

As red wines continue to surge,
whites show marked improvement

CHILE'S ONE-TWO PUNCH

BY JAMES MOLESWORTH



Viña Quebrada de Macul in Maipo Valley made an outstanding Domus Aurea Cabernet in 2005, Chile's best recent vintage. The wine is a prime example of Chile's prowess with the variety.

Powered by Cabernet Sauvignon, Chile's red wines have long been known as a source of consistent quality and solid value. In addition, the country's best reds have surged in recent years to offer classic-level quality and great cellar potential. The Casa Lapostolle Clos Apalta 2005, our Wine of the Year in 2008, is only one notable example.

While red grapes still dominate the Chilean wine industry—constituting three-quarters of the country's vineyard plantings—whites are moving quickly up the ladder. Just as wineries honed their winemaking programs for red wines in the late 1990s, shifting their red varieties from high-yielding, lower-quality valley floor sites to hillside microclimates (resulting in the quality surge seen today), they are giving newfound attention to their white grapes, particularly in terms of site selection.

Vintners are rushing to develop cooler, coastal areas for their whites, while also utilizing better viticultural techniques. As a result, Chile's whites have taken a qualitative leap forward in recent years. It's an eye-opening advance that provides the Chilean wine industry with an enviable one-two punch.

Since my last report on Chile ("Chile Returns to Its Roots," May 15, 2008), I have reviewed more than 550 wines, a record-high total that mirrors the growth of the category. American consumers continue to warm to the combination of value and quality that Chilean wines offer.



Maria Luz Marín's San Antonio Valley winery has added a mouthwatering Syrah to its lineup.

Fifty-five wines in this report earned outstanding marks (90 or more points on the *Wine Spectator* 100-point scale), a solid 10 percent of all wines tasted. Looking farther down the list, nearly 325 wines (or 58 percent) earned at least 85 points. Reds dominate the top-scoring group, emphasizing Chile's strong suit—Cabernet Sauvignon—as well as its burgeoning breadth thanks to Carmenère and Syrah. (An alphabetical chart of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/053109.)

Typically, Chilean Cabernets show softer, loamier structures than their Bordeaux counterparts, and more subtle fruit than their peers from California. Still, the best examples have the stuffing to age for a decade in the bottle, melding into elegant tobacco-, cedar- and mint-inflected wines.

Leading the way is the Concha y Toro Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor. The newest vintage of Don Melchor, the 2006 (94 points, \$80), is a dark, muscular style, with black currant, braised fig and loam notes that all roll together through the dense but polished finish. There's impressive power for the vintage, and this latest release is a worthy successor to the Don Melchor 2005 (96, \$69), also reviewed in the months since my last report.

The two Don Melchors do well to illustrate the differences between 2005 and 2006. The earlier vintage was the best in recent memory, thanks to a long, moderate growing season, while the latter vintage, though dry and even in temperature, produced wines a shade less concentrated than those of its predecessor.

Other top Cabernet-based wines in this report include the Viña Quebrada de Macul Maipo Valley Domus Aurea 2005 (94, \$55),



Courtney Kingston and winemaker Byron Kosuge are proving Pinot Noir can thrive in Chile.

which shows alluring mint and sage notes and a long, loamy finish, and the Viña Montes Alpha M Santa Cruz 2006 (94, \$95), sourced from the winery's vineyards in Apalta, an area that has proven to be one of Chile's best *terroirs*. (For an overview of Chile's major wine-producing regions, see "ABCs of Chilean Wine," page 100.)

Among the well-priced Cabernets in this report are the Concha y Toro Pirque Terrunyo 2005 (91, \$37), the Viña Santa Rita Maipo Valley Medalla Real Special Reserve 2006 (91, \$20) and the Miguel Torres Curicó Valley Manso de Velasco Old Vines 2006 (91, \$34).

Cabernet's muscle contrasts with the soft, fleshy texture and alluring plum, tobacco and mineral profile of Carmenère, which tends to perform better in blends than on its own, as it sometimes struggles to ripen fully, leading to green flavors.

The variety's strengths shine in the 2005 Clos Apalta (96, \$75), whose blend contains 42 percent Carmenère, along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot. The Concha y Toro Carmenère Peumo Carmín de Peumo 2005 (94, \$125), fashioned by winemaker Ignacio Recabarren, contains small amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc and exhibits gorgeous flavors of graphite and licorice. With more than 80 Carmenère-based bottlings in this report, there is plenty to go around. Newcomers to the grape should look for the solid Viña Montes Carmenère Colchagua Valley Alpha 2007 (89, \$26) for its textbook profile at a friendly price.

