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Year's Best Syrah

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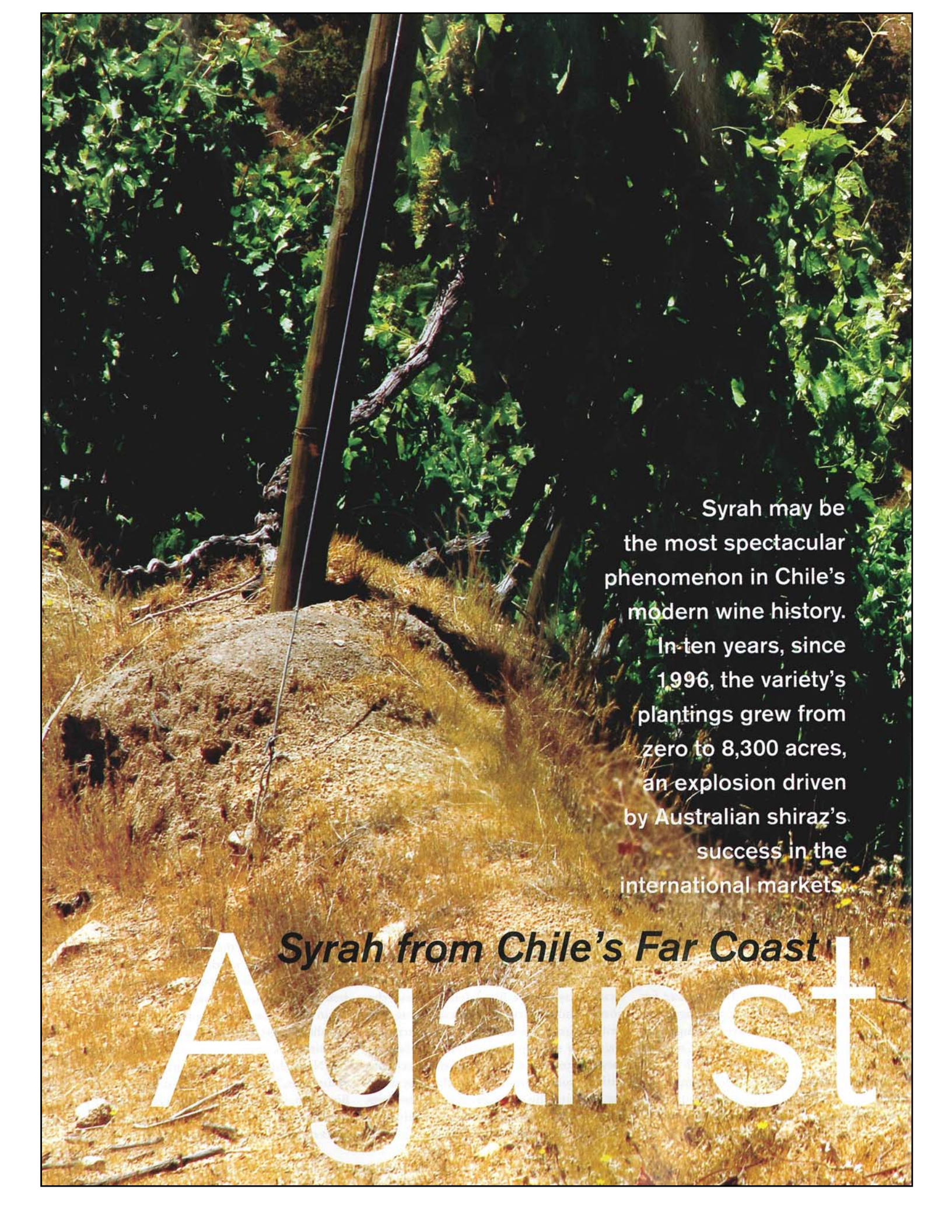
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Syrah may be
the most spectacular
phenomenon in Chile's
modern wine history.

In ten years, since
1996, the variety's
plantings grew from
zero to 8,300 acres,
an explosion driven
by Australian shiraz's
success in the
international markets.

