

WINE News

*Chile, Argentina dreamin'
on a winter's day.*



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Meet Us Under the Tropic of Capricorn

By Kirk Walker

This is an exciting time for South American wine. While the same could be said for much of the wine world today, Chile and Argentina are particularly abundant right now in opportunities to explore new wines and regions virtually at the same time as the winemakers and viticulturalists in these same regions. South America is home to some of the oldest winemaking traditions of the New World, and indeed, has some of the longest-lived vines in the world. Yet the modern wine industry here is quite young, and in its youth is still discovering and

rediscovering itself. Inputs small and large have changed the face of the industry over the last 15 years. As winemakers have traveled the world, they've returned to update vineyard and winery practices, greatly improving the quality of their exports, while rediscovering long-neglected, if not forgotten, viticultural areas. And with over 1,000 miles in between Salta in the north and Itata and Patagonia in the south, there is so much room to explore. I can't wait to see what is yet to come.

2019 Lapostolle “Cuvée Alexandre Apalta Vineyard” Cabernet Sauvignon Colchagua Valley (\$19.99) This winery's founding mission was to explore the potential of the vineyards of Apalta, one of Chile's best regions for Cabernet and Carménère. Over the last decade they have worked biodynamically and organically in the vineyards, and their efforts have paid off. This is an incredible Cabernet, with dark cassis and cherry notes backed by oak spice and a touch of mountain herbs. The palate is full but not heavy, with layers of flavor. **94 JS**



2018 P.S. Garcia “Bravado” Red Blend Itata Valley (\$18.99) Located inland from Concepción, Itata was one of the first places that European vines were planted in the Americas, but is also approaching the southern boundary of viticulture in Chile. This is a blend of old vine Carignan, with Syrah, Grenache, Petit Verdot and Mourvèdre. Medium to full-bodied, this Rhône-inspired blend is textbook Itata, but also reminds me of Priorat with its combination of bright and dark red fruit and touches of earth, spice, and stones. **92 JS**



2019 Amalaya Malbec Salta (\$12.99) Nearly 800 miles north of Mendoza, Salta is situated practically at the Tropic of Capricorn. Viticulture here is only possible due to the extreme altitude of the vineyards, most at over a mile above sea level. While the region has a winemaking tradition nearly as old as Mendoza's, it's significantly harder to get these wines to market, which makes this a crazy deal. This is desert mountain Malbec, saturated in color, with dark fruit and spicy aromatics that jump out of the glass. The palate has density yet the tannins are soft. What a rare treat. **97 DC**



“C” is for Cabernet!

Cabernet Sauvignon was brought to Santiago in the mid-19th century while the city was going through a boom and was looking toward Europe for inspiration. Not surprising, then, that the Bordeaux model was emulated. It just happens that Santiago is surrounded by countryside that is ideal for growing grapes like Cabernet and its siblings, which thrive in nearby Maipo, Rapel Valley further to the south, and the more famous Colchagua and Cachapoal Valley. Near the Andes and in the coastal ranges you’ll find the smaller, more premium DOs of Los Lingues, Apalta, and Peumo.

2018 Clos de Luz “Massal 1945” Cabernet Sauvignon Rapel Valley (\$19.99) These ungrafted vines were planted in, you guessed it, 1945, on land that the family has owned since the second wine boom of the late 19th century. It is the red fruit of this Cabernet that has me so excited. It is the old-school flavor of St-Julien, Pessac-Léognan, or Spring Mountain. Pure, rich, but not heavy. There is a lightness and ease to the wine which makes it so charming, a soft spoken country gentleman. The fruit is backed with tobacco and just a whisper of those Chilean mountain herbs; the tannins are polished and fine. **93 JS, 92 RP**



2018 Court Rollan “Genus” Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah Cachapoal Valley (\$19.99) While this is not 100% Cabernet—sometimes I get distracted while I am talking about wine—this is what I call a “Korean burrito wine.” The two delicious things that are combined in this wine—the Korean and the burrito, if you will—are Syrah and Cabernet. When I started learning about wine there were Rhône wines and Bordeaux wines—two separate categories. Then I was introduced to Penfolds Bin 389 and my life was changed. This wine reminds me of that moment and wine. Heady and rich, this has lots of dark fruit flavor, with notes of tobacco, herbs, pepper, and creamy oak. It’s that blend of aromatics that gives it a strangely familiar quality. The palate is where this blend shines: the core is delicious, dark Cabernet, bolstered on the mid-palate by that gorgeous Syrah fruit. Structured and round, the wine finishes nicely, with lingering dark red fruit that is not backed by too much spice. Why isn’t this Cab-Syrah combo done more often? I don’t know. But I am always happy when I see it, I almost always buy it, and am even happier when I taste it. Same as with a Korean burrito. **91 JS, 91 WE**



“C” is for Carménère!

