

Reporte de Vendimia 2006

by Grant Phelps, Chief Winemaker.

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Introduction

As yet another winter begins here in Chile I once again find myself sitting in front of my computer about to relate the events of the recently completed harvest after what has been not only another very challenging but also somewhat arduous vintage here at Viu Manent. 2006 represents my fourth harvest here at Viu (already my sixth in Chile) which means that I have now completed more harvests in Chile than in any other single country in which I have made wine, including my native New Zealand. Because of this I feel that I can say with some authority that whilst Chile always experiences a comparatively long harvest the 2006 harvest has to be a new record. Whilst I got to spend my birthday this year on top of our machine harvester supervising the picking of our first Sauvignon Blanc grapes on February 20th the last red grapes were not picked until May 17th which adds up to a harvest of 86 days from start to finish – 10 days longer than our previous record set in 2003.

THE CLIMATE

After a reasonably wet winter (with 900mm of precipitation compared with the annual average of 600mm) the 2006 growing season kicked off with an earlier budbreak than normal (by about 7 days). The first buds to swell and split open to reveal the new green shoots of the season were those of the Malbec in El Olivar and Chardonnay in San Carlos (both on the 17th of August). The commencement of budbreak was unfortunately followed three and half weeks later by a cold snap beginning on September 12th and resulting in two consecutive nights of sub-zero temperatures in all of the wine producing valleys from Casablanca south. Whilst some areas such as Casablanca were particularly hard hit the frost only affected certain parts of the Colchagua Valley. Our two largest vineyards (San Carlos and El Olivar) fortunately escaped damage however the temperature at La Capilla dropped as low as -2.2°C resulting in all of the new shoots of the Cabernet Sauvignon at this vineyard being frosted resulting not only in a 60% reduction in crop loads but also a 3 week delay in the commencement of ripening.

While a spring frost is not uncommon in Casablanca a frost at this time in Colchagua is virtually unheard of (indeed I talked with some of the veteran vineyard workers here at Viu who told me they couldn't recall ever having seen a September frost in all of their 40+ years working in our vineyards).

The frosts were followed by a largely sunny September and October with warmer than average daytime temperatures which seemed to suggest that we were once again on track for a good vintage. This pattern changed however at the beginning of November with cool, overcast, windy days being the norm right through until the end of December. This cooler weather was most marked during flowering (from November 3rd to 15th) resulting in poor fruit set. As is often the case in nature the vines naturally compensated for the lower number of berries per bunch determined at flowering time by forming larger berries. This translated into crop levels quite different from the norm. In some cases crop levels were below average, as was the case with the Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon in San Carlos (25% and 16% below average, respectively). In other cases crop levels were well above average as was the case with the San Carlos Sauvignon Blanc and Malbec (37% and 20% above average, respectively).

Whilst December saw cooler temperatures than average January brought some extremely hot temperatures. The 24th and 25th of January saw record temperatures being recorded in most regions in Chile (in the case of the Central Valley it was the hottest recorded temperature in over 100 years). Our vineyards were no exception with temperatures of 51°C and 41°C being recorded at El Olivar and La Capilla, respectively.

2006 was a relatively dry year with no precipitation whatsoever during February and March. The first rain of 8mm fell on April 12th which was after all of the whites were already in and thus its effect was minimal. The second more serious rain of 31mm fell on April 19th which, because it was immediately followed by hot sunny weather, caused little damage. A third rain of 5mm fell on May 15th after all of the grapes (with the exception of the late harvest) had already been picked.

In summary, the aforementioned factors (temperature spikes, frosts and poor fruit set) all combined to create a general lack of balance in the vineyard the end result of which was berries which whilst high in sugar concentration were lacking in flavour and tannin ripeness (especially in the skins) making it necessary to leave the grapes hanging until physiological maturity had caught up. This translated into a year which for me was one of the most challenging not to mention nerve wracking of my career. In the end we waited over 3 weeks beyond the usual start date for the red harvest beginning to harvest significant amounts of red grapes only on April 17th. Combined with the larger than average crops this year this resulted in not only the most compressed but also one of the biggest harvests in the history of the winery.

THE WHITES

The big news for 2006 is that for the first time we had the opportunity to work with Sauvignon Blanc grapes from the Casablanca Valley for the Secreto Sauvignon 2006. Casablanca has for a long time been the centre of the Sauvignon universe here in Chile and whilst I have always maintained that it is possible to make very expressive, attractive Sauvignon here in Colchagua, Casablanca (with its fresh coastal breezes and morning fogs) is undoubtedly better suited to the variety. The best proof of this is in the glass with this year's Secreto Sauvignon showing intensely mineral notes and lashings of exotic fruit such as guava, fijoá along with nectarine and ripe pear. I think it will compare favourably with some of my favourite Sauvignons from the Awatere Valley of Marlborough, New Zealand. Both the Reserve and Varietal Sauvignons were once again sourced 100% from our San Carlos vineyards and whilst not as concentrated as the fairly exceptional 2005's both wines continue in the style of their predecessors with nice minerality, fresh citrus flavours and marked natural acidity. They should both make for excellent summer sippers for the coming northern hemisphere summer.

Unfortunately the September frosts did severely damage the vineyard of our contract grower in Casablanca meaning that availability of our Reserve Chardonnay will once again be limited. Quality was however good this year despite the delay in ripening caused by the frost. In the end we were amongst the last to pick in Casablanca on the 19th of April (compared with a harvest date of March 24th last year) and thus ripeness at harvest time was excellent. As was the case in 2005, the grapes were hand-picked, crushed to tank and cold macerated for 12 hours before the free run juice was drained directly to a selection of new and used French barrels where it was fermented with selected yeasts. Although it is still early days the components in barrel are looking extremely promising at this time.