Red wine lovers need not stop there—both Syrah and Pinot Noir continue to improve in Chile. The Viña Montes Folly Santa Cruz 2006 (94, \$95) is the top-scoring Syrah among recent releases. The Viña Casa Marín Syrah San Antonio Valley Miramar Vineyard 2005 (92, \$68) makes an impressive debut, offering live-wire acidity and mouthwatering mineral and fruit flavors.

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BONUS VIDEO: James Molesworth examines the diversity and improving quality of cool-climate wines from Chile's Casablanca Valley in this tasting of a Syrah and a Pinot Noir. Watch it at www.winespectator.com/053109.

Winemakers pursuing Pinot Noir have made slow but steady progress with this notoriously finicky grape. There are less than two dozen Pinots in this report, but the Kingston Family Pinot Noir Casablanca Valley Alazan 2007 (90, \$30) proves the variety can be successful in Chile. Viña Cono Sur, Viña Garcés Silva and Veramonte are other Pinot producers worth seeking out.

Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc dominate among the 150 Chilean whites I have reviewed in the past year. Most of the bottlings hail from relatively new vineyard regions in cooler areas, including Leyda, Limarí and Bío Bío. So far, producers have been crafting the wines in a clean, fresh style, with minimal or no oak influence. Among Chardonnays, the Viña Aquitania Malleco Valley Sol de Sol 2006 (90, \$22), the Viña Cono Sur Casablanca Valley 20 Barrels 2007 (90, \$20) and the De Martino Limarí Valley Legado Reserva 2007 (89, \$18) each offer bright tropical fruit and floral flavors without being top-heavy or tiring to drink.

The Sauvignon Blancs are equally interesting, with the Viña Montes Leyda Valley Leyda Vineyard 2008 (90, \$16), the Viña Quintay Casablanca Valley 2007 (89, \$16) and the Viña San Pedro Elquí Valley Castillo de Molina Reserva 2007 (88, \$13) all showing raptorial cut to lime, mineral and sea salt notes.

“In terms of figuring out what grows best where, Chile may be decades behind California and perhaps centuries behind Europe,” says Courtney Kingston, co-owner of Kingston Family in the Casablanca Valley. “But Chileans are a very quick study and catch up fast. The movement out to the coast to cooler sites is a sign of this. The wines are fresher and more varietally expressive.”

Chile’s wine industry remains dominated by a handful of large wineries—Concha y Toro, Viña San Pedro, Viña Santa Carolina and Viña Santa Rita chief among them. But while the number of major producers may be lacking, competition is fierce within the highly export-minded industry. The end result is an ongoing quality battle that provides consumers with a wide array of easy-to-find, well-priced reds and whites.

This report includes more than 125 wines that rated 85 points or better while costing \$15 or less per bottle—an impressive crop of value-oriented wines. Two standouts include the Sur Andino Chardonnay Limarí Valley Terra Andina 2007 (90, \$13), made by winemaker Stefano Gandolini of Argentina’s Viña Doña Paula winery, and the Viña Bisquertt Syrah Colchagua Valley Casa La Joya Reserve 2007 (90, \$11), a muscular wine filled with

bittersweet cocoa, blackberry and raspberry flavors.

Other top values that showcase Chile’s range include the Viña Santa Ema Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Reserve 2005 (90, \$14), the Veramonte Chardonnay Casablanca Valley Reserva 2007 (89, \$11) and the Viña Palo Alto Reserve Maule Valley 2007 (89, \$13), a Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère and Syrah blend.

With familiar grapes, unique *terroirs*, world-class bottlings and a host of values, Chilean wine continues to occupy a solid place in today’s marketplace.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator’s lead taster on the wines of Chile.



Viña Cono Sur makes solid wines in good quantities. Its wide range includes Cabernet, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and more.

