

# Where Oh Where is Carmenère?



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## WHERE OH WHERE IS CARMENÈRE?

Like the mystery adventures of the popular sleuth, Carmen Sandiego, the story of Carmenère could be entitled “The Mystery of the Missing Sixth Grape of Bordeaux”. But... *this* mystery has been solved! The elusive varietal has been found alive and well, hiding away for centuries and flourishing on the slopes of the Andes in Chile.

This intriguing mystery was brought to light for me one evening last year while attending a Chilean wine-tasting dinner presented by Miguel Torres. Our final dinner course was introduced with the story of the Miguel Torres’ purchase of vineyard acreage in Chile. When the negotiator asked what the old-looking vines were across the road, the reply was to the effect that those old things, nobody wants them. You can have them for free if you like. Those old unwanted vines were the elusive and long-thought-missing Carmenère.



### **The Mystery History**

It's been called a hoax, it's been called a wine of “hazy origin”; but the grape and its resultant unique qualities do exist and in fact have authentic pedigree and class.

The Carmenère grape, also known as the Grand Vidure, was a major component of Bordeaux' vineyards in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. It was classified as one of the few wine grapes permitted to be grown in the classic Médoc region of Bordeaux in France along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec and Petit Verdot. Along with Cabernet Franc, Carmenère is credited with establishing the reputations of some of the Medoc's best estates. However, Carmenère fell into disfavor with vignerons because of its propensity for coulure, a problem resulting in the loss of berries shortly after flowering early in the growing season. Too often, excessive coulure reduced Carmenère's yields to levels that proved intolerable to growers, many of whom were already replacing it with other grapes when phylloxera infestation devastated Bordeaux's vineyards late in the 19th century. When replanting began, financially distressed growers could not afford to gamble with varieties that wouldn't produce consistent crops, and Carmenère was spurned in favor of others. To this day, there are no commercially significant plantings of Carmenère in Bordeaux.

Meanwhile, Carmenère from France had quietly migrated to Chile, along with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. 150 years ago, Chile's fashion-conscious aristocracy modeled the wineries it created after those in France. Cuttings from Bordeaux, including Carmenère, were planted in the valleys around Santiago. These vineyards formed the backbone of the South American country's burgeoning wine industry - the wines they produced closely followed the French model. Some were considered of such quality that when phylloxera struck, decimating France's vines and cutting production dramatically, Chilean exports helped fill the void.



Much Carmenère had been planted, and the vines did well in the climatic conditions of central Chile, but over time its distinct identity was lost. Vineyard layouts and planting records were not particularly systematic during the 19th century in most countries, and Chile was no exception. Plantings were done willy-nilly and Carmenère were interspersed in vineyards with Merlot, with which it shared some superficial similarities of appearance. Carmenère remained, but over the course of history its identity became submerged and then lost altogether. Chileans began to call both grapes Merlot. If remembered at all, Carmenère was referred to as a lost or extinct variety. Global obscurity set in.

As the Chileans learned how to make good wine, they started to gain a reputation as a producer of great Merlot with more color and intensity than other regions could produce. It was apparent, however, that Chilean "Merlot" was of two distinct varieties, with leaves shaped and colored somewhat differently, grape bunches that did not look identical, and MOST importantly, a different ripening timetable (a factor relating to the climate, many thought). As Chile began to export more in the late 1980s, and the country experienced a massive wave of foreign investment and involvement in its wine industry, it was noted that even the very moderately priced Chilean Merlot had a stronger, more positive and slightly spicier flavor profile than wines made from the same grape elsewhere in the world. The texture was also reported as more sumptuous. At first this was attributed to clonal variations, with the theory that perhaps Chile had evolved a sub-variety of Merlot with stronger levels of fruit extract and flavor intensity. In the early 1990's French ampelographers began examining the leaves and grapes. They identified two distinctly different varieties: Merlot and Carmenère. It was not until 1994 that Professor Jean-Michel Boursiquet of Montpellier's renowned school of Oenology finally verified this by using DNA mapping, establishing that Chilean Carmenère, which had been mis-identified as Merlot for over

a century, was in fact identical to Carmenère vines that had been preserved at French viticultural stations.

Rather than panic, Chilean winemakers deftly turned scandal into opportunity. With the following vintage some winemakers began to separate the Carmenère vines and make a pure varietal wine from them, which tasted very different from their previous “Merlots” and further spurred interest in publicizing the new discovery. In 1998 the Chilean Dept of Agriculture officially recognized Carmenère as a distinct variety, thus enabling Chilean vintners to bottle wines under the Carmenère name. Since the 1990’s, Chile has been actively marketing Carmenère.

