

Reporte Vendimia 2004

Introduction

As autumn once again draws to a close here in Colchagua, I look out upon the vineyards in front of the winery here at Hacienda San Carlos. The last of the leaves of the past growing season are now yellowed and barely hanging on. Pruning is once again in full swing here at San Carlos with the oldest of our most ancient Malbec vines now receiving what must be their 150 th annual pruning. Already significant amounts of snow have been deposited on the Andes, with the highest 6,000m peaks, only 50kms distant, forming a spectacular back-drop for the winters vineyard activities.

So, with all of our grapes now safely harvested and with the first whites already bottled, the reds in barrel and, in the case of our Late Harvest Semillon, still fermenting in tank it is once again time to relate something of the wines created this year by our winemaking team.

THE CLIMATE

Flowering kicked-off earlier than usual in the spring of 2003 following an unusually mild and dry winter which was notable for the absence of snow on the nearby Andes at the eastern end of the Colchagua Valley. We received a total of only 440mm of rain throughout the 2003 winter (from May-September) compared with 970mm during the same period the previous year. This resulted in drier than normal soils at the commencement of spring and also a lower than usual water table. Because of this, flowering, beginning in late October, was on average one week earlier at San Carlos and La Capilla and two weeks early at El Olivar compared with 2002. A similar trend was noted for veraison with the red grapes changing colour earlier and in a more uniform fashion than is normal – an early indication of the quality of the coming harvest.

In contrast to the uncharacteristically hot 2003 vintage in Europe, the mean daily temperature in Colchagua was 27 ° C during the latter parts of summer and early autumn (January and February) which was 1.5 ° C below average. However crops in 2004 were about 20-30% down on average figures which resulted in very rapid ripening (the increased water stress during flowering and veraison was no doubt also partly responsible). This resulted in an earlier white harvest than is normal and whilst the reds in most cases already had the sugar levels at which we would normally harvest up to six weeks early it was obvious that tannin maturity was still lacking in the seeds and thus we elected to leave the fruit hanging until we felt that polyphenolic maturity was optimum.

The 2004 harvest was marred by three small rains (in contrast to the exceptionally dry 2003 harvest). The first rain of 15mm fell on March 2 nd after all of the Chardonnay and

Sauvignon Blanc had already been harvested and as the only remaining white was Viognier which is extremely thick skinned the whites were unaffected. Also this rain was too early to have any significant impact on the reds which were still in the early part of the ripening process and thus still with very hard skins. The second rain of 3mm on March 30 th was too small to have any impact and indeed as it was followed immediately by hot weather and sunlight the grapes dried almost instantaneously. The third rain of 24mm on April 13-14 fell after all of the reds except the last of the Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenere had already been harvested and as these varieties are very thick skinned rot levels remained effectively at zero until the completion of the harvest on April 19 th. A forth rain of 46 mm on April 20 th-23 rd fell after all of the grapes were already all in.

THE WHITES

In 2004 we continued our efforts to both improve and also assert a stylistic change in our white wine programme. It has always been my belief that wine is made in the vineyard and thus the energies of the viticultural team, lead by Viu Manent viticulturalist Jorge Perez, were very much concentrated on our Sauvignon Blanc leading up to the harvest. Following the success of last years Sauvignon Reserve we made the decision to convert all of our vineyards over to a Vertical Shoot Positioned (or upright) canopy thus abandoning our work with the Scott-Henry (or divided) canopy. The reason for this is my firm belief that Sauvignon is always best when grown with plenty of foliage to protect its sensitive grapes from the sun. This has always been my experience in New Zealand even though the sun is not as hot there as in Chile. When Sauvignon grapes are left to mature in the shade of the grapevine canopy they tend to retain not only more natural acidity but also more herbaceous/stone-fruit characters producing a fresher, more intense style.

Whereas last year we followed a strategy of harvesting the Sauvignon grapes in three distinct stages, in 2004 I felt I had come to grips with which grape flavours would produce the best wine thus harvesting the majority of the grapes in one hit. Once again the decision to harvest was based entirely on grape flavours as assessed by myself and fellow Viu Manent winemaker, Juan-Pablo Lecaros. Consequently harvest was carried out not only earlier but also over a shorter period of time from the 19 th-24 th of February (compared with February 25 th-March 14 th in 2003). Now that both the 2004 Varietal, Reserve and Secreto are all in the bottle I can say with confidence that we are on the right track these wines all being a statement in bright, racy acidity and freshness with concentrated green flavours of lime and fijoa along with quince and passionfruit leading to rich, sweaty, mineral notes on the finish.

2004 marked a departure from tradition for our Reserve Chardonnay programme as we decided to source, for the first time, grapes from outside of Colchagua. This was based

on our desire to pursue a more mineral, overtly cool climate style of Reserve Chardonnay. In order to achieve this, grapes were purchased from a small, well managed vineyard at the eastern end of the Casablanca valley. Yields for 2004 were very low in Casablanca owing to a spring frost during flowering. Thus our vines there had a crop of only 6 tonnes/hectare (2.5 t/acre) resulting in extremely intense, concentrated grapes picked not only with excellent ripeness but also with very high levels of natural acidity. The grapes were hand-picked on April 2nd, 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 both wild and selected yeasts. The results at this point look nothing short of stunning.