Rating Chilean Red Wine Vintages

2008	87-90	Long, very dry growing season resulted in reduced yields but greater concentration. Similar in style to 2003; achieving balance with sometimes rugged structures will be key	NYR
2007	91	Cooler temperatures through the growing season resulted in a late harvest and reduced yields. Reds show supple textures and excellent length	Drink or hold
2006	91	Long, very dry growing season with warm days and cool nights; consistent through all valleys. Late-ripening Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère very promising; less concentrated and structured than 2005	Drink or hold
2005	93	Long, moderate growing season consistent through all valleys. Reds show lots of ripe, rich tannins; Cabernet Sauvignon excelled	Drink or hold
2004	88	Cool start to growing season with warm finish, then harvest split by rains: Carmenère suffered, while Cabernet Sauvignon did well	Drink
2003	91	Cool start followed by a long season of warm days and cool nights; wines from all major valleys show power and structure	Drink
2002	88	Split vintage: North (Aconcagua, Casablanca and Maipo) produced excellent wines, while harvesttime rains in the South (Curicó and Maule) caused problems; Rapel caught in the middle	Drink
2001	92	Dry, hot summer and low yields produced many solid wines; Aconcagua, Maipo and Rapel excelled	Drink
2000	87	Cool growing season, with a large crop; best wines have balance and forward fruit, but controlling yields was key	Drink

Note: Most Chilean white wines should be drunk on release.

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 many wines of the vintage have not yet been released; “drink” means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; “hold” means most of the age-worthy wines have not yet fully matured.

James Molesworth's Recommended Wines From Chile

For complete reviews, see the Buying Guide of this or previous issues or www.winespectator.com.
An alphabetical listing of all wines tasted for this report is available at www.winespectator.com/053109.

TOP WINES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
CASA LAPOSTOLLE Clos Apalta Colchagua Valley 2005 Gorgeous aromas lead to a rich, velvety palate of currant, fig paste, licorice, cassia bush and bramble. Carmenère blend.	96	\$75
CONCHA Y TORO Cabernet Sauvignon Puente Alto Don Melchor 2006 A dark, muscular style. This shows impressive power for the vintage, along with precision and balance.	94	\$80
CONCHA Y TORO Carmenère Peumo Carmin de Peumo 2005 Driven and pure, with remarkably supple tannins guiding the black currant, plum, graphite and melted dark licorice notes.	94	\$125
VIÑA MONTES Alpha M Santa Cruz 2006 Very suave, with concentrated black currant, warm fig sauce, espresso, maduro tobacco and black tea notes.	94	\$95
VIÑA MONTES Folly Santa Cruz 2006 Rich and lush, but with superb poise, offering crushed plum, raspberry ganache and macerated currant fruit. Syrah.	94	\$95
VIÑA QUEBRADA DE MACUL Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Domus Aurea 2005 Dark and concentrated, with mint, cocoa powder and loam notes covering a core of dark currant confiture and warm fig.	94	\$55
VIÑA ALMAVIVA Puente Alto 2006 Muscular and broad-shouldered, with bittersweet cocoa, dark currant and braised fig notes. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	93	\$85
VIÑEDO CHADWICK Maipo Valley 2006 A big, dense wine, with a core of loam, melted black licorice and macerated currant fruit. Cabernet Sauvignon.	93	\$180
CONCHA Y TORO Carmenère Peumo Terrunyo 2005 Dense and fleshy, this offers layers of dark, crushed berry fruit, sweet toast, melted licorice and aged tobacco notes.	93	\$41
VIÑEDOS EMILIANA Gê Colchagua Valley 2005 Impressively rich, with blueberry compote, braised fig, graphite and roasted earth. Loaded with character. Syrah blend.	93	\$90
VIÑA CASA MARÍN Syrah San Antonio Valley Miramar Vineyard 2005 Really juicy, with a vivid beam of blackberry, plum and blueberry fruit coursing through. Casa Marín's debut Syrah.	92	\$68
VIÑA NEYEN DE APALTA Espíritu de Apalta Colchagua Valley 2004 A structured style, with loam, black currant, fig paste and black licorice notes. Carmenère and Cabernet Sauvignon.	92	\$65
MIGUEL TORRES Conde de Superunda Curicó Valley 2002 Very dark, with an exotic array of braised fig, plum sauce, maduro tobacco, tar and game notes. Tempranillo blend.	92	\$55

TOP VALUES

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
VIÑA BISQUERTT Syrah Colchagua Valley Casa La Joya Reserve 2007 A solid, muscular style, showing bittersweet cocoa, blackberry and raspberry ganache flavors, with a dark, fleshy finish.	90	\$11

TOP VALUES (continued)

