
Regional profile

Elqui & Limarí, Chile

Elqui is a fraction of the size of Limari in vineyard terms, but both of these cool-climate regions are producing wines with a real wow factor, says Margaret Rand after a recent visit



FIRST, LET ME quote directly from my notebook. 'Cloud on coast; shrouds hilltops as you go inland. Hills are bare and scrubby, but valleys become greener. Then ahead, quite suddenly, is blue sky. Fig trees, bougainvillea, palms, herds of multi-coloured goats, lemon groves.' Does this sound like a cool-climate area to you? Nope, me neither. The characteristic plants of Chile's Elqui and Limari regions, the ones most likely to grow in the vineyards and cluster on the hills, are 2m cacti. Cool? Well, in one sense.

Below: at Viña Tamaya, 2m high cacti grow, despite it being a 'cool climate' vineyard subject to wind

Cool climates are Chile's Holy Grail. Ripeness is easy in the traditional Central Valley areas; overripeness horribly easy. Casablanca was the first spot to be trumpeted as 'cool climate', then came Leyda. Now, Elqui and Limari, both bizarrely far north (Elqui is to the north of Limari) are the latest regions; and suddenly the claims feel true. Elqui is smaller and newer than Limari, and people are moving in cautiously, a few hectares at a time: these places are deserts, after all.

Officially, only Elqui is a valley, and even has a river running through it; Limari is an *altiplano* – a high plateau. Elqui is the most northerly of all Chile's wine regions, unless you count the >



'What is crucial both to our understanding of Elqui and Limarí is cloud cover and fog'

pioneering plantings to the north in the Atacama Desert, and Limarí is some way to the south. Elqui and Limarí are what most of us would call deserts: the former gets 500-600mm of rain a year, and only in the winter; the latter has 700-800mm a year. The only water is snowmelt, which has to come from the Andes. But the San Pedro winemaker Gonzalo Castro points out that a cool climate doesn't have to be wet. 'In most of Chile there is the coastal mountain range, which is like a wall between the sea and the vineyards. In Elqui and Limarí there is no coastal range, so there's a corridor from the sea to the Andes. The cold reaches about 20km inland, then it gets warmer.'

The climate in the central part is Mediterranean, and up against the Andes it cools again. The whole of Elqui could be divided into five or six climates; but it's the cool coast we're looking at here. Picking

Photo: Maggie Nelson



Elqui & Limarí at a glance

Area and grapes planted

Elqui 286ha: Syrah 87ha; Carmenère 60ha; Cabernet Sauvignon 25ha; Sauvignon Blanc 72ha; Chardonnay 23ha; Pinot Noir 19ha
Limarí 1,483ha: Syrah 297ha; Cabernet Sauvignon 260ha; Carmenère 93ha; Pinot Noir 72ha; Merlot 55ha; Chardonnay 544ha; Sauvignon Blanc 168ha.

There are also smaller quantities, not included in the total figures, of Viognier, Sangiovese, Riesling and others, and rather larger quantities of Moscatel and Pedro Ximénez. There seems to be little vintage variation: hardly any rain, no frost.





Above: Viña Taball has planted international varieties now in preference to Moscatel

Left: José Pablo Martín, the winemaker at Viña Tamaya

Below: Puclaro Lake in the Elqui Valley



of Syrah is in late May here, compared to mid-April in Cachapoal, further south in the Central Valley.

That absence of a barrier between sea and vines means, as well as cool air, cloud cover and wind. At Tamaya in Limarí they have learned to plant their rows east-west, because north-south rows lean at an angle under the wind. But what is crucial both to our understanding of Elqui and Limarí, and to their accounts of themselves, is cloud cover and fog.

Gonzalo Castro, the winemaker at San Pedro in Elqui, says that when planes can't land at Elqui because of fog, it can be bright sunshine in Santiago, 530km to the south. However, as you'll infer from the above description of my journey inland from the coast, it was always bright sunshine when I was there. And Louis-Michel Liger-Belair, who makes Pinot Noir of compelling purity in Vosne-Romanée, has opted to plant Pinot in Bio-Bio in the far south rather than in the north because he couldn't see the Elqui cloud cover either.

