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# BLANC PAGE

AS AMERICANS DIVERSIFY THEIR PREFERENCES IN WHITE WINE, CHILEAN SAUVIGNON BLANC PRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY

BY ROGER MORRIS

**'C**hilean Sauvignon Blanc can be just as crisp as those from New Zealand, but with the elegance of Sauvignon Blanc from Loire in France," says Alex Guarachi, CEO and founder of California-based TGIC Importers. "And Chile is capable of doing so many things with Sauvignon Blanc because of the varied terroirs and growing conditions throughout the country."

Most wine regions pride themselves on producing a distinctive style of wine, something they can heavily market as a brand—Napa Valley Cabernet, Mendoza Malbec, South African Chenin Blanc. But when it comes to their Sauvignon Blancs, Chilean wine producers love to flaunt their diversity. If a consumer likes the Sauvignon style of Sancerre, Marlborough, Graves or California's North Coast, Chile thinks it can match those styles and improve on them, and at a discount.

In fact, Chilean winemakers think so highly of Sauvignon Blanc that they are touting it in the American market as the companion white to go along with the country's iconic red, Cabernet Sauvignon, rather than the traditional Chardonnay. "The quality of Sauvignon Blanc in Chile has improved over the past few years more

than Chardonnay," claims Viña Tarapaca winemaker Ed Flaherty, and plantings have increased dramatically.

## GEOGRAPHY SPAWNS DIVERSITY

A look at a map of Chile helps explain its huge capacity for diversity. The country's average width from the Pacific Ocean to the crest of its Andes Mountains and its border with Bolivia and Argentina is only 110 miles, about the driving distance from downtown New York City to Philadelphia. However, it stretches some 2,653 miles from the tropics in the north almost to the Antarctic in the south, about the distance between Los Angeles and Washington, DC.

That north-south span alone encompasses the range of climate possibilities—from hottest to coldest, wettest to

driest—needed to grow practically any grape variety. Even its narrow east-west corridor provides a huge range of climates from humid, foggy coastal areas to temperate interior valleys to chilly mountainside venues. For Sauvignon Blanc, a grape that loves to change style according to where it's planted, the clone used and winemaking practices, Chile is a virtual Noah's Ark of viticulture.

In short, Sauvignon Blanc from Chile may all taste like the same variety, but with distinctive differences, according to Evan Goldstein, sommelier, consultant and author of the recently published *Wines of South America: The Essential Guide*. "For example, SBs from Casablanca have a cleaner, brighter perfume and the definitive Sauvignon characters of herbs, grass, lemon, and olive," Goldstein explains. "I believe that the western,

**TOP, LEFT:** Chile's variety of microclimates from north to south makes it a veritable Noah's Ark of viticulture. **RIGHT:** Recent advances in quality and targeted promotions are helping raise the profile of Chilean Sauvignon Blanc above the "bargain wine" level. Here, revelers at last summer's #WineBarWars in NYC enjoy Sauvignon Blancs picked by sommeliers competing to develop interesting wine lists strictly from Chilean wines.



Phil Bernstein (far left) at MacArthur Beverages in Washington, DC, thinks Chilean Sauvignon Blancs could benefit from more marketing attention. In New York City, Chris Raftery thinks SB is becoming the Malbec of white wines by the glass. Aurelio Montes believes respect for Chilean bottlings over \$20 is just around the corner.

cooler-climate area of Casablanca produces zippier elderflower versions, while farther east, the wines tend to evoke pink grapefruit, hard candy, and green melon."

Goldstein suggests keeping an eye on Limarí, where the wines are mineral-driven; San Antonio, with a spicy character, and its more concentrated sub-regions Leyda and Lo Abarca; and Bfo-Bfo, whose wines are "elegant with quince aromas."

As evidence of Chile's potential for both quality and diversity in Sauvignon Blanc, consider Undurraga's "T.H." (for Terroir Hunter) program—dedicated to finding the best terroirs for various grapes all over Chile. Acclaimed enologist Rafael Urrejola has pinpointed 30+ parcels, each no more than 12 acres. As part of this program, he makes three separate T.H. Sauvignon Blancs, from Leyda, Casablanca and Lo Abarca, each vivid and balanced yet distinct. The 2011 Lo Abarca was named best New World white wine at the ExpoVinis in São Paulo, Brazil, among entries from more than 25 countries.

#### TRADE, CONSUMERS TAKING NOTICE

While American drinkers grew fonder of Sauvignon Blanc over the past decade, particularly by-the-glass offerings, trade professionals say they now are demanding different, distinct styles, much as an earlier generation split preferences on types of Chardonnay.

And while Chardonnay is still the most popular varietal wine in the United States, Sauvignon Blanc continues to make inroads. "Sauvignon Blanc is becoming the Malbec of white wines by the glass," says Chris Raftery, sommelier at CorkBuzz in New York City. "Chilean Sauvignons are popular in part because they tend to have a nice salinity to them."

## One ongoing challenge: with fine Sauvignon Blancs made all over the world, it's harder for Chile to stand out.

"People are moving away from New Zealand's grapefruit tastes to Sauvignon Blancs that have more lemon-lime flavors like those from Chile," adds Andy Gesell, VP and South American Manager for Alabama-based Vineyard Brands, importer of Cono Sur.

One issue that Chile faces is standing out in a crowded marketplace. Sauvignon Blanc, either 100% varietal or blended, is produced around the world, and the U.S. is generally producers' primary target. Phil Bernstein of MacArthur Beverages in Washington, D.C., notes the attractiveness of Chile's wines, but feels that the country needs to give its Sauvignon Blancs the same marketing attention that New Zealand and France do theirs. "The Chileans Sauvignons sell steadily as they are in an attractive price point," he says, "but I don't really have anyone beating down our door for them. In general, Chile is dragging its heels a bit as a category overall."

Furthermore, Sauvignon Blanc seems to be positioned in consumers' minds at only one price level. "It's difficult to break that \$20 a bottle price barrier with American drinkers," concedes Aurelio Montes, International Vice President for Wines of Chile and himself an exporter of Chilean Sauvignon Blancs under his eponymous label. Respect at higher price points may be just around the corner, though, based on quality evident in recent vintages.

Goldstein concludes: "There are very good price values, especially at the top end, when compared to those emanating from France, New Zealand and California."

Selling diversity is a tempting marketing strategy—but only as long as each consumer can sort out producers offering their preferred style. Otherwise, Chile's "blanc page" can suddenly have so many images that the consumer turns it and moves to the next one. ■

### BLANCS TO WATCH

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{ \$15 & UNDER }

- **Anderra**
- **Los Vascos**
- **Casillero del Diablo**
- **Montgras**
- **DeMartino**
- **Santa Ema "Amplus"**
- **Emiliana "Natura"**
- **Santa Rita "120"**
- **Lapostolle**
- **Veramonte**

#### WORTH THE HUNT

{ & THE TAG }

##### Casa Silva

"Cool Coast" Sauvignon Blanc 2014 (\$23)

##### Concha y Toro

"Itimunyo" 2011 (\$23)

##### Cono Sur

"20 Barrels" Sauvignon Blanc 2014 (\$23)

##### Errazuriz

"Aconcagua Costa" 2014 (\$17)

##### Garces Silva

"Amayna" Barrel Fermented 2012 (\$21)

##### Koye

"Costa" NV (\$24)

##### Montes "Outer Limits"

2014 (\$26)

##### San Pedro

"1865" Sauvignon Blanc 2014 (\$17)

##### Vña Ventisquero

"Queulal" Gran Reserva 2012 (\$13)