

Reporte de Vendimia 2007

by Grant Phelps, Chief Winemaker.

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Introduction

Already I can say that 2007 has been one of the most interesting not to mention one of the toughest vintages of my now seven vintages in Chile. Those who took the time to read last years vintage report may remember my pointing out that 2006 was our longest harvest ever (at 86 days). As it turned out 2007 wasn't far off at a total of 84 days from start to finish (not counting the Semillon late harvest picked in mid June). What made 2007 truly arduous though was a combination of ominous weather pattern predictions at the start of harvest (I am still considering suing the Chilean meteorological service for psychological stress!) along with a new record in the number of kilometres driven: from Casablanca in the north to Bio-Bio in the south.

THE 2006-2007 GROWING SEASON

The 2006 winter in Colchagua was one of the mildest in recent memory with only three ground frosts recorded between July and August and a minimum temperature of only -2.6°C (recorded at La Capilla). This was accompanied by a normal amount of winter rainfall (680mm).

The warmer than average temperatures over winter combined with good levels of soil moisture resulted in the earliest budburst of any of the past five growing seasons. The first buds to swell and split open to reveal the new green shoots for the coming growing season were those of the Malbec and Syrah at El Olivar (August 15th and 18th, respectively), followed by the Chardonnay and Malbec at San Carlos (August 19th and 23rd, also respectively). Overall budburst was about 9 days earlier than average.

Following the early budburst we experienced one of the wettest and coldest springs of recent years with a total of 125mm of rain between mid September and late October.

Spring was characterised by cloudy, windy days with mean daytime temperatures hovering in the mid teens. The cool weather continued until mid November with only a handful of days in which temperatures climbed into the mid 20's. In spite of the cool weather flowering commenced normally on the 25th of October although it took a week longer than usual to finish (ie. 26 days from start to finish compared with 19 days in an average year). In spite of the cool temperatures fruit set and bunch closure appeared normal. The first effects of the cool spring only became apparent in January with the first berries to go through veraison (of our Malbec vines in El Olivar) beginning to soften and change colour on January 10th (11 days later than usual).

Although yields varied between grape varieties and between our different vineyards, yields this year were only slightly affected by the cold spring weather, being down about 11% across the board compared with 2006.

As per usual San Carlos registered the lowest mean daytime temperatures throughout the growing season (from August to May) followed by La Capilla with El Olivar being the overall hottest site. Temperatures however were only higher at El Olivar from spring until early summer (August to December). From December until May La Capilla registered the highest monthly mean temperatures (these being the most important months for ripening) which clearly shows why this site consistently produces our best Carmenere and Cabernet Sauvignon (both our latest ripening varieties).

As per usual January was the hottest month in Colchagua. Mean maximum daily temperatures were lowest at San Carlos (30.8°C), followed by El Olivar (32.5°C) with La Capilla recording the highest overall maximum temperatures (34.4°C). Overall these numbers were ideal for ripening as temperatures mostly hovered around the 30°C mark without too many extreme temperature events.

The lowest mean minimum (that is, night-time) temperatures for the same month (January) were recorded at La Capilla (11.9°C), followed by San Carlos (12.3°C) with El Olivar registering a noticeably higher minimum temperature (16.1°C). Consequently the highest overall diurnal temperature variation was recorded at La Capilla with an average of 22.4°C temperature difference between daily maximum and nightly minimum temperatures during January (c.f. 18.5°C and 16.4°C for San Carlos and El Olivar, respectively).

Climatic predictions for the coming vintage began ominously in September of 2006 with the detection of elevated water temperatures in the eastern Pacific Ocean thus heralding the beginning of an 'El Niño' weather pattern. Depending on who you believe this may have been responsible for the cool weather over spring but was almost certainly the culprit behind an unseasonable downpour of 42mm in Colchagua on February 16th. Things looked grim indeed for the coming vintage until it was confirmed on February 28th that the El Niño pattern had dissipated having been replaced by La Niña which typically makes for an 'Indian summer' (that is to say, a long dry autumn) here in Chile. Indeed the only other precipitation experienced before harvest finished on June 12th was a small rain on April 30th which at 2.5mm was too small to inflict any damage on the quality of the harvest.

In summary, what began by looking like a difficult harvest was transformed into one of the best years I have ever seen here at Viu. Although on average harvest began around 3

weeks later than normal (as was the case in 2006) the long dry hot autumn gave the grapes the additional time they needed to achieve optimum ripeness. In the end 2007 will be remembered as a year in which we had the luxury of being able to pick everything when we felt it was ready rather than having to rush because of adverse climatic conditions.