Our entry level Varietal Chardonnay was once again sourced entirely from our San Carlos estate with harvest being carried out about a week earlier than in 2003 (from February 23rd-27th). Due to the cooler temperatures during January/February flavour development was ideal with the retention of a good deal of natural acidity along with a predominantly citrus flavour profile. 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 some 'creme brulee' type flavours in the grapes. Once again it was apparent early on that the timing of the harvest was paramount to achieve a wine with the desired flavour characteristics. In order to achieve this either Juan-Pablo or myself were in the vineyard on a daily basis tasting each and every block in the weeks leading up to the harvest. The grapes were all machine harvested at night to minimise juice temperature and thus juice oxidation. 75% of the juice was then cold fermented in stainless steel with selected yeasts with the remaining 25% 'warm fermented' (at 22-23 °C) in 2nd and 3rd use oak barrels.

2004 marked the second year of significant Viognier production here at Viu Manent. Viognier, which originally comes from the Rhone Valley of France, is still a relatively new variety here in Chile and indeed it is an entirely different beast to either Sauvignon or Chardonnay. As with all things in life, practise makes perfect, and thus whilst the 2003 edition of Secreto Viognier was released to critical acclaim we are expecting greater things still with the 2004 edition. Once again harvest was carried out by hand and very late (on April 16th) compared with our other whites which are harvested around two months earlier. Once again crops were very low at less than 6t/ha (2.3t/acre). Grapes were sorted by hand at the winery to remove any less than perfect bunches and the wine was whole bunch pressed in order to minimise phenolic pick-up. This was followed by six days of cold settling and a cool fermentation in stainless steel. As was the case last year, this wine still needs to spend some time maturing in tank in order to really open up and develop the classic apricot, papaya and quince characters for which the variety is famous before it is bottled later this year.

The one advantage of the small rains which fell in March and April was an earlier than usual Botrytis infection in the Semillon grapes. The grapes were harvested this year on May 10 th (compared with June 16 th in 2003) at 42 ° Brix and with an infection of around 70% compared with last years more lightly Botrytised example (with a 15% infection). As I write this the juice is still only about mid-way through the fermentation even though it has already been at it now for six weeks.

THE REDS

Once again in 2004 the cellar team worked hard to reduce the level of tannin extraction in the reds with a great deal of care (not to mention frequent tastings!) to vary the length and frequency of pumpovers in order to build wines with strong tannic backbones but without extracting the hard drying tannins from the seeds which tend to leave the wines dried-out and without good ageing potential.

At this point 2004 can be summed-up as an early ripening year which, because it was not a result of higher than normal temperatures, means that this advanced maturity was not at the expense of balance and harmony. 2004 was, like 2003, an excellent Malbec and Syrah year with a higher percentage of Reserve quality (and above) wines being produced than in any previous year. This can probably be attributed not only to the excellent growing conditions (with cooler temperatures during January and Feb being particularly beneficial to more early ripening varieties such as Malbec and Syrah) but also to the increased vine maturity in our newer plantings at San Carlos and also El Olivar. Once again the very different terroir that is El Olivar showed itself throughout the fermentation and also during the first classification tastings in May with Viu Manent's consultant winemaker, Aurelio Montes. Overall the wines of El Olivar are more earthy and spicy with aromatics more towards the tar, leather and bacon end of the spectrum. The San Carlos wines on the other hand are black with immense fruit concentration and lashings of chocolate, wild mushroom and truffle. It is of course too early to say as the wines have only recently completed malolactic fermentation but 2004 definitely seems to have produced the raw material for a Viu 1 year. If so then expect to see the 2004 edition of our flagship wine in bottle in mid 2006. In the case of our Syrah the blend has already been made for the 2004 edition of the Secreto Syrah and is quietly resting in barrel. Whilst it is still early days this wine already shows the ample tannins, concentration and spicy fruit which made the first edition such a huge success (winning a gold medal at Vinalies in France and taking out 88 pts along with best Syrah in its price category in the magazine 'Vinos y mas' here in Chile).

2004 also produced some good Carmenere from La Capilla which, whilst picked after some rain, was super ripe when harvested and thus still looks concentrated, juicy and rich. As per usual the flavours of our Carmenere ranges from green bell peppers and

spear-mint through to tobacco, roasted red peppers, sage and chocolate but it will only be in January of next year, when the first blends are assembled, that we will really have a good induction of how quality this year compares with the 2003's.

2004 was a somewhat difficult year for Merlot in that we did experience some dehydration in the vines at our El Olivar vineyard. Whilst yields were reduced at El Olivar the quality of the harvested grapes was still high. Our most important vineyard for Merlot however is La Capilla and here we picked some exceptional fruit with the wines showing good concentration and really pretty berry fruit as well as already soft and approachable tannins.

Cabernet Sauvignon was, as always, our most important grape by volume representing 37% of the total harvest. Maturity across the board was better in 2004 than in 2003 with good colour, nice berry fruit and spice and most importantly softer tannins and overall better structure than in the 2003's.

Our El Olivar vineyard produced it's first Cabernet Franc last year and at a recent tasting this wine stole some of our Malbecs limelight with its massive tannin structure and meaty, gamey texture. The 2004 promises more of the same with, once again, very low yields of 7.5t/ha (3.3t/ac) and seriously inky-black concentration.

So, in conclusion, in the reds department 2004 has been yet another opportunity for the winemaking team here at Viu Manent to flex it's collective creative muscles to produce the raw material which, when blended and matured with care, will in a years time give some hopefully great wines for you all to taste. In the case of the whites the first examples have already been bottled so I can say with some confidence that in each and every case the 2004's will eclipse their predecessors. And that leaves me with little else to say to conclude my vintage report except "Salud con vinos Viu".

June 22, 2004

By Grant Phelps, Chief Winemaker