



Vina Santa Ema, located in the Maipo Valley winegrowing region, makes a diverse range of well-priced reds and whites.

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# CHILE'S **BIG RED** MACHINE

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Cabernets, Carmenères and blends dominate, from top-tier bottlings to stellar values

**BY KIM MARCUS**

**C**hile has made great strides in diversifying its quality winemaking portfolio over the past two decades. Once undistinguished, the country's Sauvignon Blanc bottlings now routinely can compete on the world stage; monotone and over-oaked Chardonnays have become crisper and more focused; and Pinot Noirs have sprinted out of the gate and are now surging across the country's cool-climate districts.

It all adds up to an enticing mix of flavors, styles and new wines. But Chile's best and most powerful bottlings remain its big reds. The most exciting and accessible of these are based on Cabernet Sauvignon. Chile excels with wines that can easily best counterparts made in California or France in the \$15 to \$40 price range.

In addition to Cabernet, Chilean vintners make reds from their version of the Carmenère grape. Both varieties are bottled alone or in blends, together and with other red grapes.

The highest-scoring wine in this report, which covers the nearly 250 wines from Chile that I've



Sebastián Labbe of Viña Carmen, in the Maipo Valley, released a luscious and affordable Cabernet Sauvignon from the 2012 vintage. Among the country's leading varieties, Chilean Cabernets can compete with bottlings from France and California.



blind-tasted in *Wine Spectator's* New York office over the past year, is the Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor 2012 (95 points on the 100-point scale, \$125) made by Chile's biggest wine company, Concha y Toro, which is a juggernaut for quality across a wide range of price points. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available at [www.winespectator.com/053116](http://www.winespectator.com/053116).)

Don Melchor is Concha y Toro's flagship, and the 2012 is 93 percent Cabernet Sauvignon and 7 percent Cabernet Franc. Refined and complex, with rich berry and red fruit flavors supported by suave tannins, it is a testament to the vision and dedication of winemaker Enrique Tirado and ranks with the world's great Cabernets.

Although Don Melchor stands at the pinnacle of Chilean wine-making, many other iconic bottlings, despite offering notable quality, are pricey for a nation that still qualifies as an emerging wine region. Overall, about 20 percent of Chile's recent releases, all of them red, scored an outstanding 90 points or higher.

Most of the leading producers make cuvées similar in style to their iconic bottlings but at a fraction of the price, thus qualifying as good entry points for discovering what this South American country has to offer. In Concha y Toro's case, the Cabernet Sauvignon Pirque Terrunyo Block Las Terrazas 2013 (91, \$40) features concentrated dark fruit flavors supported by zesty acidity and accented by enticing pepper and minerally notes.

Other notable Cabernet Sauvignons from leading producers include Viña Carmen Maipo Valley Alto Gran Reserva 2012 (91, \$15), rich with luscious flavors of tar, licorice and dark plum; MontGras Maipo Valley Antu 2013 (91, \$19), which is suave, with flavors of raspberry, huckleberry and red plum supported by medium-grained tannins; and Casa Lapostolle Colchagua Valley Cuvée Alexandre Apalta Vineyard 2013 (90, \$24), with concentrated flavors of dried cherry, mint and raspberry that feature green olive notes.

Lesser-known wineries are also making top-notch Cabernets with formidable quality-to-price ratios, including Vitivinícola Pérez Cruz Maipo Valley Limited Edition 2013 (90, \$25), elegant and featuring lively hot stone and cedar accents; Odfjell Maipo Valley Armador 2013 (90, \$13), with a deep well of dark fruit and spice; and the powerful **Viu Manent Colchagua Valley Gran Reserva 2012 (90, \$14), with dried cherry, plum tart and raspberry ganache flavors.**

**B**eyond Cabernet, Chile offers a cornucopia of reds worth exploring, starting with Carmenère. Still, it pays to be picky. Originally from Bordeaux, this variety is all but extinct in France but has found a niche in Chile. Although some vintners tout it as the nation's signature red, its track record is mixed, with too many wines dominated by intense green herb and pepper notes and chewy tannins.