WINE	SCORE	PRICE
VIÑA PALO ALTO Reserve Maule Valley 2007 Robust, with a hefty layer of coffee and bacony toast fronting for dark plum and currant fruit. Cabernet Sauvignon blend.	89	\$13
VIÑA SANTA EMA Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Reserva 2006 Solid, with a straightforward core of black currant, fig, coffee and loam notes that push through the full-bodied finish.	89	\$14
VERAMONTE Chardonnay Casablanca Valley Reserva 2007 This Chilean white is quite ripe, with forward pear, fig and melon flavors backed by a toasty but well-integrated finish.	89	\$11
VIÑA CALITERRA Chardonnay Casablanca Valley Tribute 2006 A fresh, clean style, with peach pit, yellow apple and flowers.	88	\$12
CASA LAPOSTOLLE Chardonnay Casablanca Valley 2007 Fresh, with nice cut to apple, ginger, melon and spice flavors.	88	\$14
VIÑA CONO SUR Sauvignon Blanc Casablanca Valley Visión 2008 Very fresh and floral in style, with a superlively finish.	88	\$15
VIÑA MISIONES DE RENGO Carmenère Rapel Valley Reserva 2007 This toasty red offers blackberry and raspberry fruit.	88	\$13
MONTGRAS Merlot Colchagua Valley Reserva 2007 Ripe, pure and focused, with a beam of raspberry ganache.	88	\$12
VIÑA SANTA EMA Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot Maipo Valley 60/40 2006 A polished style, with black cherry and red currant fruit.	88	\$12
CONCHA Y TORO Syrah Rapel Valley Casillero del Diablo Reserva 2007 Fresh and focused, with dark cherry and currant fruit.	87	\$12
VIÑEDOS Y BODEGAS CÓRPORA Sauvignon Blanc Bío Bío Valley Porta Reserva 2007 This is bracing, with chive, chalk and lemon zest notes.	87	\$10
VITIVINÍCOLA PÉREZ CRUZ Cabernet Sauvignon Maipo Valley Reserva 2007 A clean, polished style. The flavors glide through the finish.	87	\$13
VIÑEDOS EMILIANA Carmenère Central Valley Natura 2008 Offers ripe plum and blackberry fruit, with tobacco and toast.	87	\$11
VIÑEDOS EMILIANA Sauvignon Blanc Casablanca Valley Natura 2008 Shows nice richness, with lime, sweet pea and mâche notes.	87	\$11
VIÑA ERRÁZURIZ Merlot Curicó Valley Estate 2006 Focused, with plum, roasted vanilla and grilled herb notes.	87	\$14
LA PLAYA Chardonnay Limarí Valley Block Selection Reserva 2008 A crisp style, showing yellow apple and lemon verbena notes.	87	\$11
VIÑA SAN PEDRO Cabernet Sauvignon Cachapoal Valley Castillo de Molina Reserva 2006 Smoky, with vanilla, blackberry and black licorice notes.	87	\$13

ABCs of CHILEAN WINE

Chile's modern-day wine industry was born in the late 19th century, when the country was spared the oidium and phylloxera epidemics that devastated European vineyards. Chile's good fortune led to an influx of experienced French winemakers and soaring demand for Chilean wine overseas. The introduction of noble grapes from France and the establishment of several of today's most prominent wineries, including Viña Carmen, Viña Cousiño-Macul, Viña Errázuriz and Viña San Pedro, set the stage for Chile's success. The country has been an important player on the global market ever since.

Chile currently counts more than 288,000 acres of vineyards. Cabernet Sauvignon leads with more than 100,000 acres, followed by Merlot (32,000 acres), Chardonnay (21,000) and Sauvignon Blanc (19,500). Carmenère, the country's signature grape, accounts for upward of 17,000 acres, while plantings of Syrah (5,800) and

Pinot Noir (1,600) are slowly but steadily increasing.

The wine-producing regions are spread over several valleys. They are set amid the foothills of the Andes and coastal mountain ranges, which are bisected by various rivers that empty into the Pacific Ocean. These rivers also provide the water necessary for vineyard irrigation. Proximity to breezes from the Pacific or to the cooling influence of the high Andes moderates the dry, warm climate. Soils are diverse, ranging from alluvial loam deposits to granite and limestone. These factors result in myriad microclimates, which Chilean vintners are just now fully exploring.

Chilean law requires that wines labeled with an appellation contain at least 85 percent fruit from that region, while wines labeled with a varietal name contain at least 85 percent of that variety.

The following are the major wine-producing valleys of Chile, listed from north to south.

