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Chile's Cono Sur leads in innovation

Sandra Silfven/ Wine

"No family trees, no dusty bottles, just quality wine": That's the motto at Cono Sur, a Chilean winery that was founded in 1993 and has become not just a leader in that country's wine industry but a pacesetter.

Cono Sur, which means Southern Cone in reference to the shape of the southernmost region of South America, is a start-up by the giant Chilean wine company Concha y Toro. The plan was to create a winery not bound by family traditions or customary wines, but to put the emphasis on quality and change.

Adolfo Hurtado, the dynamic chief winemaker and general manager, who was in Detroit last week, remembers the early days: "I was 26; everybody was young and not from the Old World. Our mission was to find a new approach — to apply the concept of innovation."

And innovate they did.

Cono Sur got off to a rare start by focusing on the Holy Grail of wine — Pinot Noir — before anybody else in Chile did. They used sustainable and organic means to grow the grapes and changed the Chilean playbook on the sourcing of grapes and clones. They kept prices low, used screw caps and lightweight glass bottles, and became the first winery in the world to be certified as "CarbonNeutral" in regard to the delivery status of its wines. In other words: no greenhouse gases.

Cono Sur brought in acclaimed Burgundy winemaker Martin Prieur of Domaine Jacques Prieur as a consultant for the Pinot Noir project, which would grow to multiple price and quality tiers, starting with the inexpensive Bicycle line and culminating in the ultra-premium Ocio.

Cono Sur built a separate winery just for the production of Pinot Noir and today is the largest producer of Pinot Noir in Chile.

Cono Sur's Bicycle Pinot Noir, closed with a screw cap and priced at about \$10, is arguably the best Pinot Noir in the world at this price.

Holiday Market wine director Brian Croze currently is featuring the whole Cono Sur Bicycle line for \$8.99.

"In weight, flavor and balance, it's the best I've tasted at this price point," he said this week, adding the Cono Sur Sauvignon Blanc is leading his summer lineup at the Royal Oak store.

The bicycle on the label has multiple meanings, Hurtado says. "It is a tribute to our workers, who live nearby and ride bicycles to work, propping them up everywhere." It also speaks to the winery's philosophy of respect for the land.

A taste of Cono Sur

Cono Sur wines are available at independent Metro Detroit shops, including Plum Market locations; Holiday Market, Royal Oak; Whole Foods, Rochester; Better Health Market, Novi; Champagne's, Warren.


Cono Sur Bicycle Pinot Noir Chile 2010, \$10: This is Pinot that screams black cherry, raspberry, plums and brown baking spices. It has nice depth of flavors, good weight in the mouth and balance. It's a dream for the price.

Cono Sur Organic Cabernet Sauvignon Carmenere Colchagua Valley Chile 2009, \$13: Made with grapes certified organic, flavors are concentrated, tannins are dusty and cling to the palate, and acidity provides nice structure. It's a mouthful of cherries, dark plums, dark chocolate, mocha and vanilla.

Cono Sur 20 Barrels Pinot Noir Casablanca Chile 2008, \$29-\$35: This is Pinot on a par with the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey County, Calif., and the Carneros region of Napa and Sonoma counties. It explodes with dark cherry, black plum, vanilla and mocha character. Tannins are smooth as silk. The gentle smoke and spice off the barrels are seamlessly woven in. All the character reverberates on the finish.

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Adolfo Hurtado, chief winemaker and general manager of Cono Sur Vineyards & Winery in southern Chile, and several varieties of Cono Sur wines. (John T. Greilick/ The Detroit News)



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