



# Chile: 2018 – The Best Vintage of the Last 20 Years?

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It's very unusual for the central focus of my article to be a vintage, since *terroir* and people have such a strong impact on the wines and vintage generalizations have so many exceptions that Mother Nature is usually pushed to the back row. But in the case of 2018 in Chile, the natural conditions of the year provide such a perfect scenario for producing great wines that express their place of birth and grapes that I truly believe it's the main news about Chile's wine production right now.

The 2018 wines are arriving on the market now, and I tasted more from that vintage than from any other for this report, even if 2017 is close behind. In **my previous article** (<https://www.robertparker.com/articles/XLzXqgXLeMjv6fm7s/chile-dont-stop-believin>) published 16 months ago, I already reported on how Chilean winemakers were ecstatic about the quality of the **2018** vintage, which provided both quantity and quality. They had suffered a row of difficult vintages, including the very warm, dry and early 2017 vintage that was marked by terrible wildfires, a cold and wet 2016 vintage that caught many unprepared and a more balanced 2015 vintage that was also warm and dry (which is normal) and produced ripe, powerful wines but more in the classical style. I tasted three dozen 2018s, then early releases—mostly whites and some lighter reds but also usually simpler wines—that already point at what the vintage is capable of.



Today, I have a much clearer idea of 2018, having tasted over 300 wines from that year and having discussed it with dozens of winemakers. Yes, the wines have the same freshness as the best 2016s, but the vintage didn't present that many challenges and the quality is a lot more homogeneous. 2016 provided the conditions for the change of mindset toward earlier picking, less extraction and a lighter hand during *élevage*, and then 2018 delivered quality and quantity of healthy grapes. The 2018 wines are a much more complete and balanced version of the 2016s.

Furthermore, some top wines from 2018 have not yet been released, as many spend two winters in the winery and are released two to three years after the harvest. When those wines (Garage Wine Co., Seña, Don Melchor, Domus Aurea, Almaviva) come to the market, they will boost the average quality of the year even further.

An initial view of **2019**—again, a majority of whites, a bunch of rosés and a few early-release, lighter, simpler reds—revealed a year that was riper than 2018, warmer and drier but still fairly fresh and balanced and promises to be a good classical vintage. As for 2020, the growing season has been extremely dry (it's the same problem across the Andes in Argentina), with some heat waves and a very early harvest that started as I was writing these lines.



As for **2017**, many wines have turned out much better than expected, and I hardly found any smoke taint in any wines. A lot of grapes and lots were disqualified, sold in bulk or blended into cheaper and larger ranges; yields were also lower and further selection made some of the wines see their quantities severely reduced, but that also helped maintain the quality. It's definitely a warmer and riper vintage, almost the opposite of 2018. So, the profile of the wines is often more Mediterranean and generous, with higher alcohol and mellower acidity.



*The Domus Aurea wine from 2016 has to be their finest vintage to date.*

Some **2016** latecomers, especially the stellar 2016 Domus Aurea, the most elegant vintage to date, rounded out the vintage nicely. I might taste a handful next time, but I think I have basically completed reporting on 2016. It was clearly not a year for Carmenère, the same as in 2018, because the grape needs heat, and the difficult 2017 vintage provided much better weather for it. More about Carmenère a little later.

And other than the weather, what is happening in Chile?

### **The Socio-Economic Environment**

Most of you might have seen the news about Chile. The country exploded in late October 2019, the last straw being the increase in the price of the underground fares in Santiago, but the background issues are the huge differences between classes, as well as the poor conditions and expensive services the majority of the population suffers. Demonstrations, violence, curfew, deaths... But then the whole world is so crazy that even that news might have gone unnoticed.



I really understood all this when researching the dreadful **2017 wildfires** (<https://winejournal.robertparker.com/chilean-wine-country-a-look-at-forest-fires-history-and-sustainability>) and realized there was a huge gap between classes and the lack of a middle class in the country. Furthermore, essentials such as health and education are poor and expensive to the point that nearly all Chileans visiting me to taste their wines in Madrid were looking for a pharmacy to buy medicines, as in Chile they are up to five times more expensive than in Spain!

The structure of the wineries faithfully reflects the social structure of the country. Chile is the country with the largest wineries in the world. I suspect the Concha y Toro group (Concha y Toro, Cono Sur, Emiliana, Maycas de Limarí, Quinta de Maipo, Trivento in Argentina and Fetzer in the US) could easily be the largest in the world, even larger than Gallo. Putting it in simple words, there are few and very large wineries in Chile. It's the same in most of the other sectors in the country—a few large enterprises dominate the market.



*MoVI members, from left to right: Felipe García (PS García), Maurizio Garibaldi and Christian Sepúlveda (Bouchon)*

In the wine world, small players have slowly emerged, movements and associations of small, independent growers like MoVI (Movimiento de Viñateros Independientes) or Chachos Deslenguados are more and more relevant. It all possibly started with País. It's the grape that was originally taken to America by the Spanish, Listán Prieto, the Castilian red variety almost extinct in its place of origin that spread in the American continent. It took on different names in different places, including Mission in California and Criolla Chica in Argentina. They kept the original name in México, but it was baptized as País in Chile. *País* means country.

### **País is Here to Stay**

País was THE grape in Chile. In some places, it's even called *Chilena* (Chilean), clearly the closest to a local wine grape that didn't exist in America, an adopted child that was loved as if it were their own.



