

A view of the vines at Altair Vineyards & Winery in Chile's Cachapoal Valley

THE EXPERT ITINERARY

Chile Uncorked

Traveling through the nation's prime valleys with a master guide, **COLIN BARRACLOUGH** gets special access to the wineries, vintages, inns and restaurants that matter.

Vineyard-hopping in Chile once merited little more than a day trip from Santiago. But a slew of stylish new guesthouses, wineries and tasting rooms have turned what had been a trudge into a pleasure. There are few crowds—even Colchagua Valley, Chile's most trafficked wine region, receives only 120,000 tourists a year, while more than five million descend on California's Napa—so visitors get personal attention. Head winemakers conduct

vineyard tours, owners of historic hacienda hotels chat about restoration techniques and award-winning chefs explain how they create their dishes. "It's what California was like 20 years ago: rustic, personal and appealing," says Tulio Vera, co-owner of the New York shop Puro Chile, which imports wine, food and fabric from the country.

The wines themselves are earning enough accolades and medals to make sommeliers and critics take notice, too. Ten years ago,

wine lovers bristled at the overly robust, big-bodied Cabernets and Merlots, deeming them unsubtle and more about bargain prices than about taste. But now Chile "produces wines of quality and quaffability," says Patrick Capiello, wine director at Gilt, the Michelin two-star restaurant in Manhattan. He fast-tracked 12 Chilean wines onto his list after visiting the country. "They taste like you paid a lot more for them than you probably did."

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Earthquake damage sustained in February 2010 was quickly repaired, yet navigating Chile's wine country is still no easy task. Upwards of 200 vineyards—most accessed by unpaved, barely mapped roads—dot 14 appellations stretching from the Atacama Desert to the Lake District, almost 900 miles to the south. Many of the best wineries are open by appointment only, and comfortable lodgings are hard to find. Those in the know travel with Sandra Oyarzún, Chile's finest wine country concierge, whose clients include former Museum of Modern Art president Agnes Gund and Monaco's Prince Albert. "With your own car and driver, you can see the highlights in three days, though it's more leisurely to spread the journey over four," says Oyarzún, who, during my packed three-day trip, opened doors to the wine country's most prominent vintners, landowners and business figures.

DAY 1
SANTIAGO AND
SAN ANTONIO VALLEY

The tour departed from Santiago, Chile's capital, with our first destination the sleepy Leyda Valley, a two-hour drive toward the Pacific through hills and orchards. As recently as 2003, the wine world scoffed when business magnate José Antonio Garcés planted Syrah vines here, seven miles from the sea; today, Leyda is the San Antonio Valley's prime nook. At around noon, Oyarzún and I arrive at the 420-acre **Viña Garcés Silva**. The valley's combination of porous granite soil and maritime climate "breaks all the rules," chief winemaker Francisco Ponce tells us while unbottling the vineyard's saline Amayna Chardonnay (\$28), singled out by *Wine Advocate* as one of Chile's best Chardonnays.

From here, we take gravel roads that lace through grassland and rustic *pueblitos* to the Casablanca Valley, which shares Leyda's reputation for experimentation. Oyarzún has persuaded celebrity photographer and wine guru Julio Donoso, a founder of Chile's Movement of Independent Winegrowers, to let us visit his 21-acre **Viña Montsecano**, which, like Garcés Silva, is normally

closed to the public. Donoso employs biodynamic techniques like herb-based composts, mineral-rich pest-control sprays and attention to the lunar calendar when sowing or harvesting to produce an unpretentious, sulphite-free Pinot Noir (\$30). We find no souvenir shop or Frank Gehry-

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designed winery building, as one does in Chile's larger vineyards—only rolling mountain ridges, ocean breezes and a pair of falcons circling above. "Winemaking is like photography," says Donoso as we lunch on barbecued organic beef and fresh vegetables from the farm next door. "Observation is critical. Wine resembles a beautiful model: You have to handle both with extreme care."

