

Newcomer Vintners Shake Up Chilean Wine Scene

LUIS ANDRES HENAO, Associated Press

MAULE VALLEY, Chile (AP) — Sven Bruchfeld doesn't mind if you don't like his wine, as long as some people love it.

He's part of a bold new wave of independent vintners who are challenging Chile's reputation for producing oceans of agreeable but predictable wines. Their quirky, small-batch harvests are capturing the attention of wine connoisseurs at home and abroad.

"We need wines that are polemical, that are not liked by everyone, that generate controversy and spark conversations," said Bruchfeld, a Chilean of German ancestry who is owner and chief winemaker at the Polkura winery.

The independents have broken away from Chile's industrial wine culture to lovingly squeeze out small lots of wines, usually using organic, even spiritually tinged theories of winemaking.

In Alvaro Espinoza's vineyard in the Maipo Valley south of Santiago, a horse plows along rows of grapevines in the shadow of the Andes mountains while a solar panel powers the irrigation. In the Maule Valley farther south, Pilar Miranda also farms with horses and when her wine is ready for bottling, she punches the corks in by hand.

"This new generation is much more conscious about environmental problems and more committed to healthy, sustainable agriculture ... and also for the production of wines that have a stronger connection to the Earth," said Espinoza, whose Antiyal wines regularly break into the 90s in respected ratings.

"That's why I think this new generation of winemakers and entrepreneurs is going to change Chile's image globally."

Chile has been making wine since the mid-1500s, when Spanish settlers brought the first vines to the coast-hugging nation. And it has grown into the world's No. 7 wine producer, with an output of nearly 1.3 billion liters last year. About 480 million liters of bottled wine were exported.

While major producers such as Concha y Toro also release batches of world-class wines, critics have long complained that Chilean wine overall was too industrial and fixated on volume.

"It had quality but lacked character, and there was no space for the small winemaker," said Patricio Tapia, Chile's most respected wine writer.

But in the past decade "a new generation has been born, and Espinoza was the

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precursor," said Tapia, author of the "Descorchados" wine guide.

The 52-year-old Espinoza who apprenticed at wineries abroad as well as in Chile was among the first to embrace the "biodynamic wine" movement that was taking root in Europe and the United States.

Based on the writings of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, it forbids artificial pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers and it sees farms as living organisms affected by the cycles of the moon and planetary alignment, as well as seasons.

Like Espinoza, most of the new vintners emerged from the country's old wine industry, either working at corporate winemakers or studying enology at local universities.

But some have also come from abroad: an Italian count, a former Canadian ski coach and a Swiss lawyer are among the 18-member Chile-based Movement of Independent Vintners.

The artisanal producers have pounced on long-abandoned vines or set up shop in forgotten wine zones, while others have experimented with new combinations of grapes, regions, temperatures and terrains.

In the quest for a more interesting wine, they've experimented in extreme places: from the icy south to northern areas in the heart of the Atacama desert. The result has been a rich mosaic of styles.

They often use rustic but proven methods such as manual corking and egg-shaped concrete vats and earthenware pots for fermentation.

"For us it's about getting back to our roots to make some great juice," said Miranda, 40, who started making wines in the garage with her ski-coach Canadian husband and created the whimsically named Garage Wine Co.

The couple's mountain-grown cabernet blend and cabernet Franc and a dry-farmed, single varietal Carignan are mostly sold in boutique wine shops in San Francisco, New York and London for \$20 to \$30 a bottle. "I'm going to call them hipster shops," said her husband, Derek Mossman, who began the company in his garage. "We don't compete with the big players from Chile, but rather with the independent offerings from the south of France, Spain, Italy and California."

In the Colchagua Valley, Polkura focuses on syrah grapes to produce 2,000 cases a year. Its name means yellow stone in the native Mapudungun tongue and comes from the yellow granite spread in the area's clay soils. Polkura's winemakers say the decomposed granite "gives the wine minerality and elegance, while the clay provides body and structure."

Its 2008 syrah made it into the Top 100 list for both Wine Spectator and Decanter magazines. And its Block g+i won the Southern Hemisphere's best syrah in Australia's "Five Nations Wine Challenge."

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Prestigious mainstream vineyards such as Lapostolle, owned by the heirs to the Grand Marnier liquor fortune, also have embraced biodynamics. Its Clos Apalta, a blend of carmenere, merlot and cabernet sauvignon, was named Wine Spectator's wine of the year for 2008.

"More people are experimenting, searching for new frontiers and new techniques," said Andrea Leon, Lapostolle's winemaker. The results "express a place of origin and a particular vision of wine that doesn't have to be the same."

For Peter Richards, author of "The Wines of Chile," "It's not an overstatement to say that the very future of Chilean wine is being decided right now."

"Chile can stay in a dependable, reliable but slightly unexciting mode, or it can choose to spread its wings and really try to discover its potential for fine wine," said Richards, one of the world's 314 certified "masters of wine."

"It's very exciting to see the beginnings of this revolution. The flame is still small but it continues to grow. It just needs more fanning."

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