Carménère’s time might be coming. An often misunderstood wine grape, Carménère is a descendent of Cabernet Franc, and was widely planted in Bordeaux when it was brought to Chile in the mid-19th century. After phylloxera devastated Europe, it was not widely reintroduced in grafted vineyards because of its comparatively low yields. You can see the familial similarities between Cab Franc and Carménère, which are both high in pyrazines. It’s the “greenness” on the nose of both varieties that trips most people up. I think the difference between the two is best described by thinking about bell peppers: Cab Franc’s greenness is raw green bell pepper—intense, pungent, and fresh—while Carménère’s variation on that theme is more like sautéed red bell pepper (throw in an onion, too). There is a little of that bite, but there’s a sweetness to it—and a fajita-like savory aroma to it. The palate is all charm. Carménère has modest tannins and acidity, and does not require a lot of oak to take the edge off. It can be enjoyed by itself—but that savory note also gives it versatility at the dinner table.

2019 Lapostolle “Cuvée Alexandre” Carménère Apalta (\$20.99) The granitic soils and protection offered by the Chilean Coastal Range makes this one of the great terroirs for Carménère in Chile. This wine has a deep, almost purplish quality to its hue, and the varietal’s intense, dark fruit nose. The



next thing to pick up is clean oak spice, and then that typical savory note. The palate is medium to full-bodied, with very fine tannins, and has a freshness that speaks to the granite in the soil. The fruit brightens a little and lingers nicely with just a hint of that savory green tone. This is the perfect introduction to varietal Carménère. **94 JS**

2017 TerraNoble “CA 1 Andes” Carménère Colchagua Valley (\$26.99) The fruit for this wine comes from the Los Lingues region on the eastern boundary of the Colchagua Valley. This is an Andean wine—the soils are derived from the mountains, and the climate is tempered by them. There’s a brightness and an energy to this that is common to “mountain wine.” The nose is still dark red fruit, but there’s a lift to it. That savory “green” tone is softened and highlighted with mountain herbs and a faint background floral note. There is a lot of wine here. The palate pops. The fruit takes more of a red fruit turn—it’s focused and has lots of energy. Then come notes of fine spice, herbs, and earthy tones, with red berry returning on the complex and layered finish. While not as savory and overt as some Carménères, this could not be anything else.



Noemía de Patagonia: Dinosaur Wine?

My obsession with wine is the perfect vehicle for me to nudge the conversation toward my first obsession: dinosaurs. What, am I the only wine fan who regularly talks about Jurassic carnivores? Cretaceous herbivores? OK, then how about plate tectonics and geology? In the wine business there is plenty of talk about fossils in vineyard soils, but those are mostly smaller crustaceans and mollusks. That's all cool and I love the wine that is produced from those sites, but here we are talking about *real fossils*—dinosaur fossils. One of the largest animals ever to walk upon the Earth was the Argentinosaurus. (I know you saw that coming.) No tiny sea shell, this animal was almost three school buses long. And do you know where they found it? Patagonia! Now in all fairness, the Argentinosaurus was found about 100 miles from where Bodegas Noemía has their vineyards, but I have to start any conversation about this region with that dinosaur. The Patagonia wine region is in a desert along the Río Negro. It's hundreds of miles from fossil-chasing author Bruce Chatwin's Patagonia, and hundreds of miles from Mendoza. The southerly latitude offers lots of sun, cool nights, and high winds, but there's enough access to water to allow viticulture to thrive here. And while these wines might be assumed to be rugged and intense, the truth is that they are far from that. Like most things from the desert, there is a heartiness to them, but also a delicate beauty.

2019 Noemía de Patagonia “A Lisa” Malbec Río Negro (\$19.99) The first thing you notice is the saturated red color, significantly brighter than the purplish hue that you see in Mendoza Malbecs. The reserved nose shows red fruits, muted, dried wind-blown herbs, with a fine, dusty earthiness. Supple, round, and energetic, the wine shines as it glides across the palate. The sweet, dark cherry fruit is dusted with herbs, and there's just enough bitterness to the fine tannins on the finish to balance it all, with good concentration. What a wine. **93 JS, 93 RP**



2017 Bodega Noemía de Patagonia “J. Alberto” Malbec Río Negro (\$44.99) “Deep” is the first word that comes to mind when smelling this—it's intense yet contained. You get the sense of falling into the fruit of this wine, or better yet, sliding, like Fred Flintstone down an Argentinosaurus' ridiculously long neck. It's clearly evocative. The palate is full, broad, with just enough tannin to pull it back together on the finish. Beneath the saturated cherry-pomegranate fruit is a very fine spice that speaks to the quality and the age of the oak that it was aged in. This is an incredible Malbec that tastes nothing like its northern brethren. It tastes like...dinosaur wine. **94 JS, 94 RP**