*País was the first wine grape to arrive in Chile, and as such, there are many old vineyards planted with it.*

In a way, it all reflects the politics and the class struggle. País is the grape of the peasants, of the poor, despised by the powerful corporations but used at ridiculously low prices to produce mass-market wines. And all of a sudden, País and the style of wine produced for home-consumption, called Pipeño, woke up and revindicated its position as the most faithful representation of Chilean viticulture of dry-farmed, ungrafted vineyards in Bio-Bio, Itata and Maule. Frenchman Louis-Antoine Luyt was pivotal in this rebirth, but now others have taken up the torch.

The category is quite healthy now, and producers like Roberto Henríquez, Viejo Almacén de Sauzal, Bouchon, Estación Yumbel and Garage Wine Co. produce País wines that are sought after and sold throughout the world. Henríquez presented me with up to five different reds produced with País from different soils, and it's impressive how the grape can transmit the character of the soils, especially the granite and volcanic ones.



*Ancient País vines from Roberto Henríquez on the south bank of the Bio-Bio River*

His 2019 País Franco grown on basalt soils on the south bank of the Bio-Bio River shows characteristics that clearly remind me of wines from the Canary Islands or Sicily, with notes of wet pumice stone and spices that, to me, are the giveaway descriptors for volcanic soils. And new names are appearing all the time. During this round, the revelation was the País from Catalina Ugarte. I think it's something relevant to mention, and I'm glad to see it happening, that many of these small producers are finding importers in the US.



*Classical red granite soils in Itata*

Something similar is happening with the red Cinsault, a grape that is extensively planted in Itata and is also vinified by some of the País producers mentioned. It's the flagship grape of Pedro Parra, who also works with some País. His 2018s are the best wines produced with Cinsault in Chile so far.



*The Pedro Parra winery*

### **And Carmenère is Coming Back?**

I've never seen so much Carmenère from Chile, and the quality of its wines has improved tremendously—years ago, it was mostly undrinkable. It's nothing new, but it seems like the grape is making a stronger comeback, with more wines and more bottles of many existing brands.



*Carmenère planted in 1945 at Clos de la Luz in Cachapoal*

But most of the wines are produced in a very different style now. In the past, when the grape was left to mature, it was often in excess, as they were trying to get rid of the herbal character of this grape that more often than not resulted in excessively ripe, alcoholic wines with very low acidity and dangerously high pHs. The new style is a lot fresher, with grapes picked earlier, contained alcohol, herbal and spicy character and much better freshness. No, Carmenère is still not my favorite grape, but while in the past I was unable to drink those wines, I can happily drink many of today's examples. I think producers like De Martino drove the change, as they overcame the fear of showing the natural style of the grape when picked much earlier than yesteryear.

### **Better Pinot Noir**

Another grape that has seen an enormous transformation in the last few years is Pinot Noir. Of course, the nature of the grape does not do well if picked too late, extracted and given too much oak, which could have been some of the sins in the past. But there was also something inherent to the quality of the plant material that had been available in the country, which was quite low. When people started planting good clonal or massal selections, more often than not coming from Burgundy, the motherland of the variety, quality skyrocketed.



*The Talinay Pai vineyard is the source of a new and inspiring Pinot Noir from Tabalí.*

One of my true *coups de coeur* this time has been the 2018 Talinay Pai Pinot Noir from Tabalí in Limarí. It comes from a very special vineyard with two massal selections from Vosne-Romanée and Gevrey-Chambertin in Burgundy that were planted ungrafted on a steep slope (30%) of pure limestone and with a very high density of 12,500 plants per hectare! They were very careful not to let the grapes ripen too much and then vinified and matured the wine with a gentle hand, the result being really amazing, going straight to the premier league of Pinot Noir from Chile.

Another Pinot Noir that is close to my heart and I want to mention is the one produced by Montsecano. I've known Alsatian André Ostertag for over 20 years, and I've admired and drunk his wines ever since. Ostertag is, of course, one of the partners in Montsecano, a Pinot Noir-only project in the Casablanca Valley, where he handled the vinification and they applied his philosophy of non-irrigation, natural yeasts, no oak, and so on.



*The Montsecano wines plus Derain's new Chilean Pinot Noir Las Nubes*

There is a big change from the 2018 vintage, as Ostertag is not actively involved in the harvest and vinification because of health problems. Julio Donoso, the leading Chilean partner, met Dominique Derain in Burgundy, as Derain is a producer in Saint-Aubin. Derain is friends with one of the other Montsecano partners, Álvaro Yañez, who lives in Paris. Derain has helped them produce the 2018s and 2019s and has even produced a small quantity of a wine from Chile— a young Pinot Noir from Casablanca, but not from the same place as Montsecano, that he sells with his own label, Las Nubes. As Donoso explained to me, “The Ostertag style is still the backbone, but we harvested a little earlier and did shorter macerations in search of going one step beyond, looking for elegance and structure now that the non-irrigated vines are well established.”



*Julio Donoso from Montsecano*

There is a lot going on in Chile, and you should read through the producer profiles and take a look at the tasting notes. My highest-scoring wine was the 2018 VIGNO from De Martino, a wine that should be well known to our most faithful readers. But there are many hidden gems beyond the high-scoring and famous names, such as an unexpected volcanic Sauvignon Blanc from AltaCima, the revamped Amelia range from Concha y Toro, the cool-climate biodynamic wines from Matetic and a wine dedicated to the Ramones! And no, they are not ALL from 2018.



*Hey, ho! Let's go!*

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Vintage	Wines	RP
2018	De Martino Vigno	98
2016	Quebrada de Macul Domus Aurea	97
2017	De Martino Vigno	97
2017	Seña	96+
2017	Viñedo Chadwick	96+

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