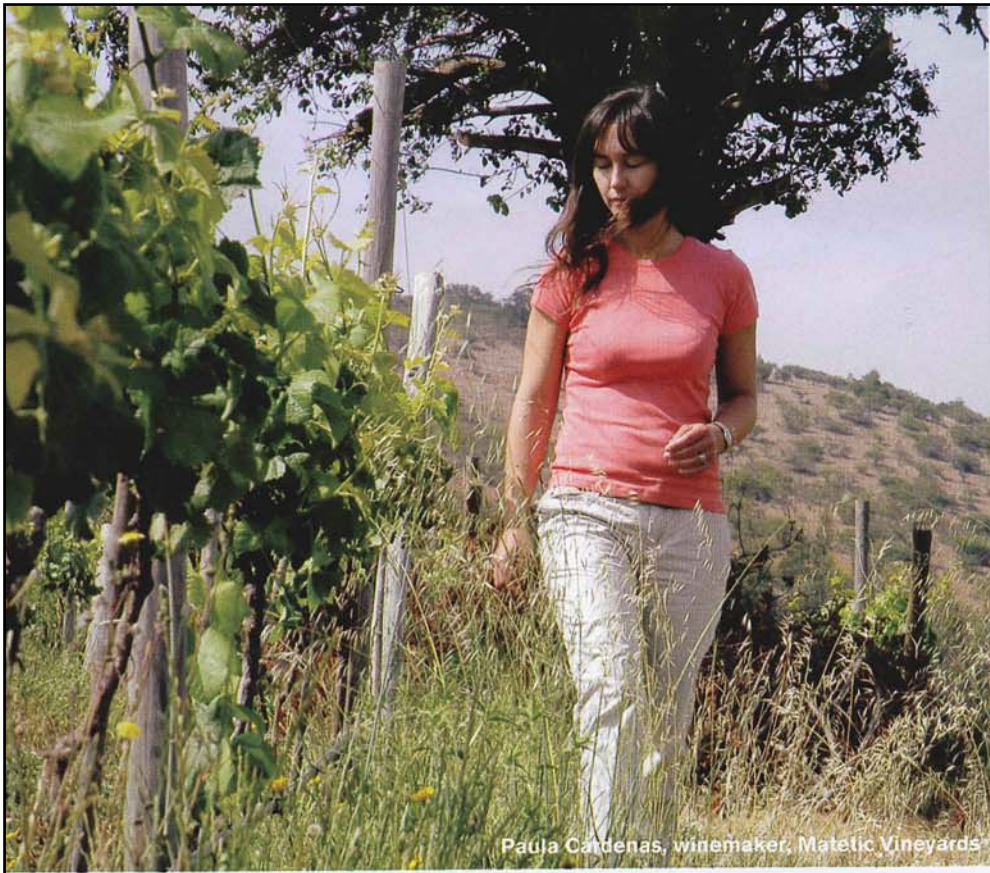
Syrah from Chile's Far Coast

Against

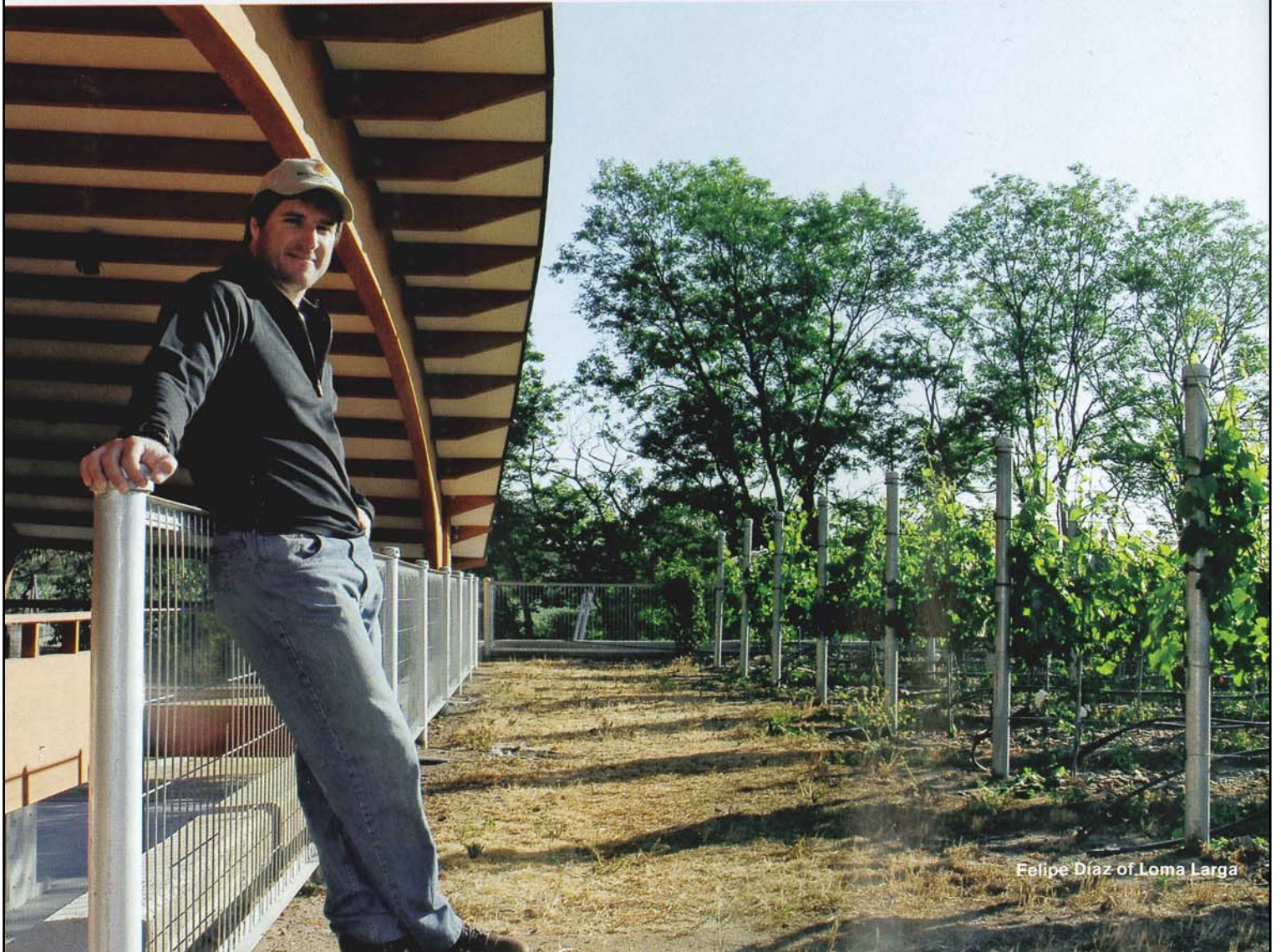
