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Garlic, Pest-Eating Geese Guard Chile's New Pinots: Elin McCoy

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Review by Elin McCoy



Jan. 19 (Bloomberg) -- "See those white bands around the vines? They're soaked in garlic and oil," says Chilean winemaker Matias Rios as I kneel down for a sniff. The pungent smell keeps fat insects called burritos from destroying pinot noir vines at [Cono Sur Vineyards & Winery](#), the oldest in Chile.

"We tried onions, then chillies. Garlic worked best," Rios says. The vines' grapes make the spicy, juicy \$15 Vision, one of five pinots Cono Sur produces.

I never thought finicky, cool-climate pinot noir had a future in Chile, a country best known as a Bordeaux wannabe for its good-value but unexciting \$10 cabs and dozen-or-more showcase reds with \$50-plus price tags. But on a December trip to this 2,700-mile-long coastal country, I found several wineries taking on the "heartbreak grape" and starting to succeed.

Cono Sur is banking on the grape's potential here. Founded in 1993 as a subsidiary of giant [Vina Concha y Toro SA](#), the winery added an ambitious pinot noir project a decade ago and created the country's first super-high-end, or icon, pinot, Ocio. With 300,000 cases a year, it has become one of the globe's largest pinot producers.

It's eco-friendly, too. The winery's other burrito busters are 1,000 white geese that waddle through the vineyards gobbling up insects. The downside is that they also like nibbling on grapes, so they're allowed out on patrol only before the fruit forms on the vines.

Chile's isolation and dry climate make organic farming easier by keeping most pests and diseases at a distance. Wines made from thin-skinned pinot generally show more complexity and individuality when grapes are grown without chemicals. Rios mixes compost pellets that look like dog food with water to create a natural fertilizer he refers to as "organic Red Bull."

Slow Start

Chile has been slow to embrace the prized grape partly because few Chileans have any experience with it.

Cono Sur's chief winemaker Adolfo Hurtado had worked in Burgundy and enlisted a French consultant to help design a special cellar to mimic Burgundian methods. As Rios and I taste in a room overlooking the barrels, he explains that for the two top pinots they now use feet to crush grapes.

"Human energy is softer than machines and produces juicier wines," explains Rios. The darkly fruity 2007 20 Barrels (\$24) and silky-textured 2008 Ocio (\$50) are good demonstrations, though they don't yet compete with the best of Oregon or New Zealand. I hope the winery tones down the oak in future vintages.

Burgundian winemaking tricks are only part of the recipe for good pinot. At first, wineries planted the grape in all the wrong places; now the most ambitious seek out cooler regions.

I found the best and most elegant Chilean pinots at [Casa Marin](#) in San Antonio valley, about an hour's drive west from Santiago. Only 3 miles from the ocean, this boutique producer has the coldest vineyards in the country and makes truly exceptional wines.

Steep, Foggy

"Everyone told me this land was too close to the Pacific, too steep and too foggy to make great wine," says owner- winemaker Maria Luz Marin, a short, blond woman who greets me in the winery courtyard.

With its tile roof, the stone-and-wood building surrounded by steep hills green with vines looks like a small, rambling hacienda. Marin admits even her friends in neighboring village Lo Abarca (population, 400) worried she would lose all her money when she bought 88 acres here 10 years ago and struggled to transform it from eucalyptus forest to vines.

Standing outside the small cellar with her son and co- winemaker, Filipe, in bill cap and wrap-around sunglasses, I feel a chill wind on this sunny day. That's just what pinot loves.

As we taste through her stunning line of whites and reds, she explains she picks later than anyone else in Chile. The long cool growing season, she says, allows complex grape flavors and aromas to develop without losing delicacy.

Smoky Pinot

Marin's haunting 2006 Lo Abarca Hills (\$49) has wonderful, layered, spicy, cranberry flavors. The smoky 2007 Cartagena pinot, her second label, offers real pinot character at \$20. A less-expensive (\$15), no-oak 2009 pinot, coming to the U.S. later this year under her Cartagena label, was deliciously gulpable, fresh, juicy and savory.

Now even hard-to-please Burgundians are taking the country's pinot potential seriously. Vosne-Romanee's [Comte Liger-Belair](#) has joined with French/Chilean oenologist Francois Massoc and terroir consultant Pedro Parra to launch one.

[Nicolas Potel](#), one of the region's most brilliant winemakers, has been hired to make pinot in new region Bio Bio, 400 miles south of Santiago, where vintners battle strong winds, hard rain and frequent frost.

Pest-gobbling geese will have plenty to keep them busy.

([Elin McCoy](#) writes on wine and spirits for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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