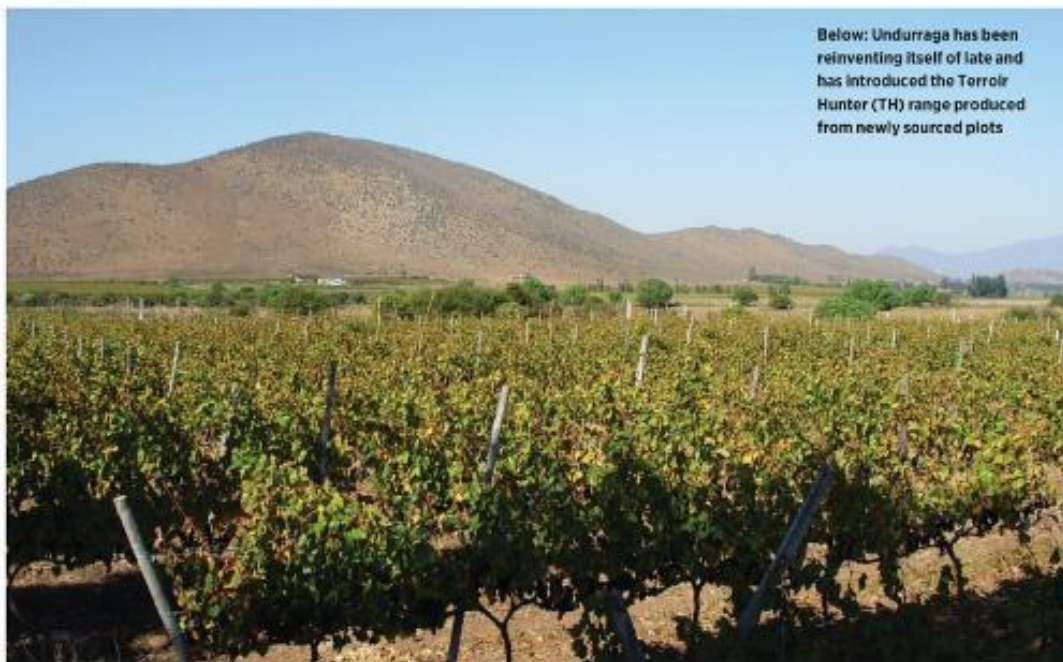
But I don't dispute its existence. It blows off by midday, they say, and then the light is dazzling: the air is so dry and so pure that it's a centre for astronomical research. Vineyard managers de-leaf much less here than in the Central Valley. 'We like leaves as cover,' says José Pablo Martín, winemaker at Tamaya.

A new wave of 'wow'

Is it wishful thinking to find similar purity and precision in the wines? They are, I have to confess, the first Chilean wines in 20 years to have made me think, 'Wow!' They have freshness; they have acidity. Partly, says Alvaro Arriagada of Wines of Chile, that's because the soils are alkaline, something that he says no one had realised until they started planting and found the wines had a different balance. Do producers have to acidify? To quote from *HMS Pinafore*, 'No, never! What, never? Hardly ever.' Carmenère is acidified quite frequently; Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc sometimes.

Syrah is one of the stars of Elqui and Limarí. It has a stony, black-olive character, black-cherry fruit, and it's fresh; not made muddy by excess alcohol, nor chewy by over-extraction. What is >

Six producers to watch



Below: Undurraga has been reinventing itself of late and has introduced the Terroir Hunter (TH) range produced from newly sourced plots

Viña Falernia & Mayu, Elqui

The same producer, but two different brands. Falernia was started in 1998 by the Italian Giorgio Flessati and local pisco producer Aldo Olivier; there's still a lot of Pedro Ximénez grown at high altitude, but now it makes attractive table wine. Mayu (right) is owned by Aldo's son Mauro, and started in 2005. Giorgio likes risk in viticulture, and extravagant enterprises: it took him two years and six bulldozers to plant 125ha here, he says. Subtle Viognier and mineral Chardonnay; 2012 was the first year of Pinot Noir, and it's looking very promising.



flavours in one part, aromas in the other. Syrah, however, does best in the south, Carmenère in the north. All work is done by hand, and the 400-500 full-time workers handle all the crops on the estate.

Viña Tabali, Limari

Tabali's first plantings in Limari were of Moscatel for pisco; now it has Syrah, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier. Cabernet Sauvignon will ripen, they say, but it's not very nice. Situated 23km from the coast, the estate also produces olives and citrus fruits, and there's another 75ha vineyard, also in Limari, called Fray

Jorge, on pure limestone; the only marine terrace in Chile, they say. They never acidify, and are starting organics.

Cono Sur, Limari

This is a big company with vineyards all over this very long country, under the Concha y Toro umbrella. Keen on environmentalism, though not yet quite as organic as you might think, it's also big on balanced, fresh wines, so gets a big hurrah, even if it can still sometimes be a bit heavy handed with the oak. It made its name with Pinot Noir and, last winter, with the crop in New Zealand and Burgundy well down, it was claiming the title of largest Pinot Noir producer in the world. In Limari, however, it makes Chardonnay and Syrah in the cooler, coastal part, Viognier and Carmenère in warmer spots.

Undurraga, Limari

This is a long-established company, one of the old Chilean warhorses that have been around forever. It started in the Maipo Valley, right in Santiago's backyard, in 1885, but it's been reinventing itself, and its Terroir Hunter range is part of that process. It's what you might think from the name: people go out looking for interesting terroirs, and then decide what to do with them. It's just changed UK agents, so with luck stockists for this Syrah should follow.

Viña San Pedro, Elqui

Planting in Elqui started in 1998, but with more than 80ha, it is only a part of this giant's operation. It started by planting Merlot, which didn't work, so took a gamble on Syrah, which did, superbly. 'Elqui isn't extreme any more; it's trendy now,' says Elqui winemaker Gonzalo Castro.