Elquí (1,254 acres of vines) Located more than 250 miles north of Santiago, this small valley has drawn interest recently for its abundance of sunlight and its cool, lengthy growing season, the result of its proximity to the coast. Viña San Pedro has taken the lead in developing vineyards here, notably for Sauvignon Blanc.

Limarí (4,000 acres) With no coastal mountains to buffer the ocean-fed breezes, the broad Limarí Valley is a cool region whose limestone-based soils are proving ideal for producing bracing Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay. Syrah also shows promise.

Aconcagua (2,700 acres) Vineyards were first developed here in the late 1800s. The climate provides a long growing season, with warm days and cool evenings particularly suited to red grapes. Cabernet Sauvignon is the leader, though there has been a recent shift toward more Mediterranean varieties such as Syrah and Grenache.

Casablanca (10,100 acres) A cool-climate valley located about 90 minutes' drive northwest of Santiago, Casablanca is best known for its Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Recently, Pinot Noir and Syrah have also had success. All of Chile's major wineries source fruit from this increasingly important district.

San Antonio (800 acres) This area comprises a trio of sub-valleys: Leyda, Lo Abarca and Rosario. Leyda, the best known of the three, has become increasingly prominent on the labels of top-quality Sauvignon Blanc.

Maipo (26,600 acres) This valley begins a stretch known as the Central Valley—four major wine regions that combine to form the heart of Chile's wine industry. Located just south of Santiago, Maipo has been infringed upon by urban development. Yet vineyards still thrive here where Chile's first vinifera vines were planted. Changes in

altitude from the Andes down through the plains combine with cooling breezes to create several spots that are ideal for Cabernet Sauvignon. The wines are often marked by minty, smoky notes that reflect their cool-climate origin.

Rapel (83,600 acres) The Rapel Valley is made up of two sub-valleys: the Cachapoal Valley (26,800 acres) in the northern half of the region and the Colchagua Valley (56,700 acres) in the south. In the eastern portions of these two valleys there are many low-altitude, flat, fertile vineyards

with moderate temperatures suitable for large-scale grape production.

In the western stretch of the Colchagua Valley, however, there are high-quality, low-yielding hillside vineyards that have taken Chile's reds to new heights of quality in recent years—the most famous of these sites in the Apalta area. Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère and increasingly Syrah are the lead varieties.

Curicó (47,000 acres) This valley is home to some of the country's largest producers, such as Valdivieso and Viña San Pedro, who use the region's predominantly flat plateau for their vineyards. The Lontué sub-valley is located in Curicó.

Maule (77,200 acres) This southernmost portion of the Central Valley is also the country's single largest wine valley. Here, the temperatures are much cooler at night, and frost is a potential problem. Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc dominate the plantings, while small pockets of old-vine Carignane could prove interesting.

Bío-Bío / Malleco (8,750 acres) These two valleys, located more than 300 miles south of Santiago, form the southern region. White varieties dominate, led by the generic Moscatel de Alejandria, though more Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc have been planted recently.



CHILE'S *TERROIR* HUNTER

PEDRO PARRA

Pedro Parra is used to jumping feet first into his work. As he leaps down into a coffin-sized *calicatta*, or hole, dug between rows of vines on the slopes of Chile's Apalta Valley, he takes a few swings with his hand-pick. "This is my favorite tool," he says, twirling it in his hand.

Shards of dirt fly in the air, and Parra suddenly stops. "There, see that," he says, pointing to small white flecks within the rust-colored earth. "That's quartz, which creates micropores in the soil. That means good drainage and low vigor. This is a good spot for Syrah."

Finding the right combination is what Parra is being paid to do, and he has a rapidly growing client list of Chilean wineries. His knowledge is filling a niche in the Chilean wine industry. Evoking a modern-day Indiana Jones, Pedro Parra is Chile's *terroir* hunter, in search of treasure by way of vineyard land.