Better versions are plush, spicy and filled with dark fruit flavors. One of Chile's benchmark reds is Lapostolle's Clos Apalta. The 2005 vintage was *Wine Spectator's* Wine of the Year in 2008, and the 2012 (93, \$135), a blend of 66 percent Carmenère, 19 percent Merlot and 15 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, is very creamy, with concentrated flavors of dark plum, blackberry and chocolate.

Concha y Toro delivers again with its Carmenère Peumo Serie Riberas Gran Reserva 2014 (90, \$17), a rich style with dark fruit flavors that are intensely spiced.

Other notable reds include the Viñedos Lagar de Bezana Aluvion Alto Cachapoal 2013 (90, \$29), a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Carmenère; the Odfjell Carignan

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**BONUS VIDEO:** Americans love Cabernet, and Chile produces some delicious examples. What makes these wines distinctive? Kim Marcus talks with the winemaker who helped put Chilean Cabs in our glasses, Aurelio Montes. Watch them at [www.winespectator.com/053116](http://www.winespectator.com/053116).

MAP: HENRY ENG

Maule Valley Orzada 2013 (90, \$21), filled with currant and dried berry; the Viña Santa Ema Merlot Maipo Valley Reserva 2013 (90, \$15), with savory notes to its red fruit flavors; Altamana Malbec Maule Grande Reserve 2014 (90, \$18), svelte and minerally; and the Casas del Bosque Pinot Noir Casablanca Valley Reserva 2013 (89, \$15), rich and finely crafted.

Among white wines, Sauvignon Blanc provides the widest diversity of flavors and styles. The best Sauvignons are fruit-forward and downplay the green herbal accents that plague many bottlings. The top-scoring version is the Garcia & Schwaderer Casablanca Valley Special Selection Marina 2014 (89, \$22), a minerally style, with stone, green peach and lemon-lime flavors.

Fresh and fruity is the Viñedos Emiliana Casablanca Valley Natura 2014 (88, \$12), with peach, apricot and green apple flavors. For a creamy style, try Los Vascos Casablanca Valley 2015 (88, \$14) or Viña Montes Leyda Valley Spring Harvest 2015 (87, \$16).

If you're looking for crisp, snappy Chardonnays, try the Viña Santa Ema Leyda Valley Reserva 2014 (89, \$15), with baked pear and lemon meringue flavors backed by plenty of fresh acidity; and the Viña Santa Rita Leyda Valley Medalla Real Gran Reserva 2014 (89, \$18), an elegant, spicy style with plenty of citrus notes. Buttery versions include the Miguel Torres Chardonnay Limarí Valley Cordillera Reserva Especial 2012 (87, \$16) and the Casas del Bosque Casablanca Valley Gran Reserva 2013 (86, \$17).

**R**ecent vintages in Chile have reflected the relatively benign nature of its climate, dominated by a Mediterranean regime of cool, wet winters and dry summers,



Lapostolle winemaker Andrea León produced one of Chile's benchmark reds in 2012, the Carmenère-based Clos Apalta bottling, which blends in portions of Merlot and Cabernet.

## Rating Red Wine Vintages in Chile

2014	89	Spring frost cut crop; good quality fruit harvested; crisp reds, savory whites	Drink or hold
2013	90	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	A cool spring led to lower yields and delayed ripening for Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère, while early-ripening varieties in coastal areas excelled, with lots of bright acidity and elegant fruit flavors	Drink or hold
2009	88	Warm, very dry growing season, though yields were slightly higher than previous years; inland valleys more variable than cooler coastal spots. Whites are ripe and forward; tannin management key for reds	Drink or hold
2008	89	Long, very dry growing season resulted in reduced yields, but also greater concentration. Similar in style to 2003; achieving balance with sometimes rugged structures was key	Drink
2007	92	Cooler temperatures through the growing season resulted in a late harvest and reduced yields. Reds show supple textures and excellent length	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 the vintage has not yet been 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.

similar to California. The biggest threat came in 2014, when a hard spring frost cut the crop in many vineyards. The growing season was cooler than normal but delivered an average crop load in the end. Quality was very good overall, and I rate the vintage 89 points.

