

Chile's Cabernet Heartland

The Maipo Valley excels in the 2015 vintage BY KIM MARCUS



Clockwise from top left: The Maipo Valley's Viña Haras de Pirque winery, owned by Italian wine star Piero Antinori, produced a top Cabernet blend from 2011: **Viña Almaviva**. Winemaker Michel Friou scored with a classic-rated red; a worker picks grapes at Los Vascos, which released one of this report's best values.

Chile is a huge winemaking realm. Vineyards thrive in dozens of valleys that extend along its narrow geography for almost 500 miles, from the green, verdant south to the desert dryness of the north. There are many fascinating districts, but for sheer concentration of top-rated wines, the Maipo Valley, located roughly in the center of the country, dominates, especially when it comes to reds based on Cabernet Sauvignon.

The Maipo shares many of the attributes of its neighboring regions: a moderate Mediterranean-like climate, fertile soils, water from melting Andean snows and talented vintners striving to excel. In the Maipo, however, these traits are accentuated to form a near-perfect environment for the production of Cabernet Sauvignons that compare favorably with versions from California or Bordeaux, yet often at a fraction of the price.

In this report, 10 of the 21 wines scoring 92 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale are from the Maipo, including two of the three wines in the classic range (95 to 100 points). Overall, I have blind-tasted nearly 275 wines from Chile in the past year, with an impressive 72 of them receiving outstanding scores of 90 points or higher. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at www.winespectator.com/053118.)

The leader of the pack comes from one of the Maipo's leading subappellations, Puente Alto. Elegant and rich, the Concha y Toro Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor 2015 (96 points, \$120) offers concentrated red fruit flavors and suave tannins.

The Maipo is named for the river that flows from the Andes to the Pacific Ocean just south of the Chilean capital of Santiago. The region is dry, with only about 12 inches of rainfall per year.

Water from the river is used to irrigate the vineyards, and cool breezes from the Pacific help keep summers mild. Perhaps most importantly, deep gravelly soils built upon water-retentive clays and loams offer a complex mix of *terroirs*.

The region's commercial winemaking culture is based on a solid foundation as well. Its origins date to the mid-19th century, when vintners from Bordeaux sought to explore new frontiers because their native land was devastated by the root louse phylloxera. Today, the Maipo has more than 31,000 acres of vineyards, about half that of California's Sonoma County.

"The thing I like about the Cabernet Sauvignon from the Maipo is the texture of the tannins," says Sebastián Ruiz, winemaker for Viña Tarapacá, which makes well-priced reds from its 1,400-acre Rosario estate in the Maipo, led in this report by its pure-tasting Cabernet Sauvignon Gran Reserva 2014 (91, \$18). "When the wines are young, the tannins are very present. But with time they become integrated. They become elegant and finely textured," Ruiz adds.

The best wines from the Maipo come from vineyards where the roots grow deep into rocky and alluvial soils in their search for water and nutrients, promoting balanced tannins and flavors. For example, the soils at Tarapacá are 12 feet deep, and, at the Don Melchor estate, vines' roots extend more than 20 feet into the earth through layers of gravel laid down by the ancient course of the river.

Other top-scorers from the Maipo include the Viña Almaviva Puente Alto 2015 (95, \$130), a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot; the Viña Santa Rita Cabernet Sauvignon Casa Real 2013 (94, \$85), explosively fruity and rich-tasting; and the Casas del Bosque Cabernet Sauvignon Gran Bosque Private Reserve 2014 (94, \$60), with impressive concentration to the red fruit flavors.

Four particularly well-priced Cabernet-based Maipo reds come from high-altitude parcels in the river's watershed. Such locations help to promote the fresh and pure fruit flavors evident in the Concha y Toro Pirque Terrunyo Block Las Terrazas 2015 (93, \$40), William Fevre La Misión Gran Reserva 2013 (92, \$20), Viña San Pedro 1865 Selected Vineyards 2015 (91, \$18) and Viña Casablanca Nimbus Single Vineyard 2015 (91, \$18).

Famed Italian vintner Piero Antinori has recently doubled down on his stake in the Alto Maipo, home to many high-elevation vineyards. Last year Antinori purchased the remaining 50 percent of a winery called Haras de Pirque, which he previously ran as a joint venture with a local vintner. The estate covers almost 250 acres planted at

elevations ranging from 1,800 to 2,100 feet above sea level and features a state-of-the-art winery.