THE WHITES

As mentioned earlier, the beginning of vintage in Colchagua was marred by an unseasonable downpour of 42mm on February 16th, only three days before we harvested the first of the Sauvignon Blanc for our Varietal line. Whilst the rain obliged us to drop around 10% of the crop in order to eliminate any bunches which had started to develop Botrytis it didn't have any noticeable effect on quality. In line with previous years, harvest was carried out between February 19th and 27th and ultra cool fermentations (as low as 8°C!!!) helped to retain fruit aromas. With the first of the 2007 Varietal Sauvignon Blanc already in the bottle I would suggest that this will be one of the best years ever for this wine as natural acidities were higher this year than ever before (no doubt directly attributable to the cool spring) resulting in an amazingly fresh, clean, fruit-driven style.

The big news in the Sauvignon camp is that in 2007 for the first time ever the Reserve Sauvignon Blanc was not sourced from our vineyards here in Colchagua. Instead grapes were sourced from the very cool climate Leyda Valley. Unlike Colchagua, Leyda was unaffected by the pre-harvest rain and cool spring temperatures (in fact it was a warmer than average year in Leyda). The result of this was an unusually early Leyda harvest in general although, as per our general policy of optimising freshness in the wines, we were one of the first wineries to pick in the valley (on March 10th). The resulting wine is a very food friendly style with notes of sweet herbs (rosemary and sage) and white pepper on the nose. In the mouth this wine shows marked notes of nectarine, white peach and quince accompanied by mineral notes with just a hint of salinity.

As was the case last year, we have once again sourced grapes from the ultra cool Casablanca Valley for our Secreto Sauvignon Blanc. Similar in style to the 2006 version this wine is once again intensely fresh on the nose with notes of kiwi, green nectarine and white peach.

2007 saw yet another year of low production for our Varietal Chardonnay here at San Carlos (cropping naturally at 8.5 tonnes per hectare). The cool spring weather also delayed harvest by over three weeks with harvest being carried out in the last week of March. Once again the grapes were machine harvested at night to minimise juice temperature and thus oxidation. Following 12 hours of maceration at 8°C, 90% of the

juice was cold fermented in stainless steel with selected yeasts with the remaining 10% 'warm fermented' (at 22-23 C) in 2nd and 3rd use oak barrels. The slow termination to the end of the ripening cycle combined with the aforementioned low crop loads has resulted in a wine with very good concentration and focussed citrus flavours combined with good spice and mineral notes.

The Viognier Secreto was once again hand harvested (on March 29th) 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 continues in the vein of the 2006 edition in that it is tighter and steelier than some of the previous editions and showing predominantly mineral, green stonefruit notes at this stage. As has been the case previously for this wine I would expect it to improve with 12 months of bottle ageing.

The grapes for our Chardonnay Reserve 2007 were once again harvested from our contract grower at the warmer eastern end of the Casablanca Valley on the 9th and 10th of April. As has previously been the case fermentation was once again carried out in French oak barrels with a total of 35% new oak. Batonage has been carried out on a weekly basis since the completion of fermentation (in order to flesh out the mid palate and impart some mealy complexity to the wine). Once again there was no malolactic fermentation carried out the objective continuing to be a focussed, mineral style without the distraction of buttery notes which often come from malo.

The heavy rain of February resulted in the best early Botrytis infection in our 40+ year old Semillon vines that I had ever seen here at Viu. The presence of morning mists during the latter part of April and all of May further helped the slow spread of noble rot the result being some nicely concentrated fruit picked at 34°Brix on June 11th and 12th. At 11.7°Alc and 197 grams of residual sugar the 2007 version of our Late Harvest is more concentrated than even the now legendary 2004 (which took out trophies at both national competitions here in 2006). Whilst it has only recently finished fermenting the raw material is there for another stunning wine – all that is required now is some time for it to rest in barrel and thus achieve some extra complexity.

THE REDS

Important changes in the red programme took place both in the vineyard and in the winery in 2007. In the vineyard the coordination of our viticultural team, lead by Miguel Mujica and Jorge Perez, was more impressive than ever. Crop loads and canopies were well managed at all three of our own vineyards and René Cabello our grower liason also did a fine job in coordinating management at our various contract grower's vineyards.

On the winemaking side of the equation I spent more time than in any previous vintage on the road visiting our vineyards and growers in order to synchronise harvest with optimum ripeness levels. The primary objective here was to wait until seed tannins had become completely ripe and then to pick as soon as possible in order to avoid the jammy, overripe flavours so typical in Chile which often rob the wines of their personality (and which also tends to impart a soapy structure to the wine due to high pH's).

Whilst it is still early days (with most components still going through malolactic fermentation as I write this) at the two classification tastings held thus far (in late May and early July) the Viu winemaking team has so far rated more components as being of Reserve and Single Vineyard quality than ever before.

2007 was remarkable in that it is the first year we have achieved such balance with our Malbec blocks at El Olivar (our youngest Malbec vineyard). Although planted in the year 2000 Malbec is always very difficult to manage whilst young and tends to produce erratically until it has a few years under its belt. The results of this year have convinced me that the growing pains of these blocks are effectively over as in 2007, for the first time, we achieved truly balanced vines cropping at an average of 9 tonnes per hectare. Ripening was uniform throughout the six blocks at this site with virtually no problems with raisening (a constant factor in previous years at this site). The result has been some exceptionally concentrated wines with lush tannins and voluptuous, ripe fruit flavours (think Pamela Anderson, only in a much darker coloured bathing suit!).

