

South America Uncovered

Chile and Argentina are becoming more and more interesting as producing countries for the UK wine market. We have long known that Chile produces wines that stylistically suit our market and at good value prices and our buying director Emma Roberts introduced many new suppliers after her visit two years ago. Argentina is an emerging producing nation and therefore well worth exploring. Personally I hadn't visited either for 11 years, and so this year's trip was a real eye-opener.

Fundamentally Chile is a completely different country today than it was even 5 years ago, let alone 11! Santiago now feels like a modern, bustling international city. I was amazed by how many producers are new, and how many new vineyards in virgin sites have been planted in the last 5-7 years. The really exciting aspect of this is the emergence of regional differences in wines produced. The cooler areas nearer to the coast on the west and the Andes in the east are seeing plantings of Sauvignon and Pinot Noir and other cooler climate varieties. Vineyard areas such as San Antonio and Leyda near the Pacific (which I hadn't realised is very cold in Chile due to the Humboldt Current) did not even exist a decade ago. Growers are also planting further south in cooler, more marginal areas towards the Antarctic. In more traditional areas producers are moving from the fertile, valley floors to the slopes at higher altitude, where yields are lower, harvests are later, and aromatic expression is more complex. And of course there is Elqui and Limari in the north; 4 hours drive from Santiago towards the start of the Atacama Desert – wonderful growing conditions.

We have also come across new suppliers, organic suppliers, old stalwarts such as Los Vascos doing great things (a tip, try maturing their normal Cabernet for a couple of years – it ages beautifully) so watch this space for next year.

Argentina is a total contrast. The economic troubles the country has experienced since devaluation in 2001 are quite plainly illustrated by the number of ancient cars still on the roads! But boy is its wine industry getting interesting. New plantings in cooler areas like Tupungato are making lovely fragrant Sauvignons, Torrontes, and rich yet unheavy Malbec. Malbec really is a speciality here, reaching new heights (literally in the high altitude vineyards) of richness and sophistication. There are new boutique small production wineries springing up that are making some lovely, handcrafted wines.

The 24 hour trip home (a tip, try to avoid any lengthy waits between connections at Sao Paolo airport – there is nothing to do there!) was well worth it and the visit has proved to be one of the most satisfying for many years.

About the Author

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