

# As South American wines aim higher, the French connection goes both ways

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By **Dave McIntyre** Columnist, Food August 5

We usually turn to Chile and Argentina for affordable, quaffable wines. Yet both are capable of producing high-end vino that can stand among the best in the world. And they've looked to Bordeaux, the very image of Old World wine sophistication, for help.

On a recent visit to South America, I was interested in exploring French-influenced wineries to see how the Old World was influencing the new in this reach for quality. Instead I found the opposite: that Bordeaux has been reaching out to the New World to reconnect to its roots.

Chile is known for red wines from the smoky, peppery carmenere grape, and Argentina for fruity malbec. Both are traditional varieties prominent in Bordeaux blends in the 1800s but fell out of favor after the phylloxera root louse epidemic decimated European vineyards in the latter part of that century. When the Bordelais replanted their vineyards, they favored cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot, grafted onto American rootstock immune to the louse. By then, however, carmenere and malbec vines had been exported to South America, where they thrived on their own rootstock; vinous time capsules waiting to be unlocked.

My first stop in Chile was Almagura, on the outskirts of Santiago, a joint venture between Concha y Toro, one of Chile's largest wineries, and Baron Philippe de Rothschild, which owns Chateau Mouton Rothschild and other wineries in Bordeaux. Almagura is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, a landmark that Philippe de Sereys de Rothschild, vice chairman of the French company, says marks a turning point toward maturity and top quality.

"Wine is an investment," he told me during a visit to Washington in May. "It takes time for the terroir to begin to express itself. Almagura is already 20 years old, but it is only 20 years old. There's still a lot of work to do."

And the project is evolving. From the initial 1996 vintage, Almagura has been a blend dominated by cabernet sauvignon, with a healthy dollop of carmenere providing a Chilean signature. In the early years, however, the carmenere was labeled as merlot;

Chile realized only in the 1990s that its merlot was actually carmenere. So the idea of tasting Bordeaux of old is newer than the Almaviva project.

But the wines are aging well. I tasted 12 vintages, from the initial 1996 through the not-yet-released 2015. All were delicious, with even the early vintages from the late 1990s remaining fresh and complex as they age. The 2007 was my favorite, having shed its youthful tannins but not yet taking on the patina of age, suggesting Almaviva hits its stride about 10 years after the vintage.

About a three-hour drive from Santiago, in the Millahue Valley, is Viña Vik. This a project of Alexander Vik, a Norwegian entrepreneur, but with a French connection: The initial winemaker was Patrick Valette, a former owner of Chateau Pavie in St. Emilion in Bordeaux and a prolific consultant for wineries in Bordeaux and Chile. Valette left Vik earlier this year to return to Bordeaux. I met with his successor, Cristián Vallejo, who oversees the futuristic winery — a property of nearly 11,000 acres in a horseshoe-shaped valley about 40 miles from the Pacific.

Vik is a no-expense-spared operation, with a luxury hotel and a restaurant with Michelin aspirations. While other Chilean wineries emphasize tradition, Vik opts for modernity. Many Chilean wines boast of their ungrafted vines, unaffected by phylloxera, even though there's no real way to tell if wines from ungrafted vines taste better. Vik's vines are all grafted to ensure even quality, using six different rootstocks in various parts of the vineyard, Vallejo says.

Viña Vik manages to walk the tightrope between power and elegance. “We don't want muscle wines,” Vallejo told me, referring to the overtly fruity, high-alcohol style that became popular with international wine critics over the past two decades. “Obviously, we are Chile, so we have color, density, structure and tannin. To make an elegant, well-balanced wine is a challenge.” High vine density in the vineyards and low yields per vine help preserve acidity while ripening grapes without too much sugar, he says.

Across the Andes in Argentina's Mendoza region, malbec replaces carmenere as the focus of Bordeaux history. When Pierre Lurton, director of Chateau Cheval Blanc in St. Emilion, came to Mendoza in the late 1990s, he wanted to re-create the style of Bordeaux in the 1850s, when malbec made up about 40 percent of the average red Bordeaux blend. Obviously, few people alive today have tasted that style, and the terroir of the high-altitude vineyards in the Andes foothills differs wildly from maritime Bordeaux. But malbec's prominence in Mendoza offered a unicorn of sorts — a chance to re-create history.

Lurton founded Cheval des Andes, a joint venture between Cheval Blanc and Terrazas de los Andes. Today, Cheval is a blend of malbec and cabernet sauvignon, with other Bordeaux varieties playing smaller roles. Winemaker Lorenzo Pasquini says Cheval, like Viña Vik, has moved away from the power-focused international style.

“Today we have more concentration on elegance and finesse instead of power,” Pasquini says. “That means complexity in the nose before intensity, and balance in the mouth before power.”

Bodegas Caro is a joint venture of [Catena Zapata](#), famous for pioneering Mendoza's wine renaissance and leading the exploration of high-altitude vineyards. Its partner is Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Lafite), the parent company of

Bordeaux's Chateau Lafite Rothschild. Like Cheval des Andes, Bodegas Caro was established in 1999, and with a long-term perspective.

"We want to make the most elegant wine in Argentina, and if we persevere over four or five decades, I think we can achieve it," says Caro's winemaker, Fernando Buscema.

For Caro, evolution over the first two decades hasn't been a change in style so much as an effort to find the best vineyards to produce the style of wine the Catenas and Rothschilds envision. "The key is in the vineyards, and it takes a lot of time to understand where to grow the right grapes," Buscema says.

Like many wineries in Mendoza, Caro has extended its reach south of Mendoza city, higher up in the Andes foothills. "Our focus now is on Altamira, south of Mendoza," Buscema told me. "We believe we can make really elegant wines there. But it took us nearly 20 years to reach that conclusion."

Such effort and investment do not come cheap. These wines range from about \$50 a bottle for the Caro to well into triple digits for Vik. They are trying to prove a point, and recapture a whiff of history.

New World innovation, meet French patience. The result is terrific, with more to come.

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Dave McIntyre writes about wine weekly. He also blogs at [dmwineline.com](http://dmwineline.com).  Follow @dmwine