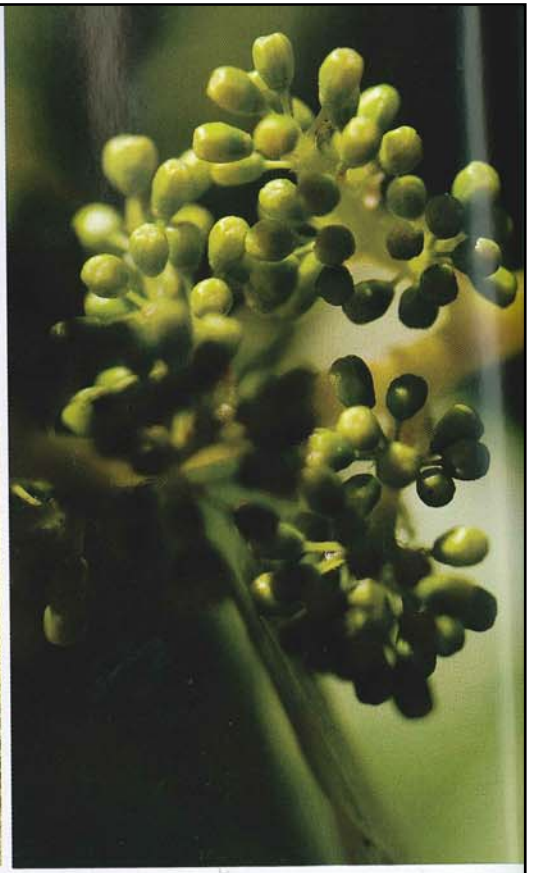


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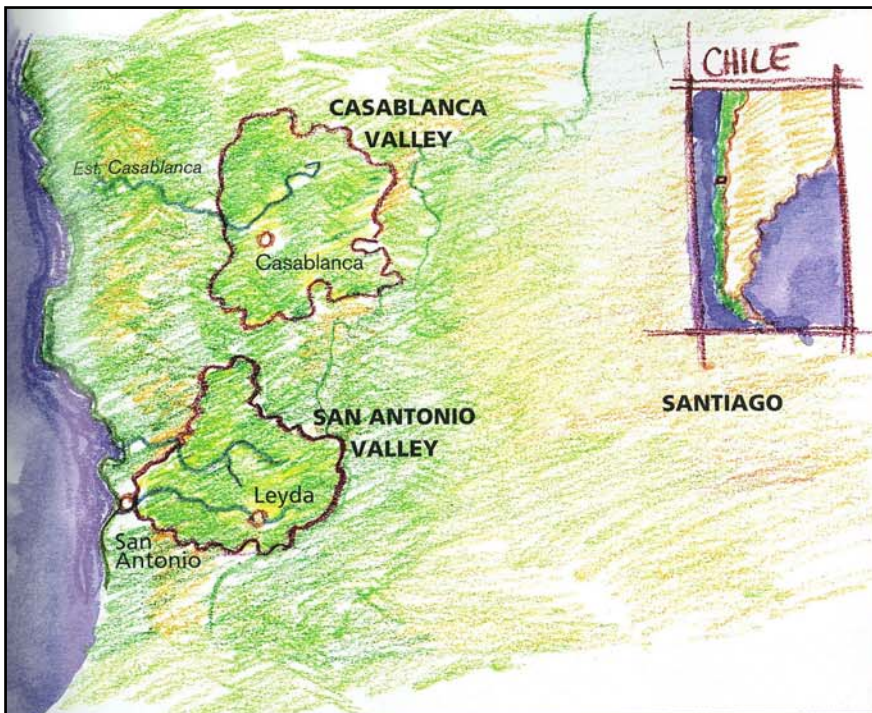
the Wind