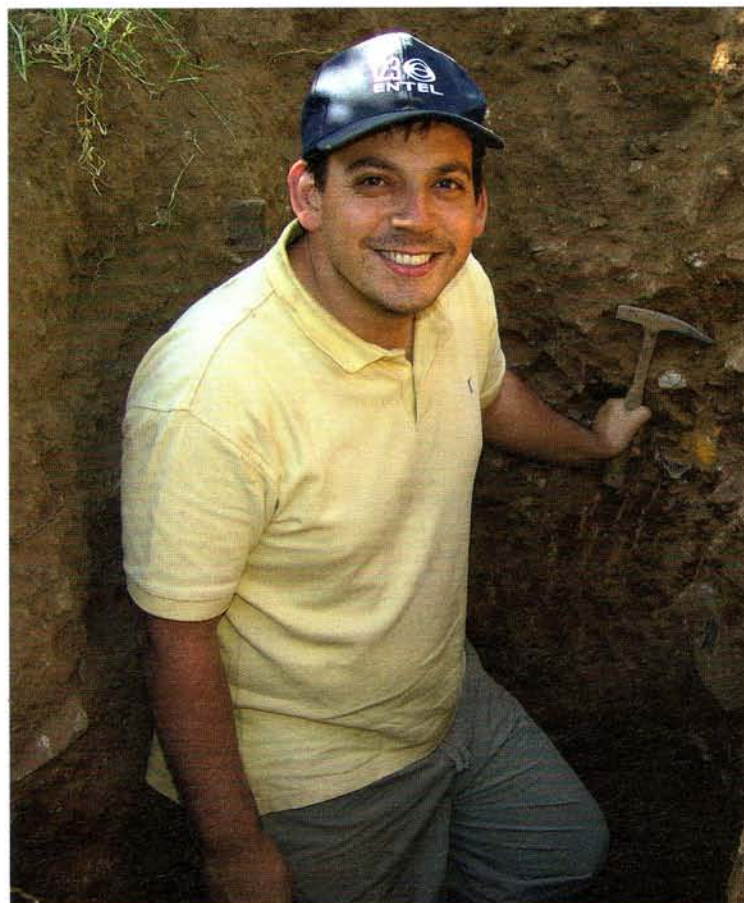
Parra, 38, holds postgraduate degrees in agricultural science from universities in Montpellier and Paris. Now an assistant professor in the enology department of the Universidad de Chile in Santiago, Parra's expertise is being plumbed by top wineries. His work has even spurred Viña Montes to tear out some Cabernet Sauvignon vines planted in the prime Apalta area and replace them with Syrah—an expensive proposition, as well as an intriguing one, considering that Apalta is one of Chile's top spots for Cabernet production.

Casa Lapostolle, also located in Apalta, is among the wineries that have enlisted Parra's services in the past few years. He relishes the opportunity.

As we stand at the valley's southern edge, Apalta spreads out into a crescent-moon shape, with the slopes rising steeply in the distance. Parra points to a spot on the western end. "There," he says, "see how the face of the hillside has broken away and slid off. The land is like this." He holds his hand palm-side up, with the fingers pointing upward. "Concave soils, which hold too much water. But there," he adds, sweeping his arm to the eastern side of the valley to indicate a completely different spot, "the soil is like this instead." Parra turns his palm down. "Convex, that means there it is just rocks, granite. And that's where all the great *terroirs* are."

As Parra has worked on the concept of *terroir* in Chile, he's had to balance the French approach, learned from his studies overseas, with the culture of the Chilean wine industry, which in many ways is still evolving. In France, *terroir* is typically defined by strict AOC regulations that restrict certain areas to certain grapes, while in Chile, wineries continue to research what works best in their particular vineyards. At Viña Montes, for example, Cabernet and Carmenère—the generally accepted grapes—are now being joined by Syrah, Grenache and Mourvèdre.

The Franco-Chilean divide shows at Casa Lapostolle, where



Pedro Parra advises wineries on matching specific grape varieties to particular *terroirs*.

Parra works with owner Alexandra Marnier-Lapostolle and head winemaker Jacques Begarie. The question as to whether vine age is necessary to truly display an area's *terroir* turns into a spirited debate, with Marnier-Lapostolle and Begarie feeling that old vines inherently do a better job of translating *terroir*. Parra, on the other hand, feels that with modern vineyard techniques and the aid of irrigation, the healthy young-vine vineyards of Chile can perform just as well as older vines.

"But you see," says Begarie, as he tastes some almost-ripe grapes from a parcel of Lapostolle's oldest Cabernet vines, "the best Cabernet always comes from this spot—the oldest vines."

"Yes," Parra says with a wink. "But the oldest vines happen to be on the right spot here."

"Could be," Begarie says, laughing.

"We knew it was the best spot," says Marnier-Lapostolle, taking the middle ground. "But we didn't know why—and Pedro is helping us with that."

"You mean Pedro is learning with us," chimes in Begarie.

And as Parra continues to learn along with his clients, the *terroir* hunter expects to discover even more buried treasure in the Chilean soil.

—J.M.