

Reporte Vendimia 2005

Introduction

Once again I find myself in the depths of another Chilean winter (my fifth so far) and with time on my hands after yet another manic and very long harvest followed by one month on the road promoting the Viu Manent stable the length and breadth of the northern hemisphere from New York to Russia to Denmark. In my absence Colchagua has experienced the wettest June on record for many decades having received 600mm of rain (what we normally receive in an entire year) in just one month.

So it is time to breathe a sigh of relief and, with the sound of the rain pounding on the roof of the winery, settle down to relate something of the harvest and the quality which you can expect from the soon to be released wines.

THE CLIMATE

The prelude to the 2005 growing season was notable for an exceptionally dry 2004 winter. We received a total of only 200mm between May and August compared with the historical average of 600mm. This followed hard on the heels of the also unusually dry 2003 winter (with a total winter rainfall of 400mm). Temperatures during winter were also very mild with only one ground frost being recorded.

As a result of the warmer than normal temperatures and low level of soil moisture flowering kicked-off about one week earlier than usual with the Malbec in El Olivar beginning as early as October 20th.

Trouble struck however in early November in the form of two weeks of erratic weather with some very cool, windy, overcast days and some rain. The most affected were La Capilla and San Carlos with a mean temperature of 5.8 and 4.3 ° C below the monthly average, respectively. This resulted in uneven fruit set and consequently crop-loads well below those for 2004. In San Carlos the varieties most affected were Cabernet Sauvignon (-34%) and Malbec (-51%). In La Capilla the only significant reduction was for Carmenere (-28%) and in El Olivar once again it was Malbec (-47%) along with Syrah (-25%).

The cooler than normal weather continued throughout December with a daily mean temperature of 4.5 ° C below average which delayed the onset of veraison by 7-10 days. However in spite of this (and due no doubt to the reduction in crop-loads) veraison was faster and more uniform than normal – an early indication of the quality of the coming harvest.

Temperatures remained 1 to 2 ° C below average during January and February followed by a March and April very close to the historical average resulting in very even ripening not only according to sugar levels but also in terms of tannin maturity of the seeds and flavour development.

As was the case in 2004, the 2005 vintage was marred by three small rains. The first rain of 9mm fell on March 7 th , closely followed by another small rain of 5mm on March 11 th . As both rains were very small and were followed by hot weather and wind the remaining whites (Chardonnay and Viognier) and reds all dried out immediately before suffering any damage. The third rain of 8mm on April 27 th 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 30 th .

THE WHITES

In 2005 our labour intensive work with Sauvignon Blanc continued unabated and indeed I feel that the painstaking work of Viu Manent viticulturalist Jorge Perez with canopy management in this variety has produced our best Sauvignon Blanc Reserve to date. Flavour development was not as predictable as in 2004 which lead to a return to a more fragmented harvest in the style of 2003. Whilst the harvested kicked-off normally on February 18 th we ended up picking in six different stages finishing on March 5 th (a total of 15 days compared with only 5 days in 2004). Once again the decision to harvest was based entirely on grape flavours as assessed by myself and fellow Viu Manent winemaker, Juan-Pablo Lecaros. Now that the 2005 Varietal, Reserve and Secreto are all in bottle I can say with confidence that we have once again produced some very fresh Sauvignon's showing bright, racy acidity and freshness with concentrated green flavours of lime and fijoá along with quince and passionfruit leading to rich, sweaty, mineral notes on the finish.

Unfortunately the small rains in Colchagua on March 7 th and 11 th badly affected the Casablanca Valley , the source of our Reserve Chardonnay . In total over 100m fell and of our two growers contracted to produce grapes for the Reserve Chardonnay one was considerably affected by bunch rot. Although this had no effect on grape quality (as we stipulate only 100% clean grapes in our contracts) it did result in 50% drop in production as all affected bunches had to be dumped. As was the case in 2004, the grapes were hand-picked (on March 24 th and April 6 th), 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. The results at this point look very exciting and I can say with confidence that not only has quality been maintained

but also that the 2005 will show not only more minerality but also more elegance than the 2004.

Our entry level Varietal Chardonnay was once again sourced entirely from our San Carlos estate with harvest being carried out about a week later than usual (from March 3rd -18th). Due to the cooler temperatures during January and 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 I found myself 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.

For the Viognier Secreto we followed the same techniques as in 2004, namely hand harvesting (on March 23rd) with low crops of 6.5t/ha (2.8t/acre). Once again 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 four days of cold settling and a cool fermentation in stainless steel. As was the case with the 2004, this wine will improve with 12 months of bottle ageing although it is already showing the classic apricot, papaya and quince characters for which the variety is famous.

As was the case in 2004, the small rains which fell in March and April resulted in an earlier than usual Botrytis infection in our 40 year old Semillon vines. The grapes were harvested this year during the second week of June at 37 ° Brix and with an excellent dry Botrytis infection. As I write this the juice is nearing the completion of fermentation in barrel and promises to be as good as the 2004 although with a fresher acidity and at this stage more primary fruit character (at the moment pineapple and passionfruit notes dominate).

THE REDS

Once again in 2005 the cellar team worked hard to reduce the level of tannin extraction in the reds with a great deal of care to vary the length and frequency of pumpovers in order to build wines with soft, rich structural tannins primarily from the skins rather than hard drying tannins from the seeds which tend to leave the wines dried-out and lacking good ageing potential.

At this point 2005 can be summed-up as a cooler than average year which, because it was combined with lower than average yields in the reds did not come at the expense of ripeness. In fact I would predict that in a few years time the 2005's will become known for their ageing potential as acidities were relatively high thus contributing to structure.

2005 was without a doubt an excellent Cabernet year with excellent concentration from the La Capilla vineyard for our Single Vineyard Cabernet . Also the quality of Cabernet from San Carlos for our Reserve and Varietal Cabernets was the best I have yet seen in my three years at Viu. Yields were an astonishing 34% down on 2004 and 50% down on the 2003 vintage which is no doubt directly attributable to our policy of zero irrigation in these old vineyards of 50 year old vines coupled with two years in a row of very low rainfall. In total we harvested an average of only 7.8t/ha (3.3t/acre) resulting in wines of very good concentration and suppleness.

Carmenere was likewise affected by the reduction in yields at La Capilla cropping at an average of 6.1t/ha (2.6t/acre) for the Reserve and Secreto blends. Thus the wines are showing excellent harmony at the moment with lots of juicy cool berry fruit and fresh acidities coupled with generous ripeness levels.

The Syrah from El Olivar also cropped at 25% less than in 2004 resulting in some very juicy, rich Syrah components which come spring will be blended to make the 2005 Syrah Secreto. As was the case with it's predecesors I am sure the 2005 Secreto will be a crowd pleaser (the 2004 won a gold medal at VinExpo this year along with 88 points and 'Best Buy' in Wine Enthusiast magazine).

2005 was also a surprisingly good year for Merlot in that any problems with grape shrivel which we had in El Olivar in 2003 and 2004 were noticeably absent. This resulted not only in much higher yields (although still a very reasonable 10t/ha or 4.2t/acre for our Varietal Merlot) quality was also much improved over the 2004 vintage. Our most important vineyard for Merlot with regards to quality however remained La Capilla and here we picked some exceptional fruit for our Reserve Merlot with the wines showing good concentration and really pretty berry fruit as well as already soft and approachable tannins.

So that pretty much sums up what for me has been a very successful 2005 harvest. As was the case in 2003 and 2004 we continue to learn more each year about what works both in our vineyards and in the winery and I firmly believe that each year we are continuing to see our wines improve. Nothing more to say except "Salud con vinos Viu".