"I really believe in the potential of the area," says Antinori chief winemaker Renzo Cotarella, who is in charge of the project. Cotarella is planning an extensive replanting of the vineyards and is working from a very impressive base of quality. The most recent release is the Haras de Pirque Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Hussonet Gran Reserva 2013 (90, \$15), a crisp, fresh-tasting mix of dried green herbal notes and crushed red fruit flavors.

Many of Chile's current releases hail from the 2015 vintage, which ranks as one of the country's best in recent memory. The vintage came as a welcome relief for vintners amid a series of challenging harvests that have been quite anomalous in the



The Elqui Valley in northern Chile is one of the country's leading sources for Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc.

Rating Red Wine Vintages in Chile

2016	87	Untimely rains in key regions such as Colchagua, Maipo and Casablanca cut yields and led to less concentrated flavors, particularly for reds	Drink or hold
2015	92	A warm growing season and good harvest weather delivered powerful Cabernet Sauvignons and crisp, fruity Pinot Noirs; average quality for whites	Drink or hold
2014	88	Spring frost cut crop, yet good quality fruit was harvested, leading to crisp reds and savory whites	Drink or hold
2013	91	Cool vintage, delivering fresh, well-structured wines with good balance in terms of concentration and flavor	Drink or hold
2012	91	Warm summer weather resulted in an early harvest, with clean, disease-free fruit and yields 15 percent above average; late-ripening Carmenère performed well	Drink or hold
2011	90	Markedly cool and cloudy, with low yields leading to a harvest of clean fruit; early releases show fresh, elegant profiles	Drink or hold
2010	89	Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère saw lower yields and delayed ripening, while early-ripening varieties in coastal areas excelled, with bright acidity and elegant fruit flavors	Drink
2009	88	Warm, very dry growing season, with slightly higher yields; inland valleys more variable than cooler coastal spots. Whites are ripe and forward; tannin management key for reds	Drink

A score range indicates preliminary analysis based on barrel samples and/or a limited sampling; many wines of the vintage not yet reviewed.

Vintage ratings: 95-100, classic; 90-94, outstanding; 85-89, very good; 80-84, good; 75-79, mediocre; 50-74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the ageworthy wines have yet to fully mature.

typically tranquil Chilean climate.

In 2014, a severe spring frost decimated yields, particularly for Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir from coastal regions such as Casablanca. On the upside, quality was high for the grapes that were eventually harvested, especially for resilient varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

In 2016, untimely rains in Colchagua, Maipo and Casablanca cut yields and affected red wine grapes most adversely, resulting in less-concentrated flavors. It is the weakest vintage of the three most readily available in the marketplace now.

Looking ahead, 2017 was a very warm year, delivering ripe reds, and though southern wine regions such as Itata were affected by a series of devastating wildfires that destroyed a smattering of vineyards, wines with off flavors from smoke taint are rare.

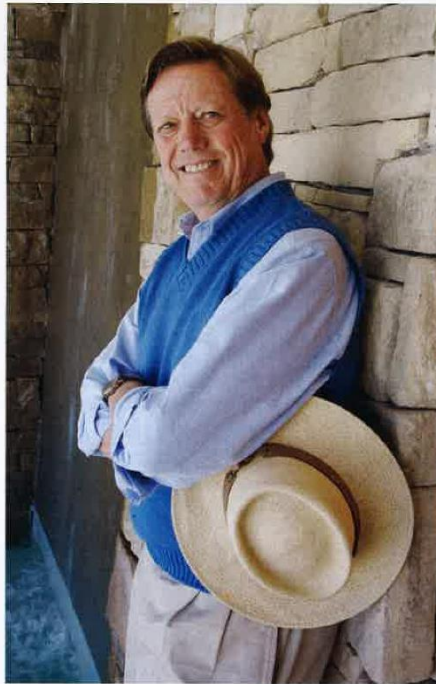
For now, the best advice is to stock up on the well-balanced 2015s while also searching for highlights from 2013 and 2014. Don Melchor winemaker Enrique Tirado calls 2015 “a fantastic year,” with the crop coming in close to normal. “In each part of the season, we had perfect weather, from flowering and fruit set to the harvest. It was a balanced growing season that helped the maturity of the tannins with fresh colors and flavors.” Michel Friou, winemaker at Almaviva, concurs, and says the warm and dry weather of the vintage resulted in well-rounded tannins, though they required careful management.

Beyond Cabernet, Chile puts out a number of other worthwhile reds. One fascinating and sometimes perplexing variety is Carmenère. With origins in Bordeaux, it is now grown almost exclusively in Chile, where it delivers crisp reds notable for their green herbal shadings. It is a key component in many of the country's top red blends.