The Malbec at San Carlos was, as always, perfectly in balance. Although it is still early days, one or two components from block 4 (our oldest Malbec block) have already been tentatively earmarked for Viu 1. The remainder of block 4, along with its nearest neighbour (block 5), is currently in new French barrels with the intention of blending them together in another 12 months or so to make our Single Vineyard Malbec for 2007. As per usual these two blocks have produced Malbec which is simply black and with amazing concentration. Dark berryfruit and bramble abound on the nose along with leather and pencil lead notes accompanied by just a touch of cinnamon and nutmeg.

A major project this winter has also been to improve block 6 at our San Carlos vineyard. Whilst this block was planted at about the same time as block 5 (roughly 60 years ago) it has always been a mixed plantation of about 45% Malbec combined with 55% Cabernet Sauvignon. The problem previously has always been managing this block effectively as the two grape varieties require very different management strategies. Another major problem has been the uneven soil type in this particular block which often led to parts of the block being completely lost due to raisening. This winter our

vineyard staff have been busy in this block with a chainsaw cutting the Cabernet vines off at the trunk and as I write this a team of contractors are busy grafting these trunks to a selection of canes from our healthiest Malbec plants from blocks 4 & 5. Also prior to grafting we carried out an intensive soil study which has led to us leaving 0.3 ha fallow as this was determined to not be suitable for replanting with Malbec. Whilst it will be a couple of years before this block is once again producing at normal levels the benefit will be another fully functional Malbec block on our best soils with some of our oldest vines and I would hope that in another 4 or 5 years block 6 will be producing wine of sufficient quality for us to use it in our Single Vineyard blend effectively doubling our production of this cult wine.

2007 also produced what may have been our best Syrah to date. At El Olivar an exacting harvest was carried out according to vigour levels in the vineyard (as identified by aerial photography with infra-red imaging) with moderate vigour sections of the vineyard harvested separately from low and high vigour zones. In the winery the Syrah was destemmed and crushed and then subjected to an individual berry selection on the sorting table (something previously reserved only for the Cabernet and Malbec Single Vineyard wines along with the Viu 1). The goal of all of this dedication was to produce our first ever Single Vineyard Syrah from El Olivar. Although it is early days yet (and despite a small production of only around 1,500 cases) I am optimistic that given the requisite 16 months of barrel aging we will achieve the quality necessary in order to release this wine under the single vineyard moniker.

Similarly, the Syrah components from El Olivar and San Carlos destined for the Syrah Secreto blend are also looking very promising with lots of dark berryfruit and spice. Following on from the exceptional 2006 vintage will be a hard act to follow but the indications are there that the 2007 edition of this wine will be every bit as fine as its predecessors.

2007 also appears to have delivered the Carmenere goods. As for the Syrah we picked a small volume of grapes (once again with individual berry selection in the winery) the intention being to produce a small volume (500 cases) of Single Vineyard Carmenere from block 20 at La Capilla. Currently this wine is resting in new French oak barrels but looks extremely promising and I am quietly confident that the quality is there to do a limited release of this wine.

This year we also harvested the first grapes from our new Carmenere blocks at El Olivar. Whilst it was the first year of production from very young vines the quality is already surprisingly good leading me to believe that as early as next year these vines could lend their touch to the Reserve and Secreto wines.

In another first for Viu Manent we also vinified a small lot of Pinot noir purchased from a grower in the extreme southern viticultural region of Bio-Bio this year with the intention of releasing this under the Secreto umbrella. Once again this wine is currently in barrel and still undergoing malolactic fermentation but indications are good for a January release of this wine.

After a difficult year in 2006 in La Capilla due to spring frosts the Cabernet Sauvignon from this vineyard bounced back in 2007 producing a moderate 8t/ha with nicely balanced vines and overall excellent ripeness. As per the Syrah harvest at El Olivar, harvesting was carried out according to vine vigour based on aerial photographs of the vineyard. All Cabernet Sauvignon from La Capilla this year was subjected to the full selection process in the winery along with bleeding-off 15% of the juice in the vats in order to increase the skin:juice ratio in the tanks thereby increasing concentration. At this stage the most remarkable thing about these wines is their tannin structure – never before have I seen such dusty, mouth-filling tannins in a Cabernet from Colchagua (something which reminds me more of Cabernet from the Stags Leap District in the Napa Valley). As in other years fruit concentration is excellent (with an emphasis on cassis and blueberry) accompanied by characteristic notes of eucalypt and sweet herbs. And on that note I will wrap the vintage report for another year with our traditional adieu: “Salud con vinos Viu!”