The 2015 vintage yielded a big crop. The growing season was long and finished late, with little or no rain, factors that usually indicate high quality and well-structured wines. "We have such a lovely climate [that] we don't have to do much in the tank. The wines naturally deliver good color and restrained tannins," says industry leader Aurelio Montes.

Yet climate change is a real concern for many Chilean vintners, who worry that meltwater from Andean snows, which irrigate the country's vineyards, may become less reliable in the future. Montes has instituted water-saving methods in his vineyards and has cut usage up to 70 percent in some plots.

"Someday we may have no rain and I want to know how to react. Water is a huge issue for the future," Montes says. Last year, vineyards in the northern Elquí region were abandoned because of a punishing drought. Fortunately, rains returned in force to the Southern Hemisphere this past winter, forestalling an immediate crisis.

In the meantime, interest is spreading across the country to improve practices in the vineyard and cellar, including using less oak in fermentation and aging to make more elegant wines. Foreign investment and winemaking talent continue to be attracted by the country's potential.

"Chile for the past 20 years was driven by the back office, but now there is a new generation that is leading the way," says Californian Paul Hobbs, who consults for San Pedro, the nation's third-largest winery. "Chile has had amazing economic growth, and the infrastructure has improved. Chile is on the move and that's exciting."

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

## Kim Marcus' Recommended Wines From Chile

Nearly 250 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at [www.winespectator.com/053116](http://www.winespectator.com/053116). WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

### TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>CONCHA Y TORO Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor 2012</b> Suave and refined, with rich flavors of dried berry, dark plum, rose petal and bramble. Offers fine-grained tannins and accents of olive. Finishes with hints of hot stone, dried beef and white pepper.	95	\$125
<b>CONCHA Y TORO Carmenère Peumo Carmín de Peumo 2013</b> Elegant and powerful, showing loads of dark berry, cherry and currant flavors, with notes of dark olive and allspice and a long, rich finish.	93	\$155
<b>LAPOSTOLLE Clos Apalta Limited Release Colchagua Valley 2012</b> A dense, ripe and powerful style, offering concentrated flavors of dark plum, blackberry and chocolate, with a rich finish.	93	\$135
<b>VIÑA MONTES Folly Santa Cruz 2012</b> Deeply flavored, rich, intense and well-structured, with concentrated flavors of dark plum, raspberry, blackberry and chocolate mousse.	93	\$90
<b>MONTGRAS Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Intriga Maxima 2012</b> Suave and expressive, with explosive, rich and fruity flavors of dark plum, blackberry and dried blueberry, accented by spice notes.	93	\$90
<b>VIÑA ALMAVIVA Puente Alto 2012</b> An elegant and refined red, showing concentrated cherry and plum flavors that take on meaty accents.	92	\$180
<b>CONCHA Y TORO Carmenère Peumo Terrunyo Block 27 2013</b> A rich and well-sculpted red, bursting with fresh flavors of dark plum, cherry tart and dried blackberry, followed by a complex finish.	92	\$40
<b>CONCHA Y TORO Syrah Buin Gravas del Maipo 2011</b> A dense and powerful red, delivering layers of dark fruit fringed by concentrated smoke and Asian spice notes, with a muscular finish.	92	\$150
<b>VITIVINÍCOLA PÉREZ CRUZ Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Pircas de Liguai 2012</b> Offers a seductive aroma of cedar and sandalwood, with flavors to match, as well as notes of red currant, roasted plum and cherry tart.	92	\$45
<b>VIÑA ERRÁZURIZ Pinot Noir Aconcagua Coast Las Pizarras 2014</b> Elegant and full of concentrated red plum and currant flavors, supported by fresh acidity. Minerally midpalate, with an herbal finish.	92	\$135
<b>VIÑA SAN PEDRO Cabo de Hornos Special Reserve Chile 2012</b> Powerful yet taut, with plenty of savory notes to the dried cherry and berry flavors, lingering with bittersweet chocolate details.	92	\$50
<b>VIÑA SANTA EMA Rivalta Limited Selection Maipo Valley 2012</b> This red is deep-flavored and rich, with plenty of minty notes. Dark plum, loganberry and dark currant elements dominate.	92	\$85
<b>VINICOLA VIK Millahue Cachapoal Valley 2011</b> A powerful, plush and juicy red, with plenty of up-front, concentrated flavors of dark plum, dried blackberry and cherry tart.	92	\$140
<b>VIU MANENT Viu 1 Colchagua Valley 2012</b> A ripe, rich and powerful red, with concentrated dark plum and dried blackberry flavors that are filled with dark chocolate and mineral.	92	\$75

### TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
<b>VIÑA CARMEN Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Alto Gran Reserva 2012</b> A rich red, offering luscious flavors of tar, licorice and plum.	91	\$15
<b>MONTGRAS Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Antu 2013</b> A suave red, with flavors of raspberry, huckleberry and red plum.	91	\$19
<b>ALTAMANA Malbec Maule Grande Reserve 2014</b> A svelte red, with fresh acidity to the plum, cherry and blueberry flavors.	90	\$18
<b>CONCHA Y TORO Carmenère Peumo Serie Riberas Gran Reserva 2014</b> Offers concentrated flavors of dark plum, dried blackberry and mocha.	90	\$17
<b>VIÑA SANTA EMA Merlot Maipo Valley Reserva 2013</b> Lush and spicy, with flavors of dark cherry, plum and dried raspberry.	90	\$15
<b>VIÑEDOS CALCU Cabernet Sauvignon Colchagua Valley 2013</b> Richly spiced, with muscular dried blackberry and cherry tart flavors.	89	\$14
<b>VIÑA MONTES Merlot Colchagua Valley Classic Series 2014</b> Red currant and dark plum flavors blend easily in this well-spiced red.	89	\$13
<b>ODFJELL Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Armador 2014</b> This offers plush flavors of cherry tart, plum and raspberry.	89	\$13
<b>VIÑA PALO ALTO Reserva II Maule Valley 2013</b> Shows toasty notes to the dark plum, mineral and cherry tart flavors.	89	\$12
<b>VIÑA SANTA RITA Chardonnay Leyda Valley Medalla Real Gran Reserva 2014</b> A spicy style, with elegant apple pastry and baked pineapple flavors.	89	\$18
<b>VIU MANENT Malbec Colchagua Valley Secreto 2014</b> Dense, with flavors of dried blackberry, mushroom and dark currant.	89	\$12
<b>APALTAGUA Chardonnay San Antonio Valley Unoaked Reserva 2014</b> Smoke notes accent the baked apple, pear and pineapple flavors.	88	\$13
<b>CASAS DEL BOSQUE Pinot Noir Casablanca Valley Reserva 2014</b> Sinewy, with spiced flavors of dried cherry, raspberry and dried beef.	88	\$15
<b>VIÑEDOS EMILIANA Sauvignon Blanc Casablanca Valley Natura 2014</b> Fruity and crisp, with flavors of peach, apricot and green apple.	88	\$12
<b>VIÑA KOYLE Carmenère Colchagua Valley Alto Gran Reserva 2013</b> Hot stone and cardamom notes accent plum and raspberry flavors.	88	\$17
<b>VIÑA MONTES Sauvignon Blanc Aconcagua Coast Classic Series 2015</b> Fruity, with touches of richness to the peach and ripe melon flavors.	88	\$13
<b>VIÑA SANTA EMA Chardonnay Leyda Valley Reserva 2015</b> Spicy and broad, with an array of apple pastry and pear tart flavors.	88	\$14
<b>CONCHA Y TORO Sauvignon Blanc Chile Casillero del Diablo Reserva 2015</b> Grapefruit and lemongrass flavors fill this zesty, well-structured white.	87	\$11
<b>VIÑA MONTES Pinot Noir Aconcagua Coast Limited Selection 2014</b> Lively, with good cut to the spiced cherry and dried beef flavors.	87	\$16
<b>VIÑA MONTES Sauvignon Blanc Leyda Valley Spring Harvest 2015</b> The melon, peach and apricot notes in this white are fruity and fresh.	87	\$16