Viña Tamaya, Limari

Tamaya's 200ha of vines rub shoulders with avocados, citrus trees, olives and papayas. It, too, tried Merlot at first and found it too cool here: it's 20km from the sea, 60km from the Andes. The south of the property has clay soil and the north has granite and sand, and some varieties are grown in both parts, for

Rand's top eight Elqui & Limarí wines

Tamaya, Limited Release Chardonnay, Limarí 2011 18 (93)

POA McKinley Vintners

Subtle, restrained, deep and complex. Entirely barrel fermented, but the oak isn't new. Taut, tense, very good. **Drink** 2013–2016 **Alc** 14%

Tabali, Tallinay Chardonnay, Limarí 2011 17.5 (91)

£15.99–£16.24 Majestic, Perfect Partners, Rannoch Scott, Stone Vine & Son, Virgin Wines

Lots of acidity in this chalky, crisp, brisk and characterful wine. Fermented in French oak, so a bit of flesh and a great texture. **Drink** 2013–2015 **Alc** 13.5%



San Pedro 1865, Limited Edition Syrah, Elqui 2009 18 (93)

N/A UK www.sanpedro.cl

Violet aromas. Rich, perfumed, well structured and elegant, characterful. Lovely purity and a very good texture. A thrilling wine. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 14%

Tamaya, Syrah Gran Reserva 2010, Limarí 18 (93)

£13.75–£17.99 Berry Bros & Rudd, Dalling & Co, Harrogate Fine Wine Co, Harvey Nichols, Spirited Wines
Ripe, serious, nice grip and spice, and good acidity. A sleek, mineral wine with a lot of complexity and lovely balance. **Drink** 2013–2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Undurraga, TH Syrah 2010, Limarí 17.5 (91)

£12.99 Gonzalez Byass UK

Vibrant, pure, aromatic with blackberries, violets and lovely wild fruit scents. Ripe and balanced, with very good acidity. French oak, and only 25% new. **Drink** 2013–2017 **Alc** 14%



Cono Sur, 20 Barrels Syrah 2009, Limarí 17 (90)

£15.99 Fine & Rare, The House of Drinks
Soy, herbs and blackberry-jelly nose. Palate: good balance of blackberry and herbs and soy fruit, nice savoury complexity, proper Syrah (not Shiraz), sweet juicy fruit balanced by herbal savouriness. **Drink** 2013–2017 **Alc** 14%

De Martino, Alto Los Toros Syrah, Elqui 2008 16.5 (86)

£22.49 Les Caves de Pyrène, Park Vintners, Smiling Grape, Swig

Sleek, tapenade and garrigue herbs on nose and palate, fresh and elegant. **Drink** 2013–2017 **Alc** 14.5%

Mayu, Reserve Syrah, Elqui 2009 16.5 (88)

£8.49–£9.99 Asda, Sainsbury's, Waitrose Direct
Good black-olives flavour, a touch of soy. Nice spice and pepper. Good tannins, big but soft without being squashy. Good value. **Drink** 2013–2014 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p103



Above: Aldo Gramola (left) and his cousin, Giorgio Flessati, partner in the Falernia winery

notable is the violet character: in Limarí it is perhaps slightly less aromatic, but styles are evolving. At the moment, the differences between producers seem to be more marked than differences between the two regions. Soils are not homogeneous; there are slopes, there is flat land, there are different altitudes.

True Pinot character

Pinot Noir is aromatic, balanced and pure, with proper Pinot character which is a very long way from the jammy, redcurrant-jelly flavours of nearly all Chilean Pinot thus far. Sauvignon Blanc is good and balanced, with the precise style depending a lot on whether it's picked early and green-beany, in imitation of Marlborough, or allowed to ripen properly. Carmenère can be promising, too, but hasn't always worked here: it tends to like the deepest soils, which rules out a lot of sites on these stony hills. Its characteristic green-pepper note remains, but is more like grilled green peppers, sweeter and less aggressive.

There are some nine producers now in Limarí, about 13 in Elqui, and there are limits to how much either region can expand. First, there's the water situation. You have to buy water rights, and these, says Gonzalo Castro, can be almost as expensive as the land, even if you can get them. There's not much land available, adds Giorgio Flessati of Falernia, and it tends to be expensive because there are already considerable plantings of grapes for pisco or the table. So he has bought, for Falernia, a 55ha (hectare) plot of large, deep glacial stones (think of a beach) and trucked in 1,815 cubic tonnes of topsoil to put over them to a depth of 20cm. One wonders about the long-term future of such a vineyard.

The long-term future of Elqui and Limarí, however, is probably good. They're not the only cool-climate regions being explored in Chile: there's Bio-Bio in the south to Lolol in Colchagua. Over the next 20 years this will add up to a complete change in Chilean wine. As I noted earlier, 'ahead, quite suddenly, is blue sky'. ■

'Water rights in Limarí can be almost as expensive as the land, even if you can get them'

Margaret Rand is a regular contributor to Decanter, and general editor of Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book