Paula Cardenas, winemaker, Matetic Vineyards



Felipe Diaz of Loma Larga



Rodrigo Soto

Chilean growers first planted syrah in the country's warm climates, to emulate the opulent style South Australia produces from old vines. But as it turns out, the young vine vigor of syrah in Chile is best tempered by the cold winds of the Pacific, and the brave few who planted syrah on Chile's far coast are now producing exceptional wines.

The rolling hills of the Coastal Cordillera begin the morning in the fog, then salt air blows in from the ocean and the winds continue all day long. The land around San Antonio, 60 miles west of Santiago, is mainly thickets and hawthorns. Nobody there had heard of syrah in 1999, when Anne Kraemer, a California consultant working for Matetic Vineyards, suggested that Jorge Matetic and his team plant it in El Rosario.

"Honestly, at the time, I thought Anne was making a mistake," says Rodrigo Soto, then winemaker at Matetic, who didn't believe syrah would ripen in such a cold climate, 12 miles from the coast.

Matetic planted six acres in a small valley; it was sheltered from the winds by hills to the west, north and east. According to climate studies, it is the warmest vineyard location on the 24,000-acre property (including 311 acres planted to vines). The soils in these hills are made of sandy decomposed granite; the valleys below have more fertile sand and clay. Kraemer and Soto chose the least productive plant material available at the time—clones 174 and 300.

"It was a challenge to ripen the fruit," Soto says, "since the syrah vines naturally produced around 15 kilos of fruit per plant." In such a cool place, it would have been impossible to ripen the grapes with those heavy yields; in effect, the cool climate forced them to lower yields. "For our first wine in 2001," he says, "we had to bring down our yields to four kilos per vine." The vines produced a syrah with fresh fruit,

herbal hints and vibrant acidity, and their success with that first bottling of the EQ Syrah led to additional plantings.

"In 2002 we decided to plant in another relatively warm spot, this one on a slope with granitic soils," Soto says, hoping the less fertile soils would control syrah's vigor. He planted the vines at a greater density, around 3,000 vines per hectare up from 2,274 at the first site.

Today, winemaker Paula Cárdenas farms those two blocks, and finds that the denser planting has helped to reduce yields per vine. Still, the fruit from the new vineyard doesn't qualify yet for EQ, Matetic's top selection. Instead, it goes to Corralillo, the second label. "It's probably just a matter of age—the new vines give fruit with lighter body, and it lacks the complexity of aromas I get from the older plants," Cárdenas says. Her 2006 EQ is defined by spicy aromas, vibrant acidity and a generous texture that make it the most opulent of the new breed of cool-climate syrahs.

Just north of San Antonio, the western Casablanca Valley is another region where producers are experimenting with cool-climate syrah. Loma Larga, for instance, is a small winery in Lower Casablanca, 15 miles from the sea, at a break in the Coastal Cordillera that allows the sea breeze to flow freely and mists to settle in the hills. The winery farms 32 acres of syrah, planted in a vineyard sheltered by those hills.

According to owner Felipe Díaz, "When we purchased the land in 1994, we realized that the lower areas were not only more exposed to the frosts and mist, but also to the cold wind from the sea."

It is a cloudy day, and Díaz has taken me to a high point in the vineyard, a lookout with a small barbecue pit and a view of the valley where the hills open out towards the coast.

In 2001 Loma Larga planted sauvignon blanc, a bit of pinot noir and chardonnay in the colder plains; 300 feet up the slopes, they planted two blocks of syrah, which they now blend together in their Syrah BK-BL. Block L is the steepest and most protected area of the vineyard, composed of predominantly granitic soils. "This vineyard gives structure and body to the wine and is usually the material that goes into new barrels. It can bear the intensity of the toast," says Díaz.

