

The Washington Post

Chilean winemakers, taking risks

By [Dave McIntyre](#), Published: July 23th 2013

We tend to think of Chile as a source of cheap, decently made (in other words, “drinkable”) wine suitable for parties and pairing with out-of-season apples and avocados. Who can argue with a magnum of Concha y Toro cabernet sauvignon priced at \$10 or less? Or a bottle of Concha y Toro’s more substantial Casillero del Diablo line at the same price? Santa Rita’s 120 brand sauvignon blanc is a reliable, inexpensive refresher, and Cono Sur churns out a wide variety of good-value wines.

And then there’s my favorite: Cousiño-Macul, still owned by the family that established it in the 1850s. Their Antiguas Reservas cabernet sauvignon was the first wine I ever bought by the case (the 1985 vintage). It continues to offer great value, even though the price has crept up toward \$20. The winery’s entry line, now simply called Cousiño, is my go-to recommendation when someone asks me for a wine under \$10. All are incredibly tasty for the price.

Over the past 15 years or so, Chilean wineries have made high-end wines that have



proved to be a tough sell: To the American consumer, Chile means low-cost. By 2010, the country’s wine exports to the States were overtaken by those of neighboring Argentina, which lured us with its malbec.

But while our attention strayed to the other side of the Andes, things were changing in Chile. Adventurous winemakers explored new regions, such as Elqui and Leyda valleys to the north and Bío Bío and Malleco to the south, in search of advantageous sites to grow good grapes. As in Argentina, they have been looking for land with alluvial soils at increasingly high altitudes.

“The classic Chilean industrial wines come from the flatlands between the Andes and the Coastal Range,” says Julio Bouchon Jr., who handles marketing for his family’s J. Bouchon winery in the Maule Valley. “If you want to make volume, go there. We are pushing the extremes.”

J. Bouchon is one of nine family-owned wineries just entering the U.S. market through the importer Vine Connections, which until now has kept its portfolio east of the Andes, in Argentina. Scattered throughout Chile’s wine-growing regions, these small-production wineries are driven by a new generation intent on improving the way Chile’s wine is made and marketed.

“We want to change the perception of Chilean wine,” Bouchon, 41, told me during a recent visit to Washington with three other representatives from the Vine Connections group. “Our concept now is quality, diversity, expression and terroir. Chile is now the entry level. We want to capture the middle range.”

They call themselves the “new Chile,” and they are trying to get as far from “industrial” winemaking as possible.

“We follow a natural way of winemaking as the best way to respect the terroir,” said Francisco Ponce, 34, winemaker at Amayna winery, in the cool-climate Leyda area along the coastal mountain range west of Santiago. “That means less intervention by the winemaker and no correction of tannins or acid.”

In the remote Elqui Valley of northern Chile, Mayu winery produces a racy sauvignon blanc and a fruity, refreshing white from Pedro Ximénez, a grape best known for sherry. In the Limarí Valley, Merino winery produces one of the silkiest syrahs I’ve tasted in a long time. J. Bouchon produces energetic Bordeaux-style reds from vineyards along the Maule River in central Chile. Chardonnay lovers should seek out the electrifying Sol de Sol, made by Aquitania winery from grapes grown on steep slopes in Malleco Valley, Chile’s southernmost new wine region.

These winemakers are not afraid to take chances. Clos des Fous, or “Vineyard of Fools,” is the project of four friends determined to explore high-altitude viticulture. “I think we earned the name when we started going up in the mountains and planting vines without irrigation,” said Francisco “Paco” Leyton, 36, the quartet’s winemaker. “People said we were crazy.”

“Chile has for too long stayed in the safe zone,” said Felipe García, 37, of García & Schwaderer winery. “We want to move into the risk zone.”

McIntyre blogs at dmwinline.com. On Twitter: [@dmwine](https://twitter.com/dmwine).