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Carmenere: A Great Value Facing Risks

The Chilean red is distinctive when made with care but can also taste like boring Merlot

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We generally plan our columns pretty far in advance because it takes time to find the wines, conduct the tastings and research the questions we raise as we sip. From time to time, though, we taste a wine and we get so excited that we want to drop everything and write about it. We feel like Kevin McCarthy in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers": "Listen to me! Please listen!"

It all began at Hattie's, a cute little Southern-style restaurant in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Hattie's is better known for its fried chicken (it won a televised "throw-down" with celebrity chef Bobby Flay) than its short wine list, but it carries some attractive choices. In the past, we had ordered a Carmenere from Chile there and it worked well, and since there was a new one on the list, we decided to check it out.

Carmenere has an interesting history. It was big in Bordeaux in the 19th century, but was largely wiped out by disease. The same grape thrived in Chile, however, and for a long time the vines there were thought to be Merlot. It was only about a decade ago that Chilean officials realized the mistake and recognized Carmenere for the distinct—and distinctive—grape that it is. However, because of its unusual history, there are attendant complexities. For instance, it is pronounced in various ways, but the official Wines of Chile organization says it prefers car-men-NAIR. And then there is the accent situation. As Wines of Chile puts it: "The original spelling (from French) is Carménère. For some reason the industry standard (as close as we ever got to one) for a while was Carmenère (which is neither French nor Spanish), but the current thinking is to

simplify it to Carmenere."

The wine on the list at Hattie's was called Cono Sur (this is named for the "Southern Cone," but the name does double duty when you say Cono Sur out loud, too). It was from the 2007 vintage and it cost \$28. The waitress pulled out her corkscrew, then realized it was a screwcap and scrunched up her face, muttering about baby-food closures. We took a sip and liked it. It was round and easy, with all sorts of ripe, black-fruit tastes. Very pleasant.

But over the course of the next hour, as the wine got air and warmed, an amazing thing happened. It got tighter, far more herbal, with intense smells and tastes of black pepper and green bell pepper. As it happened, those tastes melded perfectly with fried chicken, chicken livers, collard greens and succotash (you know we're both from the South, right?). To us, this simple bottle was a triumph: Even though inexpensive, it remained true to its varietal even as it provided a top layer of friendly fruit that anyone could like. It was a wine with serious character that novices could enjoy and experts could talk about. And, we guessed, cheap. In fact, when we checked later, it turned out Cono Sur costs about \$9, which, as our daughters would say, is just sick.

While we have been writing about Carmenere since 2002—the first we ever had that made us sit up and take notice was from Luis Felipe Edwards, which we had in Germany, oddly—we had never conducted a broad blind tasting because there haven't been enough of them on shelves. We wondered if that was still the case and

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found that, in fact, Carmeneres are far more widely available, and far more labels are on shelves, than ever before. It's still more difficult to find a wide variety of them than, say, Malbecs from Argentina, but many corner wine stores these days have two or three. Indeed, plantings of Carmenere rose about six-fold between 1998 and 2007 in Chile. It now accounts for almost 10% of Chile's total wine production.



Rick Lew for The Wall Street Journal

We bought every Carmenere we saw from the 2007 and 2008 vintages—because we prefer these young and because those are the ones you are most likely to see—to find out if our Cono Sur experience was an aberration. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights.

Considering our initial excitement, we wish we could tell you to rush right out and buy the first Carmenere you see and you'll have a winner, but, unfortunately, it's not that simple. Carmenere is a unique taste. It has not-so-easy-to-cozy-up-to tastes of black pepper and herbal green bell pepper that are quite unusual, and it has a very dark color and a medium body. We have written in the past that it might not be for everybody because it's slightly challenging. In our tasting, we found that, too often, winemakers had decided that the character of Carmenere might indeed be too challenging and, as a result, they clobbered their wine with wood. Too many of the wines were heavy with oaky, sweet-wood, vanilla tastes that obscured the essential character of the grape and left it a fairly generic red. Many, in fact, could easily have passed for forgettable, inexpensive Merlots. It's not that any of the wines were terrible, but simply that too many were boring and lead-footed. They were shrugging, why-bother wines.

The best of the wines, however, showed what a shame this development is. Our best of tasting, Terra Andina

"Reserva," was at once noteworthy and highly drinkable, and seemed so warming that we thought of roast meats and fireplaces. It's a lot of wine for \$11.99. Terra Andina US of Minneapolis says the winery makes about 45,000 cases, of which 8,000 were distributed in the U.S. to 32 states.

By the way, Cono Sur, this time the 2008, did well in our blind tasting, too, and, for \$8.99, it's a great value. The importer, Vineyard Brands of Birmingham, Ala., says the winery made 30,000 cases, of which 5,000 were distributed nationally in the U.S. And here's an interesting postscript: While the wines we tasted, including our favorites, generally had seen quite a bit of oak, the Cono Sur never touched oak. It was just pure, ripe, marvelous fruit (including 10% Cabernet Sauvignon). Bravo!

We feel Carmenere is at a critical point now. Are winemakers going to retain its distinctiveness or make it into a pedestrian red? We'd guess the next few years will be important. Meantime, although it's a little bit of a risk, the prices are so reasonable and the payoff potentially so good that we'd urge you to try one, especially if you have a wine merchant whom you trust to point you toward the wines with real spice. And if you can have it with fried chicken and greens, all the better.

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