### **Why Chile?**

Chile has been described as a “virtual paradise” for viticulture. Its southern hemisphere climate with plentiful sunshine combined with incredibly fertile soil is only the beginning. In fact, the sliver-shaped country has a microclimate produced by the backdrop of the Andes rolling the cool oceanic air back over the valleys and the smoldering summer heat. As well, the minimal rainfall in vineyard areas almost never occurs during the growing season.



And last, but certainly not least, Chile is, and always has been, phylloxera free. The phylloxera louse cannot survive the shrivelling hot desert on one side, and the prevailing cold onshore wind generated by the Humboldt Current on the other. Chile is the only major wine-producing country in the world totally untouched by the dual plagues of phylloxera and a downy mildew, *Oidium*, two of the most destructive diseases ever to affect grape vines. Thus, while Carmenère was slipping into obscurity in Europe, it was thriving on the slopes of the Andes.

### **Distinguishing characteristics**

The growing season in Chile was the saving grace for Carmenère. Its later ripening, while problematic in France, was its salvation in Chile. As well, Carmenère is less adaptable than Merlot; it requires more fastidious site selection, handling and harvesting to show at its best. Its growth pattern is much more vigorous- thus requiring more stringent pruning, both in the spring and summer. In fertile soils it never stops growing and produces the green pepper flavor. Chile’s

rocky clay soils have a poor water-holding capacity, which helps control the vigor of the vines. Planted on the hillside, Carmenère ripens extremely well, and becomes soft and fleshy. Today the varieties are planted apart from one another in any new vineyards, but the old intermingled plantings of Merlot and Carmenère still predominate. Although accuracy is impossible without a detailed and impractical vineyard survey, it is now estimated that over half of Chile's "Merlot" vines are actually Carmenère. Almost all of the *new* plantings, however, are Carmenère rather than Merlot.



Carmenère is really quite distinctive as a plant, as a grape and as a wine. Carmenère's leaves are clearly different than those of Merlot vines, and they turn bright red in autumn. A trained eye can spot Carmenère, for it sports pinkish leaves that set it apart. At harvest it is possible to identify the vines and harvest them at different times, at least for better quality production where hand harvesting is practiced. Timing of harvest is crucial, as Carmenère has relatively low acidity, even in comparison to Merlot, but if picked too early will taste vegetal, and if picked too late will be flat.

### **The Liquid Results**

Carmenère wines are described as juicy, lush quaffers with dark colors, plenty of sweet plummy fruit, low acid and velvet-soft tannins. They are richly extracted with blackberry, black coffee, cigar box notes and spices. Critics have called them "Bordeaux-like" and, simply delicious!

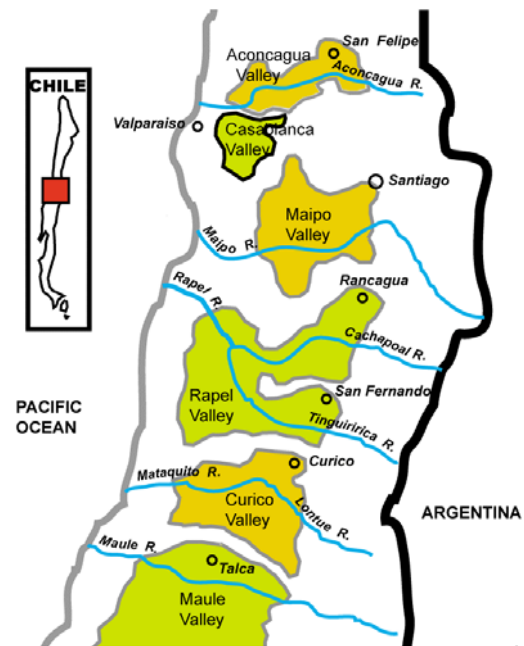
According to many, Carmenère can finally take the place it deserves among the red royalty of wine. As viticulturists devote more time to Carmenère as a distinct variety, they are learning how to pamper the fruit to its best advantage. Given its fruity characteristics, it can handle oak and reportedly ages well in American or French oak.

## For Maximum Pleasure

Given its deep complexity, Carmenère is best paired with game, lamb, grilled beef, wild rabbit and can hold up to pasta in red sauce. Unique flavors of dark fruit, meat, coffee and spices make this a spectacular food-friendly wine and true conversation piece. Mark Colvin of Colvin Vineyards, describes it as a "300-pound linebacker that enjoys opera and sushi."

## The Futures

The future for Carmenère in Chile is proving to be in the Aconcagua Valley, the most northerly of Chile's wine growing areas. Despite being north, the Aconcagua has one of the warmest microclimates in Chile, and produces very good results. Errazuriz invests heavily here. Another area of rising importance is the Colchagua Valley (Rapel Valley) south of Santiago. Two sub-regions of Colchagua, the Lolol and Apalta regions, are producing well. Of the two, the Apalta grows premium reds, and is felt to be on the edge of stardom.



