



Carmenere

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THE CARMENERE STORY has mythical overtones (a star grape in 19th Century Bordeaux, believed extinct, then rediscovered in Chile in the 1990s) but the reality is that for many years the grape has stirred strong passions, calling forth divisively negative, as well as positive, reactions among consumers and professionals alike. Recent comprehensive tastings of varietal Carmenere have revealed a new direction, and great promise, for this heretofore controversial variety's future. Today Chilean Carmenere tastes significantly better, across the board, than at any time since its re-emergence. Without having sacrificed complexity, the wines taste riper and more fruit expressive, with minimal quantities of the green, pyrazine-influenced pungency that once seemed so dominant.

It's been a learning process for Chilean winemakers who, only 25 years ago, confused Carmenere with Merlot, and thought of it as a late ripening clone. Now that we understand better the conditions it needs to thrive, Carmenere is being planted separately in its own dedicated vineyard sites, which satisfy the requirements of its demanding nature. To produce top quality wine the grape requires dry spring weather, water-retentive clay-rich soils, abundant sunshine, and a very long ripening cycle with both hot days and cool evenings. There is little margin for error, and this is one of the reasons that Carmenere has not been planted much outside of Chile's ideal growing conditions. The examples from outside Chile are frankly, to me at least, lacking.

One of the factors contributing to higher Chilean Carmenere quality is the isolation and selected cultivation of clones. Casa Silva's Los Lingues Vineyard in the hills of Colchagua Valley has been a virtual research laboratory into the clonal question. The winery planted 60 different selections in 1998 that they have narrowed down to two clones, one producing darker and more powerful fruit with blueberry fruit overtones, the other more leafy and red currant, with a slightly floral fruit expression. Both successfully tame the variety's wild nature, and produce a more supple less edgy flavor profile. The winery's Microterroir de Los Lingues Carmenere is a blend of the two, and shows great complexity and aromatics, along with body and length.

In the vineyard it's essential to expose the late harvested grape bunches to sufficient sunlight, without having them raisin. The leaves need to be pulled, pruned back but not to the extent that there is sunburn. Carmenere, it's clear, is very picky. Standard

vinification now involves at least partial de-stemming and often a cold soak prior to fermentation. Warm, though not overly hot, fermentation temperatures and judicious pumping over are among the keys to avoiding aggressive notes, followed by a two to three week post-fermentation maceration to soften the tannins.

Some of the finest Carmenere grapes are going into blends, like the iconic Lapostolle “Clos Apalta” which always incorporates about 65 to 70 percent each vintage, but the following wines, tasted here and in Chile, all qualify as varietals. As a whole, they are an appealing assemblage, and all would constitute a great re-introduction for consumers who have previously given up on the grape because they did not appreciate the aggressive style it once displayed. They are listed by geography. And, incidentally, none showed significant green accents.

ODJFELL AMADOR ESTATE CARMENERE, MAIPO VALLEY 2013

This shows the grape’s signature opacity, with blue purple tones, and a violet influenced aroma that is rich in fruit but also a bit smoky. Juicy on the palate, with ripe, slightly sweet chocolatey tones.

TARAPACA “GRAN RESERVA” CARMENERE, MAIPO VALLEY 2013

This powerful wine features a bold, ripe, black currant aroma, with lush dark chocolate notes and substantial tannins. It’s spicy and intense all the way to the finish, with notes of licorice and cardamom.

HARAS DE PIRQUE “RESERVA” CARMENERE, MAIPO VALLEY 2014

Another dark ruby colored example, the Haras de Pirque has a cocoa-like aroma, with chewy, dense, ripe fruit and clove and black pepper accents. With medium-high tannins, this is a wine you can cellar for a few years.

DE MARTINO “ESTATE” CARMENERE, MAIPO VALLEY 2015

From the producer that first bottled a varietal Carmenere in the mid 1990s, this is an herb-scented, dark berry accented wine that is smooth and mellow, with some smoked meat and umami overtones.

CASA LAPOSTOLLE “GRAND SELECTION” CARMENERE, RAPEL VALLEY 2013

This great producer makes a Carmenere balanced on the borderline between red and black fruit. Silky, round and mellow, it has a dried fruit, black fig note, with hints of almond extract and chocolate.

MONTGRAS “ANTU” CARMENERE, PEUMO VALLEY, RAPEL 2015

Supple and ripe, with plummy vanilla and black cherry notes, this is from a cooler climate valley within Rapel, renowned for its top quality Carmenere. The acids are a bit higher and help balance the ripe mellow fruit.

TERRUNYO “PEUMO VINEYARD” CARMENERE, CACHAPOAL VALLEY 2015

This beauty is from vines grown on the coastal mountains, known as the Cordillera. It is harvested extremely late and always shows massively rich dark blackberry fruit flavors, harmoniously balanced with bitter chocolate mocha spice notes.

CASA SILVA “CUVEE COLCHAGUA” CARMENERE, COLCHAGUA VALLEY 2015

This wine has a smoky, coffee-like aroma, with flavors of blueberry, and a leafy accent. Lush and creamy on the palate, it is beautifully structured, with fresh acidity and soft tannins.

CARMEN CARMENERE, COLCHAGUA VALLEY 2014

A plummy, floral scented wine, with more tart, lively berry flavors, notes of cedar, smoke and mint. Higher in acid than the Maipo wines, with more of a boysenberry jam and tobacco accent, but with the same lush texture.

VIU MANENT “GRAN RESERVA” CARMENERE, COLCHAGUA VALLEY 2015

This is grown on volcanic soil and shows a lively fresh wild berry character, with notes of bay leaf and coffee. A medium-bodied wine with gamy notes and a bright, lingering finish.

SANTA RITA “MEDALLA REAL” CARMENERE, COLCHAGUA VALLEY 2013

Spicy and rich, with blueberry and dark chocolate notes, a concentrated highly extracted wine that is also elegant and soft on the palate. This is a blend of Marchigue (granitic, well-drained rocky clay soils) and Apalta (deep rooted old vines, sunny but sheltered from rain, stony soils) fruit, very late harvested, showing complexity, great tannic structure and exceptional aging potential.

MONTES "PURPLE ANGEL" CARMENERE, COLCHAGUA VALLEY 2014

Considered by many to be the finest expression of Carmeneré, the 2014 also incorporates Marchigüe with Apalta fruit. It features brilliant aromatics of black berry, nutmeg and vanilla, as well as a velvet texture. Smooth and juicy, with huge extraction and lingering exotic spice notes.

VINA ERRAZURIZ "MAX RESERVA" CARMENERE, ACONCAGUA VALLEY 2015

Dark in color, with aromas redolent of coffee and blackberry, this is rich in sweet fruit, lush in texture and strongly tannic. A big wine that has it all.

IN SUMMARY Carmeneré today should have broader consumer appeal than its presence in the market indicates. The learning curve in Chile has been steep and the days of producing awkward, vegetally scented, and overly minty examples with excessive bell pepper notes, or conversely pruney, overripe, dried out wines are behind us. The vast majority of Carmenerés I taste today, as the above notes indicate, are wines of substance and balance, with an unapologetic sleek richness, that deserve a place at the table.