It's a short hop from Montsecano to the 37,000-acre fiefdom of the Matetic family, whose farming, forestry and fishing empire in San Antonio's Rosario Valley includes the 222-acre, certified-organic **Viña Matetic**. With an extra day, visitors can drive through the flower-filled valley or explore poet Pablo Neruda's old house in nearby Isla Negra, but we only have enough time to admire the

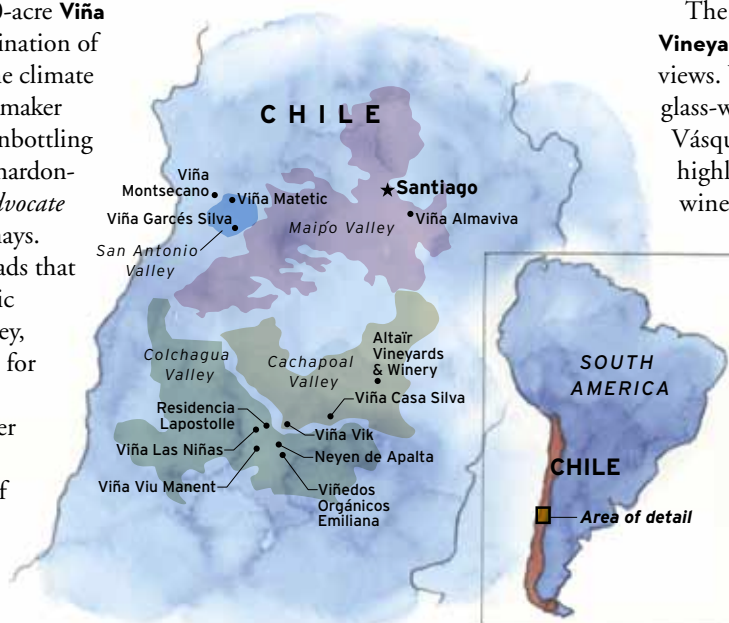
Matetics' dramatic, oval-roofed cellar, designed by Norwegian architect Laurence Odfjell, before dining in the silk-wallpapered, wisteria-covered La Casona, the Matetics' colonial-style guesthouse. Here, giant Chilean scallops are matched with the vineyard's EQ Chardonnay (\$25), while its star varietal, the dark ruby, mineral-rich EQ Syrah (\$35), complements an entrée of duck à l'orange. We sleep in the adobe-walled home in rooms smartly fitted with oak furniture and gilt-framed oil paintings.

DAY 2
SAN ANTONIO, MAIPO
AND CACHAPOAL VALLEYS

Oyarzún's second-day picks lay in the Cachapoal Valley, which slices across Chile from the Pacific to the Andean foothills, 25 miles south of Santiago. From Viña Matetic it's a three-hour drive through corn and tobacco farms, so we make a stop at **Viña Almaviva**, in the Maipo Valley. Here, Bordeaux's Château Mouton Rothschild and Chile's largest producer, Concha y Toro, have partnered to craft the award-winning Almaviva (\$75), a Cabernet Sauvignon base combined with Cabernet Franc and smooth Carmenère (a long-lost Bordeaux grape that has taken to Chilean soil with gusto). After our tasting, we continue south for an hour, paralleling the icy peaks of the Andes, before turning off the highway at Requínoa toward Cachapoal and driving 2,000 feet up into the rocky foothills.

The timber-and-stone buildings at **Altair Vineyards & Winery** provide spectacular views. We clamber into the eight-foot-tall glass-walled holes that field manager René Vásquez uses to inspect root growth in the highly porous soil, and we tour the winery's handcrafted grape press and French-oak fermentation tanks. The real draw is the spicy, opulent Cabernet-and-Carmenère premium cuvée (\$95), which we sample with a plate of locally made salami and goat cheese in the vineyard's tasting room, a sun-filled pergola.

We head next for the hotel at **Viña Casa Silva**, a rambling former family home (its seven guest rooms are packed with French-inspired antiques), for a



leisurely lunch of salmon ceviche and conger eel, served beneath a towering liquidambar tree in the hotel's cobbled courtyard. It is late in the afternoon as we set out again, taking unmarked gravel back roads to **Viña Vik**, in a remote forested valley that Connecticut-based financier turned hotelier Alexander Vik is transforming into one of Chile's prime oenophile properties. The Norwegian-born businessman (who opened two spectacular private retreats, Estancia Vik and, more recently, Playa Vik, at Uruguay's beach resort José Ignacio) purchased 10,900 acres of farmland and scrub in 2006 and enlisted star winemaker Patrick Valette to establish a vineyard. Applying advanced technology and the labor of 300 men, Valette, who learned the trade at his family's Château Pavie, in St.-Emilion, France, has planted 670 acres of vines, Cabernet and Carmenère among them; his ultrapremium 2009 blend (\$100) went on sale in April. "We're shooting for perfection, for a one-hundred-point wine," says Vik, who intends to open a 22-room hotel here. For now, Oyarzún has arranged a stay in Vik's iron-and-blackened wood four-room cabin, where we'll awaken to a view of a forest-fringed natural reservoir.