Not surprisingly, the grape has turned up in the United States, too. The proprietor of Guenoc Winery in California's Lake County, Karen Mulander-Magoon, began in the late 1980s to bring Carmenère vines to her property, working with Louis Pierre Pradier, a French research scientist and viticulturalist whose work involved preserving Carmenère from extinction in France. The vine cuttings he gave her were quarantined, tested for diseases, and finally legalized for admission to California in the mid 1990s. They were then cloned and planted. Is this the start of a trend? Today there are even some Carmenère vines planted in Eastern Washington's Walla Walla Valley, a region of similarities, in fact, with some of Chile's vineyard areas. Introduction of the Carmenère, or Grand Vidure grape, to the Walla Walla Valley was done by winemaker Mark Colvin of Colvin Vineyards. Mark had been searching for ten years for the old Bordeaux varietal, known to be a terrific blending grape, and finally tracked plants down in California. Colvin

Vineyards is a pioneer in planting Carmenère grapes in the Northwest and believe they are the only producers of the varietal in North America. Their production is SOLD OUT!

### **Solution**

Wine has placed Chile on the map in terms of international attention. The better part of \$1 billion U.S. has been spent during the last five years alone on its wineries and vineyards. Lavish new wineries combined with more serious attention to viticulture have propelled Chilean wines to world attention. The next big goal for producers is to match definitive terroirs to varietal selections. The crowning achievement will be to elevate Carmenère into Chile's signature grape, and establish an image, like South Africa's Pinotage or Australia's Shiraz.

No variety says "Chile" like Carmenère!

**“ Carmenère is truly what makes Chile different, and it's on points of differentiation that identity is created”, says Sandy Block, M.W.**



## Appendix I

### Brought to you by:

#### **Baron Philippe de Rothschild, S.A.**

RESERVA CARMENÈRE 2001

Country: Chile

Region: Valle de Rapel

Grape Varieties: 100% Carmenère

Alcohol Strength: 13.4% by volume

Vinification: The grapes are harvested by hand and transported in open baskets to the winery, where they are destemmed and lightly crushed. Fermentation takes place at high temperature in stainless steel vats. The length of the maceration period after fermentation is decided on the basis of daily tastings, vat by vat, and is generally relatively long in order to ensure a balanced, tannic structure. Malolactic fermentation then takes place before final blending. The wine is matured for six to eight months in one-year old oak barrels.

Description: An intense, vivid red with ruby highlights, the wine has an ample generous nose, which opens on aromas of spice (black pepper) and ripe black fruit (plum, blackcurrant). From a full and crisp attack with pleasantly harmonious oak, it develops a round, rich and silky body leading into a long, rich and lingering finish with a hint of bitter chocolate.



#### **Concha y Toro**

Terrunyo Carmenère 2001

A blend of 85% Carménère, 10% Cabernet Sauvignon,

3% Cabernet Franc, 2% Merlot, from select areas; Peumo Vineyard, Rapel Valley.

Dark, deep red. Intense hints of berries, chocolate, cigar box pepper and mineral notes.

Tasty and full-bodied: Elegant powerful and lingering in mouth

“Difficult to find in North America but well worth the search.”

#### **Errazuriz**

Carmenère "Single Vineyard" 2000

Aconcagua Valley

All sweet, dark fruit on the nose and palate. A hint of Soy sauce, along with black coffee and cigar box notes. Velvet-soft tannins.





### **Caliterra**

Carmenère 2000

Arboleda (Colchagua Valley)

Our 2002 Caliterra Carmenère has a deep, bright red color. This wine displays typical Carmenère aromas like spice, red fruits jam and black chocolate. The oak aged wine adds tobacco and vanilla to the blend. The palate is soft and lush, showing ripe tannins and a velvety structure. Dry figs, tobacco and chocolate linger on a smooth finish

### **Arboleda**

Colchagua Valley

Our Arboleda Carmenère 2001 has a deep red color. The aromas are complex and intense and as you swirl the glass they change from soy sauce, licorice, roasted coffee beans, dark chocolate and tobacco to black berries, dry figs and raisins. There are also nice clove, vanilla and toasty hints. On the palate, the wine is medium bodied and lush with soft, ripe tannins and a velvety structure. Dark plums and dark chocolate linger on the very long finish.



### **Vinedos TerraNoble S.A.**

CARMENÈRE RESERVA 2000

Maule Valley

Tasting note: (translated) Another pleasing surprise from this Maule Valley winery, which has already delighted us with its Gran Reserva line. A Carmenère which enchants on first encounter: complex, mature aromas of black fruit, chocolate, and humus/moist earth. In the mouth, it has very good concentration, with the fruit easily dominating the barely noticeable wood, and smooth tannins. Ready to drink now and extremely recommendable. Score - 88. (Alex Ordenes Solar, www.chilevinos.cl, Aug. 10, 2001)



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