

Kick off 2010 With a Sip of Chile

By Leslie Sbrocco for Epicurious.com Jan. 2010

As a Californian, I feel at home in the sun-splashed, seaside country of Chile. It feels like my home state flipped then stretched thin. After a recent trip – my fourth in a decade – I'm excited by not only the value proposition of Chile's wines (especially in the \$10-25 sweet spot) but by new places, people, and trends.

Aconcagua, Maipo, Rapel and Colchagua are recognized wine-producing regions, but look for hot spots like the coastal Casablanca, Leyda, and San Antonio Valleys. The southernmost, Patagonia-perched Bio Bio Valley (pronounced Beo-Beo) and the country's extreme north Elqui and Limari Valleys are generating buzz, too.

Going green is going full speed in Chile with more producers focused on sustainable, organic, and biodynamic wines. Watch also for renegade winemakers crafting boutique beauties, more tasty Pinot Noirs, and the rediscovery of old-vine Carignane grapes in the rugged Maule Valley.

Best Bargains:

2009 Emiliana "Eco Balance" Reserva Sauvignon Blanc, Bio Bio \$9 - This super-value white focused on eco-friendly growing practices is simply a delicious sip.

2009 Veramonte Sauvignon Blanc, Casablanca \$10 - A lip-smacking style packing a citrus and melon punch with a hit of fresh herbal aromas.

2008 De Martino "Legado" Reserva Chardonnay, Limari \$15 - With a commitment to expressing terroir in each wine, this boutique producer crafts wines of integrity. This classy white is crisp yet lush with impeccable balance.

2008 Odfjell "Armador" Carmenere, Maipo \$10 - Norwegian owners imbue an international flair but the wines are purely Chilean. A juicy, peppery red with tannic grip.

2008 Unduragga "Aliwen" Cabernet Sauvignon/Carmenere, Rapel \$11 - Smooth and structured red capturing dark fruit flavors with a hint of earthy complexity.

2008 Cono Sur "Vision" Single-Vineyard Pinot Noir, Colchagua \$15 - Crafted from Chile's oldest Pinot vines planted in 1968, its dark-cherry freshness delivers quality far above the price.

2007 Veramonte "Primus", Casablanca \$20 - A seamless blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Carmenere. You could pay twice-the-price and still be happy.

Green Greats:

2006 Carmen "Reserva" Carmenere/Cabernet Sauvignon, Maipo \$15 - An organic leader, Carmen is also the winery responsible for discovering the ancient Bordeaux variety Carmenere's true identity (long thought to be Merlot). An integrated, supple red with personality.

2009 Cono Sur "Organic" Sauvignon Blanc, San Antonio Valley \$13 - Cono Sur is one of the prettiest wineries I've ever visited. Their commitment to growing grapes organically is fervent and this succulent Sauvignon is a killer deal.

2009 Emiliana “Natura” Chardonnay, Colchagua \$12 - Emiliana ranks at the top of the list of producers making high quality yet affordable organically-grown and biodynamic wine. This crisp white is ideal for those who enjoy freshness and fleshiness.

Rising Stars:

2009 Maquis “Calcu” Rose, Colchagua \$12 - As a dry rose fan, nothing pleases me more than discovering a stunner like this juicy pink. The family-owned winery is one to watch...and buy.

2007 Koyle Syrah, Alto Colchagua \$17 - This inaugural vintage from members of the famous Unduragga family shows how well Syrah performs in Chile. Rich and spicy but still elegant.

2009 Casa Marin “Estero Vineyard” Sauvignon Gris, San Antonio Valley \$25 - A charismatically eclectic producer who pioneered the uber-cool climate San Antonio Valley mere miles from the ocean, Maria Luz Marin’s Rieslings and Pinots shine, but explore this unique white, too.

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