Altos Las Hormigas: Italian Flair by the Andes

How do you say Malbec in Italian? Altos de las Hormigas, of course—kind of, and definitely for my purposes today. In the mid-1990s, the world was just starting to become aware of Mendoza. The famed Tuscan winemaker and consultant Alberto Antonini came to the region with his partner and saw the potential not only of the high-elevation vineyard sites, but of the local variety, Malbec. At that time, many wineries were planting the other Bordeaux varieties—remember, this was when “Super-Tuscans” were becoming some of the hottest wines in the world. Antonini started his career in Chianti where his family's estate is located. But he became famous for his work at Frescobaldi, Col D'orcia, and Antinori, three of the most prestigious wineries in Tuscany at the time. Secretly this is a Sangiovese story: Malbec and Sangiovese are very different grapes, yet have several very important similarities. They are expressive and readily translate terroir; they have a beautiful core of fruit; and finally, they are secretly aromatic. Malbec has a lot less tannin and acid than Sangiovese, which makes it easier to drink, but can lead to a perception of simplicity. Now, areas of Tuscany also happen to have a lot of limestone in the soil, while Mendoza has very little. Limestone brings a spark to wines—you know when it is and isn't there. Antonini knew. His exploration of the soils of the region led him to the higher reaches of the Uco Valley, where limestone can be found, as a layer of calcium carbonate dusting over stones. Malbec grown in these soils has that special spark and additional acidity, a tension like that of Brunello and Chianti, which makes these wines so special.

2018 Altos Las Hormigas “Terroir” Malbec Uco Valley (\$15.99)

It is hard to avoid the comparison, especially when primed the way that I have introduced this, but there is a dark red fruit and herbal tone to this wine that reminds me of something Italian. On the palate this is all Mendoza! Sappy dark red fruits, a touch of oak; everything is lifted with a floral tone and the tannins are present but very soft and easy. Charming, with just enough oak spice and herbs to be intriguing, and on the finish there is a little of that extra verve from that calcium carbonate. **92 RP**

2018 Altos Las Hormigas “Reserve” Malbec Uco Valley (\$26.99)

While not quite as forward as the winery's Terroir bottling, this wine has depth, and a persistence that makes you pay attention. The fruit is a little reserved, the red and black berries slowly unfurling to present a wider range of fruit flavors. The calcium carbonate really speaks here, with energy and drive that you sense immediately. The palate is plums and dark cherries with lots of sappy concentration, a floral lift, and subtle spice with a mineral verve that plays off the polished tannins on the long, persistent finish. This wine has presence and intensity, all the while being textural and indulgent. **94 RP, 92 VN**





Grandeur, value, and a great place to chill a bottle of Chardonnay. (Photo: Shutterstock)

The Summits of Value

Fair enough—value is relative here, and there are many of us who would never consider the prices quoted here to represent “bargains.” Yet relative to wines that come from places like Napa, Bordeaux, and Burgundy, these wines are steals. You can buy bottlings from the aforementioned regions in a similar style and pay over three times what we are asking for these, and in my opinion, not get the same quality. Why settle for spending more on wines that merely achieve, when you can spend less and get wines that over-achieve?

The Gran Enemigo Cabernet Francs are game changers. The 2013 Gualtallary forever changed the way I see wine. Cabernet Franc plus high elevation, calcium carbonate-rich soils plus the incredibly talented Alejandro Vigil equals a wine that shook the foundations of what I thought I knew about wine, tannins, and texture. These Cabernet Francs deliver the purity, complexity, and the depth of Guiberteau or Clos Rougeard in the Loire, with the texture, richness, and poise of Cheval Blanc or Lafleur. I am dropping some pretty big names here, but I 100% believe these wines belong in the same breath as them. Better yet, you can find, buy and drink these—not so easily done with those others.

2016 Bodegas Aleanna “Gran Enemigo” Cabernet Franc Chacayes (\$99.99) Most of the vines in Chacayes are planted at around 4,000 feet, making it the second-highest region in Tunuyán. The soils are alluvial and very stony, with limestone influence from those CaCO₃-covered stones. This is one of the newest, most recently developed high elevation sites, so it is the region with the most experimental planting. **99 JS, 96 RP, 94 VN**

2016 Bodegas Aleanna “Gran Enemigo” Cabernet Franc Gualtallary (\$99.99) Gualtallary might be the premier sub-appellation in Tupungato, if not the entire Uco Valley. The combination of high elevation, around 5,000 feet, and soils that are a mixture of sand and stones with high levels of calcium carbonate make this one of the most desirable terroirs of Argentina. **99 RP, 96 JS, 96 VN**

2019 Zuccardi “Fósil” Chardonnay Valle de Uco (\$54.99) As a person who thinks that some of the best Chardonnay in the world comes from Burgundy, I was shocked when I tried this. I shouldn't have been, as I have had the high-end Chards from Catena and know the heights this region can obtain. But I was not ready for that at this price point. This is sourced from the coolest region in the Uco Valley, the San Pablo sub-zone, just south of Gualtallary. Zuccardi typically harvests these grapes a month later than the rest of their vineyards. This is for anyone who loves cool-climate, mineral-driven wines with a true sense of place. A savory Chardonnay that has a lot of energy and focus, this also does not lack fruit. Chilled heirloom apples and pears, wild herbs, and a salty minerality that lingers on the finish. **95 VN, 95 RP, 95 JS**



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