Block K comes from a gentler slope, where the soils are more fertile, less granitic and with a higher proportion of clay. The block delivers a wine with less weight, yet more freshness given its greater exposure to the wind.

Both blocks were planted with new clonal material that arrived in Chile in 2000. "The theory is that clone 525 offers low yields, at least by shiraz's standards," says Díaz. "Still, we have to thin the crop to allow shiraz to ripen." Díaz harvests one kilo per plant, and says that if he didn't thin the bunches, the yield would be twice as high. At that rate, with the cold and the wind, "What we would obtain would be a rosé," he says.



Evelyn Vidal, winemaker, Kingston Family Vineyards



Aurelio Montes

Colchagua's Coastal Syrah

Currently, half of Chile's syrah acreage is in the warm Rapel Valley, where Viña Montes grows Folly, in the Apalta hills of Colchagua. It's an area, Aurelio Montes says, "where syrah can reach exceptional elegance." Before releasing the first vintage of Folly, the 2000, Montes had already begun planting more syrah. In 1999, he developed a new site closer to the Colchagua coast in Marchigüe, and he included 148 acres of syrah. "The idea was to obtain livelier wines than those from Apalta, since it is a fresher climate," says Montes, who does not rule out the idea of adding another high-end syrah to his portfolio. "It's just a matter of time," he says.

The climate in Marchigüe, 15 miles from the coast, is what Montes calls "intermediate." It's not as cold as areas in San Antonio or Casablanca that are equally close to the coast. The difference is due to the Coastal Cordillera, which runs parallel to the sea west of Marchigüe. At an average height of 1,600 feet, these hills block some of the ocean influence; syrah ripens two weeks earlier than at Kingston in Casablanca, where the Coastal Cordillera is lower.

That intermediate climate appealed to Santa Carolina winemaker Sven Bruschfeld and Gonzalo Muñoz, a veterinarian, who together founded a syrah-focused project in Marchigüe. Their Polkura vineyard, a small, south-facing amphitheater with 30 acres of syrah, was planted in 2002. The soil is typical of the Chilean coast, consisting mainly of decaying granite, rocks and clays. The 2006, their second release, is generous in red fruit and spice, all marked by freshness—a reflection of this south-facing slope close to the Pacific.

Perhaps the Kingstons would have also obtained a rosé if they hadn't decided to plant their syrah in areas protected from the ocean wind. Kingston Family Vineyards is one of the most important growers in Casablanca, with 300 acres of vines in the southwestern end of the valley ten miles from the sea. They farm 37 acres of syrah and have selected 7.4 acres of a steep, sheltered hillside for their two estate bottlings—the basic Tobiano and the superior Bayo Oscuro. The soil is a mix of decomposed granite and clay.

The Kingstons planted their syrah vines in 1999, the same year as Matetic, with the same plant material. For more recent plantings in 2005, they opted for newly available clones, including 525. According to Evelyn Vidal, Kingston's winemaker, they grow and harvest all the syrah with Bayo Oscuro in mind. She then makes the selection in the winery. "The deeper wines, with greater length of flavor, go to Bayo Oscuro," she says, "the simpler and more approachable to Tobiano."

"Everything we do in this vineyard aims at lowering the number of bunches per vine," Vidal continues. They prune the vines hard and conduct a green harvest, she says, "not only to obtain good fruit, but mainly to reach maturity. That is our challenge. Trying to make syrah ripen under such cold conditions—it's something like those modeling agencies that demand inhuman sacrifices of women to keep them thin and beautiful." The result is one of the most beautiful syrahs ever made in Chile. The fruit in the 2006 Bayo Oscuro feels red and refreshing with complex spicy and herbal hints, while the Tobiano is softer and more straightforward, with a flavor of blackberries.

Syrah is a recent phenomenon in Chile, and no one knows what the vines will produce when they are fully mature. Will the most compelling wines come from these vines, which struggled to survive in protected sites along the Pacific—or will warmer climates gain the advantage, once the vines grow old and less vigorous? For now, the far coast is the place to be for syrah and growers are willing to bet on it.

Jorge Matetic is convinced: During the last two years he has planted 86 new acres of syrah. At a total of 123 acres, it's now the largest cool-climate syrah vineyard in Chile. And he has more in mind for the future. "One can say there is a lot of work in the vineyard to get good syrah in this climate; I won't be too dramatic about it. The pruning and green harvest are nowadays normal work if you want to get real quality in any grape. The truth is, we love cool-climate syrah and, so far, syrah seems to love the coast." ■