

Seat at the Bar



Still life with a Chilean great.

Carménère Country

This Chilean wine region is ripe for exploration.

BY LANE LEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS PLAVIDAL
STYLING BY HEIDI ADAMS

THE STORY OF CHILE'S MOST FAMOUS grape varietal is a classic tale of duped-by-the-doppelgänger. For more than a century, Chilean farmers believed the distinctive ink-black grapes with green pepper aromas growing in their vineyards were merlot, or *merlot chileno* in Spanish.

Then, in 1991, a visiting French ampelog-

rapher (grapevine botanist) discovered that the “merlot” was actually carménère, a near-extinct grape imported from Bordeaux in the nineteenth century. The wine world was stunned – was this really a long-lost varietal?

Chilean winemakers embraced the rare grape, seeing its reappearance as an opportunity rather than a marketing conundrum.

Seat at the Bar

And, as time passed and the learning curve shortened on proper growing and harvesting techniques, the wine's quality improved, balancing the bold vegetal notes typical of a carménère with more-nuanced, fruit-forward notes. Two decades on, says Rodrigo Soto, winemaker for Neyen and three other Chilean wineries, the drinking public is ready for it: "It coincides with a market that is curious about obscure varieties, that is supportive of native or unique varieties associated with specific regions."

Today, the varietal is a source of national pride: Chile is at the forefront of global carménère production, turning it out as a single varietal or as part of a blend, such as cabernet sauvignon, syrah, or malbec. On the world stage, carménères are elbowing Argentine malbecs off menus and shelves as sommeliers and wine-shop owners look for ways to keep savvy customers stimulated. To boot, it's still a relatively budget-conscious pour.

Although quality carménère is available in the States, Chileans keep much of the good stuff for themselves. So consider a trip to the source: The Colchagua Valley, located in the center of the country roughly a two-and-a-half-hour drive south of Santiago and bordering the city of Santa Cruz, has textbook growing conditions for red grape varietals. There are Pacific Ocean breezes from the west, the protective Andes Mountains to the east, fresh snowmelt runoff from the Tinguiririca River, and mineral-rich, volcanic-meets-granite soil. While it's not the country's oldest wine region (head north to Maipo for that), the area is the most visitor friendly. It's home to Chile's first wine trail (with 17 stops), sophisticated boutique hotels, top-notch gastronomy, palatial wineries, and plenty of outdoor adventure, from surfing to cycling.

"It's like our Napa Valley," explains Matias Pincheira, winemaker for Casa Silva, a pioneering winery in carménère clonal research with an excellent single-varietal tasting. "[It's] recognized as the top Chilean appellation, where most of the country's high-end wine brands are located."

If you go in search of great wine in the world's thinnest country, here are a few Colchagua Valley highlights: Check out the futuristic, barrel-shaped architecture at Clos Apalta, founded by the French family behind Grand Marnier, and splurge on a wine-paired



feast at the winery's restaurant. For premium Bordeaux-style wine, a visit to Los Vascos, owned and operated by the Rothschild family, is a must. Stop in at Neyen for a tasting in Apalta's oldest cellar, dating back to 1890. Like a theme park for wine geeks, Viu Manent offers everything from horseback rides to cooking classes, while Laura Hartwig is the polar opposite – a boutique

operation out of a Spanish colonial abode.

Most wineries here require visitors to take a tour in order to do a tasting, so allow more time than you would visiting a wine region in the States. Wherever you go, make sure to pair your wine with local specialties, such as a *churrasco* sandwich: thinly sliced grilled meat on fresh bread topped with mayo, tomato, avocado, or cheese. »

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

The lowdown on exploring the Colchagua Valley.

GO Experience wine-making, tour cellars, and taste wine in a well-known Colchagua Valley vineyard such as Viu Manent, Bisquertt, or Montes during **Avanti Destinations'** three-day tour. Travelers also visit the Colchagua Museum adjacent to the Santa Cruz vineyard, renowned for its award-winning Chamán wine.

Departures: Any day through 2018; from \$1,150 per person.

STAY In Millahue Valley, not far from Colchagua and perched on a hilltop on 11,000 acres, **Vik Chile** is home to 22 artist-designed suites, as well as world-class wines from the Vik winery and a wine-themed spa. During the hotel's new Harvest

Experience, a team of experts guides participants as they pick grapes in the moonlight, taste newly pressed juice, blend wines, and, of course, eat and drink well. *Doubles from \$1,200, including breakfast daily and a \$100 spa credit. Harvest Experience available during April and May; from \$3,200 per person.*