Due to the 25% drop in production in our Chardonnay blocks here at San Carlos the Varietal Chardonnay 2006 shows some lovely concentration although quantities may be somewhat limited compared with the previous edition. Due to cooler temperatures during February and early March flavour development was ideal with the retention of good natural acidity. A light leaf pluck was carried out approximately one week prior to the harvest in order to increase fruit exposure and therefore encourage the development of more exotic fruit flavours in the grapes. Once again the grapes were all machine harvested at night to minimise juice temperature and thus juice oxidation. 80% of the juice was then cold fermented in stainless steel with selected yeasts with the remaining 20% 'warm fermented' (at 22-23°C) in 2nd and 3rd use oak barrels. With the first part of the blend already in the bottle I can safely say that this year's version maintains the style

of the 2005 showing lovely fresh acidity, plenty of citrus character along with attractive passionfruit and guava notes with just a touch of walnut coming through from the barrel fermented and lees stirred component.

The Viognier Secreto was once again hand harvested (on April 5th) and the grapes whole bunch pressed in order to minimise phenolic pick-up. This was followed by five days of cold settling and a cool fermentation in stainless steel. The finished wine is quite different to the 2004/2005 in that it is much tighter and steely showing predominantly mineral, green stonefruit notes at this stage. As was the case with the 2004 and 2005, this wine will improve with 12 months of bottle ageing although it is definitely a more elegant, feminine style and thus is unlikely to develop the more opulent, exotic notes of some of its predecessors. For this reason however I would suspect that the '06 will be the most food friendly version we have yet produced.

The rains of April and May resulted in the best early Botrytis infection in our 40+ year old Semillon vines that I had ever seen here at Viu. However, any hopes of 2006 turning into a landmark year for sticky production were dashed when we were forced to pick earlier than anticipated on May 30th and 31st due to a forecasted 5 days of heavy rain (and at 150mm and still counting it is a good thing indeed that we did decide to pick). Whilst 2006 hasn't produced a year of the outstanding quality of 2004 (the same wine which recently picked up the trophy for best sweet wine at the 2006 Wines of Chile competition) we did get the grapes off with a clean Botrytis infection of about 40% resulting in a juice with good concentration (34°Brix) and very good natural acidity. Although it has just started fermenting in barrel the juice is already showing lovely aromas of pineapple and apricot and should produce a wine with 11.5°Alc and 130g/L of residual sugar and thus similar in style to the 2003 vintage.

THE REDS

Although 2006 was without a doubt a challenging red vintage and bearing in mind that it is still early days I can say that my first impressions of the 2006 reds are largely positive. As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the timing of harvest was more crucial this year than ever in order to obtain wines of optimum balance and concentration. Although harvest began about 3 weeks later than usual we were careful to pick before the grapes began to develop jammy, overripe flavours which tend to rob the wines of their personality and leave them with a 'soupy' structure. Because of increased production at the majority of our red vineyards this year it also became necessary to bleed-off juice from the tanks immediately after crushing in order to increase the skin:juice ratio of the remaining must in the tank in order to regain some of the concentration lost in the vineyard.

The real stars of the vintage at this point are the Syrah and Malbec. The Syrah from El Olivar are showing lovely concentration and spice and whilst they have a firm tannic backbone they are not at all drying and thus should mature well in barrel to produce yet another successful version of the Syrah Secreto. The Syrah from San Carlos is also looking very attractive at this stage with nice berryfruit and just a hint of the menthol so typical of these grapes.

The Malbec from El Olivar which has traditionally suffered from problems with fruit set and berry shrivel this year unusually had better fruit set than ever and consequently few problems with dehydration. The result of this was a slightly high crop load of 12t/ha (about double the normally low crop of 6t/ha) which we corrected by bleeding off 20% of the juice here in the winery. The Malbec from San Carlos has only just been drained off skins and put to barrel and thus it is still going through malolactic fermentation but at this stage quality looks good and we have some promising material for the Malbec Single Vineyard. The jury is still out as to whether we will produce a Viu 1 from the 2006 vintage although there are a couple of components which could yet surprise us.

Overall Carmenere also seems to have done well from the 2006 vintage. Despite crop levels at La Capilla which were 20% above average we still only cropped at 8.5t/ha which is still relatively low compared with the national average for this variety. This combined with a 10% bleed-off in the winery has led to wines with nice density, plenty of typical spicy Carmenere character and good richness. Most importantly tannin ripeness this year has been excellent in this variety.

2006 was also a surprisingly good year for Merlot at El Olivar with higher than average crop levels and also better than average quality. Based on initial tastings our Merlot Varietal 2006 should be every bit as good as its predecessor.

Cabernet Sauvignon had a difficult year firstly because of the frosts at La Capilla and secondly due to the delay in ripening caused by the difficult climatic conditions. Although crops were well below average (16% down in San Carlos, 19% down in El Olivar and 59% down in La Capilla) quality has been good overall. Although 2006 will not be remembered as a blockbuster Cabernet year the wines all have nice balance, good natural acidities and despite being very young are showing nice elegance. Although there is a hint of green bell pepper in some of the wines tannins are ripe and there is plenty of cassis in evidence so I am very happy with the results considering the adverse conditions for this variety this year.

And on that note I will wrap the vintage report for another year with our traditional adieu: "Salud con vinos Viu!"