In the hands of skilled winemakers who can control its more assertive characteristics, Carmenère can make some of Chile's most profound bottlings. The obverse is that too many versions taste astringent and overly vegetal. According to vintners I've talked to about this paradox, the key is to harvest ripe grapes, with the exposure to sunlight created by leaf thinning and pruning mitigating the formation of green-flavored pyrazine compounds.

The highest-scoring blend in which Carmenère takes a leading role is Casa Lapostolle's Borobo. The Borobo 2013 (95, \$135) is 40 percent Carmenère, with the remainder Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Pinot Noir. It is rich, with dark fruit and creamy flavors, and made under the oversight of peripatetic France-based consultant Michel Rolland.

Pioneering vintner Aurelio Montes hits the mark with his consistently top-scoring Purple Angel Colchagua Valley 2014 (93, \$90), a plush and intensely spicy blend of Carmenère and Petit



Aurelio Montes has a sterling track record for quality in Chile.



Verdot. A powerful single-variety version was made by Viña Santa Rita, the Carmenère Apalta Pehuén 2013 (92, \$70), which strikes a good equilibrium between a core of red fruit flavors and notes of dried green herbs. Viña Santa Rita also scores with its Carmenère Colchagua Valley Medalla Real Gran Reserva 2015 (91, \$18), offering dark fruit and black olive flavors.

Syrah is another leading source of quality from Chile, exemplified by the rich and juicy Viña Polkura Marchigüe Block G+I 2014 (92, \$42), with concentrated dark currant and cherry flavors, and the svelte Viñedos Lagar de Bezana Cachapoal Valley Edición Limitada 2014 (91, \$40), with good concentration to the bright red fruit flavors. The Viña Montes Colchagua Valley Limited Edition 2014 (89, \$15) posts an impressive quality-to-price ratio.

With white wines, Chardonnay leads in quality and provides a solid array of styles, such as the minerally Lapostolle Casablanca Valley Cuvée Alexandre Atalayas Vineyard 2015 (90, \$24), the plush Viña Haras de Pirque Maipo Valley Reserva 2016 (89, \$10) and the delicate Concha y Toro Limarí Valley Marques de Casa Concha 2016 (89, \$22).

Sauvignon Blanc is Chile's other major white wine. It represents a mixed bag stylistically, with too many versions featuring assertive acidity and green flavors. The best, however, are fruity and fresh-tasting, such as the Casas del Bosque Casablanca Valley Reserva 2016 (88, \$13) and Los Vascos Casablanca Valley 2017 (88, \$14).

Chile remains a work in progress. The country's vintners are intent on honing their viticultural techniques and pushing the envelope in myriad *terroirs*, ever-mindful of strong competition on the world stage. The Maipo remains the locus of quality in Chile, and a beacon for greater things to come.

Senior editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Chile.

Kim Marcus' Recommended Wines From Chile

Nearly 275 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at www.winespectator.com/053118. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
CONCHA Y TORO Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor 2015 This elegant and rich-tasting red is filled with concentrated red plum, cherry and currant flavors, backed by suave tannins.	96	\$120
VIÑA ALMAVIVA Puente Alto 2015 Powerful and rich, this is full of juicy dark plum, cherry tart and berry compote flavors that are creamy and lush. Cabernet blend.	95	\$130
LAPOSTOLLE Borobo Chile 2013 Dense, rich and powerful, with ripe flavors of dried blackberry, kirsch and dark currant that feature plenty of mocha notes. Carmenère blend.	95	\$135
CASAS DEL BOSQUE Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Gran Bosque Private Reserve 2014 This is big and rich, with powerful red fruit and savory flavors that are supported by medium-grained tannins.	94	\$60
VIÑA SANTA RITA Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Casa Real 2013 Explosively fruity and rich-tasting, offering concentrated flavors of blackberry, raspberry and dark plum that are nicely framed.	94	\$85
VIK Milla Cala Cachapoal Valley 2012 Rich and refined, offering unctuous dark fruit and spice flavors, with slate and mineral accents that linger. Cabernet blend.	94	\$39
CONCHA Y TORO Cabernet Sauvignon Pirque Terrunyo Terrunyo Block Las Terrazas 2015 An unctuous red, dripping with molten chocolate notes that wrap around concentrated dark and red fruit flavors.	93	\$40
VIÑA CONO SUR Pinot Noir Casablanca Valley Ocio 2014 Unctuously ripe and rich, this is full of concentrated dark cherry, plum and spice flavors that are supported by medium-grained tannins.	93	\$75
LAPOSTOLLE Clos Apalta Limited Release Colchagua Valley 2013 Well-structured and powerful, showing red raspberry and dark plum flavors supported by fresh acidity. Carmenère blend.	93	\$135
VIÑA MONTES Purple Angel Colchagua Valley 2014 Svelte and plush, with concentrated dark plum and cherry pie flavors that are loaded with Asian spice notes. Carmenère and Petit Verdot.	93	\$90
VIÑA SIEGEL Ketran Cordon De Fuego Colchagua Valley 2013 Big-shouldered, with robust flavors of roasted plum, dried berry and cherry tart that are flanked by plenty of savory accents. Syrah blend.	93	\$75
VIÑA HARAS DE PIRQUE Albis Maipo Valley 2011 Offers dark plum, blackberry and black cherry flavors, with notes of hot stone and dried beef. Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère.	92	\$50
VIÑA POLKURA Syrah Marchigüe Block G+I 2014 Rich and juicy, with concentrated dark currant and dark cherry flavors that are pure and mineral. Shows pepper hints on the finish.	92	\$42
VIÑA SANTA RITA Carmenère Apalta Pehuén 2013 Elegant, rich and powerful, offering focused flavors of raspberry, red currant and plum, with vibrant acidity and suave tannins.	92	\$70
MIGUEL TORRES Pinot Noir Empedrado Escaleras de Empedrado 2013 Concentrated and elegant flavors of cherry, berry, plum and currant are well-integrated and supported by silky tannins.	92	\$100

