

Chilean Red Wines

...ripe for the picking

by Butch Steadman
Dorignac's Director of Wine & Spirits



Wines from Chile burst onto the American wine scene in the 1980's and since then have continued to gain in popularity. The initial appeal of Chilean wines, particularly the reds, was their soft, fruit-driven nature and exceptional value. It was, and still is, easy to pick up a good Chilean Cabernet, Merlot or Chardonnay for under \$10.

So, twenty years later, how do Chilean red wines rate? Well, I believe that while they still offer outstanding value, the quality has steadily improved. What I find particularly exciting is the number of more unique varietals coming out of Chile such as Malbec, Carmenere and Viognier, among others.

Chilean winemaking dates back to the mid-16th century when conquistadores brought grape vines to the area and planted vineyards. French varietals such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot were introduced in the mid-18th century.

Historically most of the wine made in Chile was rather low quality and not very interesting until the renaissance of the 1980's took place.

During this time, modern winemaking techniques, namely the use of stainless steel fermenters and oak barrels for aging, were introduced to the area. Chile began to draw attention from top winemakers throughout the world, several of whom forged partnerships there including California's Robert Mondavi, Spain's Miguel Torres and France's Baron de Rothschild. These joint ventures brought capital, technology and expertise to the area, which in turn led to increased awareness and demand for Chilean wines. The number of wineries has grown from 12 in 1995 to over 70 in 2005 and Chile is now the fourth largest exporter of wines to the United States.

While Chile produces fine white wines, particularly Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, it is their reds that have wine fans taking notice. Cabernet Sauvignon is the most planted grape in Chile, followed by Merlot. However, Carmenere, an obscure rarely used Bordeaux grape, is popping up all over and is quickly becoming Chile's new red sensation. In fact, much of what was once thought to be Merlot was recently identified as Carmenere.

Chilean reds generally offer ripe fruit aromas and flavors, soft, supple tannins and good balance. Typical descriptors include cherry, plum, blackberry, blackcurrant, toasty oak, spice, fresh herbs and cedar.

With their newfound respect and popularity, modernized technology, a cohesive marketing strategy and a plethora of young, talented winemakers (half of whom are women), Chilean wines are poised to see continued growth and success for years to come.

Dorignac's
The Best is Better!

710 Veterans Blvd. • 834-8216

www.dorignacs.com • open daily 7am-10pm