DAY 3
CACHAPOAL AND COLCHAGUA VALLEYS

Colchagua Valley, Chile's Napa, lies immediately south of Cachapoal, but jagged shoulders of rock force an hour's drive. We emerge at the flat-bottomed, vine-covered valley floor and head for **Neyen de Apalta**, where Valette, the winemaker from Viña Vik, also heads production. One of Chile's oldest vineyards—a plot of gnarled Cabernet vines was planted here in 1892—Neyen sold its grapes to other producers for years. Under Valette's direction, its suave, elegant Cabernet-and-Carmenère blend (\$60), first produced in 2003 and bursting with dark fruits, now retails in 28 countries.



Gazpacho and Parmigiano-topped clams from Lapostolle's Clos Apalta winery

Wines from Colchagua, particularly its respected Apalta sub-appellation, have won more prizes than those from any other region in Chile, and most of its vineyards offer compelling reasons to dally: biodynamic winemaking lessons at **Viñedos Orgánicos Emiliana**, picnics on the ten-mile trail above **Viña Las Niñas** or, weather permitting, hot-air balloon rides over Malbec vines at **Viña Viu Manent**. We choose to snack on spicy beef empanadas baked in a clay oven at Viu Manent's courtyard restaurant, pairing them with the newly

released Vibo (\$40), an intriguing Malbec produced here but with Argentine grapes.

Then it's on to our final destination, **Residencia Lapostolle**. Paris-born Alexandra Marnier Lapostolle, whose family produces Grand Marnier, established her award-winning vineyard in 1994, sculpting a hauntingly lit, technologically savvy winery to produce her Clos Apalta premium cuvée (\$75), named Wine of the Year by *Wine Spectator* in 2008. Vintner Andrea León shows us into the shadowy barrel chamber cut into the hillside, where

we sample a Carmenère made from 80-year-old vines before an early dinner of baked Pacific oysters and local salmon. After, we retreat to the secluded cabins that dot the hillside. From a private deck, we take a final moonlit look at Chile's breeze-freshened vines before heading to bed. We'll return to Santiago first thing in the morning. ■

A custom tasting trip with Sandra Oyarzún, of Andes Traveler, starts at \$2,800 for three days. Contact Oyarzún directly at 56-2/415-7725 or go to andestraveler.com.

THE TASTING TOUR

STAYING PUT

Residencia Lapostolle Rooms start at \$1,000, all-inclusive; Camino Apalta Km 4, Santa Cruz, Colchagua; 56-72/953-360; lapostolle.com.

Viña Matetic Lodging and dinner for two starts at \$500; Fundo El Rosario, Lagunillas; 56-22/323-134; matetic.com.

Viña Vik Rooms start at \$400; Fundo Millahue, San Vicente de Tagua Tagua, Cachapoal; 56-22/482-218; vik.cl.

AT TABLE

Viña Casa Silva Hijueta Norte, San Fernando; 56-72/913-091; casasilva.cl.

Viña Viu Manent Carretera del Vino, Km 37, Casablanca, Colchagua; 56-72/858-751; viumanent.cl.

BOTTLE NOTES

Altair Vineyards Fundo Totihue, Camino Pimpinela, Requínoa; 56-24/775-598; altairwines.com.

Neyen de Apalta Camino Apalta, Km 11, Santa Cruz,

Colchagua; 56-22/406-300; neyen.cl.

Viña Almaviva Av. Santa Rosa 821, Puente Alto, Santiago; 56-22/704-200; almaviva.winery.com.

Viña Garcés Silva Fundo San Andrés de Huinca, Camino Rinconada de San Juan, San Antonio; 56-24/288-080; vgs.cl.

Viña Las Niñas Parcela 11, Millahue de Apalta, Santa Cruz; 56-72/321-600;

vinalasniñas.cl.

Viña Montsecano Estero de las Dichas, Casablanca; 56-98/149-0995; montsecano.com.

Viñedos Orgánicos Emiliana Camino Lo Moscoso, Nancagua, Colchagua; 56-72/856-060; emiliana.cl.

Note: Sending a box of six bottles to the States is about \$180. Puro Chile stocks most of these wines stateside (puro-chile.com).

