares (1,236 acres) of Apalta for their fledgling winery, called Montes.



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Meanwhile, Alexandra Marnier-Lapostolle, whose great-grandfather created Grand Marnier, had been scouting Chile with the oenologist Michel Rolland. She, too, concluded that Apalta was the perfect spot to create a world-class Chilean red, buying an adjacent slice of the amphitheater. Today, less than 20 years of harvests later, it seems safe to say that Apalta could be considered Chile's first grand cru.

The Colchagua Valley, some 80 miles south of Santiago, is a subregion of Chile's Central Valley, located, appropriately enough, in the middle of this long, skinny country. The climate, moderated by the Andes to the east and the Pacific to the west, is sometimes described as being a cross between Napa and Bordeaux. The vinifera vine arrived in the 16th century with the Spanish, and after phylloxera hit Europe in the 19th century, French refugees arrived to tend these uninfected vineyards.

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## Oenophile: Top Picks From Chile's Apalta Region



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

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Thanks to its geographic isolation, Chile is believed to be the only country in the world untouched by the nasty little root louse that devastated world wine production. Today, it's the only place where European *vitis vinifera* vines are planted on their own roots—elsewhere, vines are grafted on American rootstock, which is resistant to phylloxera, a necessary but not necessarily ideal practice. That fact, combined with its climate, make central Chile a viticultural Eden. And low labor costs give Chile a big edge in export markets. Despite these advantages, for much of the 20th century most Chilean wineries were content to serve the large, undemanding domestic market. It wasn't until the late 1980s that Mr. Montes and a trio of like-minded wine professionals, aiming for a higher standard, founded Montes, originally using purchased grapes from the Curicó Valley and eventually purchasing land in Apalta. "We felt there was music in the air," Aurelio told me many years later, "but no one else was hearing the music from the

market."

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*'We felt there was music in the air,' Aurelio Montes said of Apalta, 'but no one else was hearing the music from the market.'*

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At the age of 39, Mr. Montes started from scratch with the help of three friends—business brain Alfredo Vidaurre, who put up the initial \$62,000 investment; marketing whiz Douglas Murray; and gear-head Pedro Grand, whose family owned a winery they could use for the early vintages. Everyone worked part-time without salary. Mr. Montes, a polo-playing pilot and bon vivant, admits that it was a very risky venture. "I used to wake up in the morning feeling desperate," he says. Their 1987 Cabernet Sauvignon, made from a 100-year-old Cabernet vineyard in the Curicó region and released under the label Montes Alpha, was arguably Chile's first super-premium wine and gained them a following upon release.

After the purchase of the Apalta vineyard, the Montes team decided to plant on the hillsides, an expensive decision virtually unprecedented in Chile, but sanctioned by centuries of observation and practice in the great European wine-growing regions; "Bacchus amat colles" was an ancient Roman maxim meaning "Bacchus loves the hills."



Matt Wilson

Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle

Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle, meanwhile, arrived in 1994 after failing to find what she was looking for in neighboring Argentina and immediately fell in love with the primeval amphitheater, with its verdant mix of vineyard and forest and grassland. "When I arrived, I felt like I'd always known this place, as if from another life," she told me over lunch at the 100-year-old hacienda at the edge of the foothills. "I believe in biodynamie," she said, referring to the holistic method of agriculture espoused by Austrian theosophist Rudolf Steiner. "And I sensed very good vibes."

More specifically, though, she loved the geology and the topography, and the fact that Apalta means "poor soil," in the local Indian dialect. Students of viticulture know that fertile soil results in high yields, which make for dilute wines. And she loved the old patch of vines that climbed the lower slope of the hill, planted in 1920. "The owners apologized and told me that the yields were low. Originally the vines had been irrigated but the water was diverted to a nearby town. And I said, that's what I'm looking for, low yields. Rocky soil. It's perfect." I suspect the locals must have been baffled or at least bemused by this eccentric, beautiful Frenchwoman who thought less was more, and who maintains an impossibly chic Parisian air even when she's striding through the vineyards in riding boots.



Aurelio Montes

Montes S.A.

Not long after Ms. Lapostolle bought her vineyards, a French ampelographer—basically a vine detective—visited Chile at the behest of the government and discovered an impostor in the Chilean vineyard stock. Much of what Chilean growers had long identified as Merlot turned out to be Carménère, a variety once used in Bordeaux, which had been largely abandoned after the phylloxera epidemic, since it didn't react well to grafting. It had been brought from France along with Cabernet and Merlot in the early 19th century and interplanted with those varieties, but somewhere along the way it had been forgotten. The discovery seemed to create a marketing opportunity: Some believed that Carménère could be Chile's answer to Argentine Malbec—a signature variety.

Ms. Lapostolle discovered, along with other Chilean vineyard owners, that a substantial part of her old vineyard was planted to Carménère. Subsequently her premium red, Clos Apalta, first bottled in 1998, has been composed of at least 50% Carménère. Since its first release, Clos Apalta has proved the potential of both the grape and the region; it is a structured, powerful, nuanced red. Ms. Lapostolle loves the varietal but cautions that it's tricky: "It's very late-ripening, even later than Cabernet, and if it's planted in rich soils it will have high yields and fail to ripen."

Mr. Montes is similarly cautious: "Its flavor can be overly spicy and vegetal," he told me a few years ago. He initially made more of a commitment to Syrah, which he planted on the granitic upper slopes of the hills, geologically similar to the hill of Hermitage in the Rhône Valley. He used Carménère in a blend with Cabernet Sauvignon, but since 2005 Montes has produced a superb, spicy Carménère called Purple Angel, which sort of reminds me of a hypothetical blend of Barbera and Zinfandel.

The beautiful amphitheater of Apalta, along with other subregions of the Colchagua Valley, seems to be the perfect home to most of the so-called Bordeaux varietals, as well as Syrah. In less than two decades, Apalta has produced reds that can stand beside the world's best, as well as affordable everyday wines with an astonishing price/value ratio. The basic Casa Lapostolle reds sell for under 10 bucks, as do several Montes bottlings. Both firms are producing excellent whites in the Casablanca Valley to the north, but that's another story.