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
VIÑA SAN PEDRO Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley 1865 Selected Vineyards 2015 A refined red, with impressive length to the intense red plum, cherry and raspberry flavors, supported by crisp acidity.	91	\$18
VIÑA SANTA EMA Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Reserva 2015 Dark plum and dried red berry flavors dominate this muscular red, with plenty of minty and savory accents.	91	\$15
VIÑA TARAPACÁ Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Gran Reserva 2014 A firm and pure-tasting red, with graphite and slate notes to the dried plum and cherry tart flavors.	91	\$18
CASAS DEL BOSQUE Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Gran Reserva 2015 Powerful and rich-tasting, with concentrated flavors of dried raspberry and plum tart accented by plenty of toasty notes.	90	\$17
VIÑA SIEGEL 1234 Reserva Colchagua Valley 2015 Dark currant and roasted plum flavors show lots of freshness, along with crushed green herb accents. Syrah blend.	90	\$15
VERAMONTE Pinot Noir Casablanca Valley 2016 A suave red, with plenty of savory spice notes to the cherry, dried currant and red berry flavors that are flush with cedary accents.	90	\$12
VIÑEDOS ERRÁZURIZ OVALLE Cabernet Sauvignon Colchagua Valley Viñedos Marchigüe Santa Marta Vineyard Reserva 2014 Polished, with fine-grained tannins and firm acidity supporting the red fruit flavors.	89	\$11
LAPOSTOLLE Cabernet Sauvignon Rapel Valley Casa Grand Selection 2015 Rich and juicy, with concentrated raspberry and red currant flavors, flanked by savory dried herbal accents.	89	\$14
VIÑEDOS EMILIANA Chardonnay Bío Bío Valley Natura Un-Oaked 2016 Honeysuckle notes enliven apple, citrus and gooseberry flavors.	88	\$11
VIÑA MONTES Cabernet Sauvignon Colchagua Valley Classic Series 2015 Shows cherry and raspberry flavors with a supple, mineral edge.	88	\$13
CONCHA Y TORO Carmenère Central Valley Casillero del Diablo Reserva 2016 A crisp red, with fresh green herbal notes to the juicy red fruit flavors.	87	\$11
VIÑA CONO SUR Sauvignon Blanc Chile Bicicleta 2016 Peach, dried apricot and melon flavors are juicy in this fruity style.	87	\$12
VIÑA MAIPO Vitral Reserva Chile 2015 A spicy red, with juicy blackberry and plum flavors. Syrah blend.	87	\$11
VIÑA SANTA CAROLINA Sauvignon Blanc Leyda Valley Reserva 2017 Offers peach and grapefruit flavors that fold into a crisp package.	87	\$12
LOS VASCOS Chardonnay Central Valley 2017 Fresh and crisp-tasting, with flavors of ripe citrus and green apple.	87	\$14
VIA WINES Pinot Noir Maule Valley Chilensis Reserva 2016 Offers plum and dark cherry flavors that show notes of sandalwood.	86	\$10