

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

Chile's a hot spot for wine lovers

By John Blanchette
Copley News Service



A VIEW OF THE VINES - The view from the patio restaurant at the Santa Cruz Vineyard in Santiago, Chile, one of the world's great wine-producing regions. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



CLEAN CAPITAL - Chile's rich economy has created a bustling modern capital: Santiago, a clean, safe and thriving city of 6 million. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



SADDLE UP - Horse trails above the Hacienda Los Lingues offer unspoiled views. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



IN STEP - Children perform traditional music and dance at the Santa Cruz train station. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

SANTIAGO, Chile - I flew into Santiago in early March for the wine harvest in one of the world's great wine-producing regions. The day I arrived was also the night of the total lunar eclipse.

That evening we watched the earth's shadow swallow the moon in the private observatory above the Santa Cruz Vineyards while swallowing cabernet sauvignon and warming ourselves by the tasting room fire. It gets chilly in the Chilean

foothills of the Andes at night, a quality, according to wine writer Kevin Zraly, that makes the wines rival those of Bordeaux and Napa Valley.

Chile is a pastoral country whose serpentine body of 4,200 miles hugs the western coast of South America, beginning at the Peruvian and Bolivian borders. Its volcanic spine rests against Argentina and follows the Andes all the way down to Tierra del Fuego at the bottom tip of South America.

Never more than 200 miles wide, the diverse climate and relatively small population (16 million, 80 percent of whom live in urban environments) has preserved a rich farmland resting between the mountains and the sea.

The land produces a wide range of crops and the sea's bounty includes Chilean sea bass, salmon, shrimp and other shellfish. However, they have no fossil fuel deposits, so all the oil products are imported and gasoline prices are high, about \$5 a gallon.

Santiago is a bustling modern capital of 6 million. The commercial success of Chile, based on its mining, fishing and agricultural industries and its citizens' devotion to hard work, has created one of the richest economies in South America. Most work six-day weeks and unlike Spain and other Central and South American countries, they do not take siestas.

It is also a safe and clean country. Chileans frown on littering and are very honest. On several occasions cab drivers and merchants corrected my change when I overpaid. And there are great bargains to be had, especially if you shop at ferias, collections of artisan shops, and the currency is easy to figure - there are 500 pesos to the dollar.

Unlike other major wine-producing areas, there is not a lot of attention paid to wine tourism and very few tasting rooms exist. However, some of the larger vineyards do feature fine restaurants, guest

facilities, vineyard tours and tastings, but reservations are necessary.

An easy way to explore the wine country outside of Santiago is to take the tour that begins at the Hotel Galerias, a beautifully restored Holiday Inn owned by the Santa Cruz Vineyards. The bus takes you 87 miles south to the town of San Fernando, where you board the Tren del Vino (the wine train), which takes passengers on a 20-minute ride through the vineyards of the Colchaqua valley, voted one of the world's great red wine regions in 2005. Along the way wine from the area is liberally poured and at the Santa Cruz train station more wine awaits, along with appetizers and local folk musicians and dancers.

You continue on for lunch at The Santa Cruz Winery in a lovely patio restaurant overlooking the vineyard. On the property is a museum devoted to pre-Columbian and Easter Island art (the island is owned by Chile), and a gift shop and wine store in addition to the observatory perched in the hills above. They also own the Santa Cruz Plaza Hotel in town, which features local dishes and well-thought-out wine pairings with meals.

Down the road is the historic Hacienda Los Lingues, an estate that has been in the same family for 16 generations. They offer 20 beautifully appointed rooms full of antique furniture. Horse riding is also available on trails that lead up into the hills above the valley, unveiling tremendous views from the backs of the agile native horses.

Dinner and breakfast are part of the package, and make sure you try the national drink, pisco, which is artfully perfected here. It is similar to a whisky sour but composed of Muscat brandy, lemon juice, sugar and whipped egg whites.

The Hacienda makes some great wines, including the 2006 sauvignon blanc, which was the nicest white wine I tasted during my tour.

Like most of the back roads in the wine country, once you get off the main highway you are driving on dirt roads through picturesque farmlands. One dusty road led to ViaWines vineyards, a modern facility only a few years old, but they are already a leader in the Chilean wine industry.

They sponsor a number of training programs. While I was there, a South African restaurateur from London was taking a monthlong internship, along with four young winemakers from Brazil.

It was at the winery where we did a full tasting of Via wines and where I found my favorite red, aptly named Red One, under the Chilcas label. It is a blend of five red wines including the Carmenere grape, originally from Bordeaux. Incidentally, the French wine industry owes a big debt to Chile. It was their rootstock, resistant to phylloxera, that was replanted in France, saving the wine industry.

The winery also has the Las Chilcas guest house in the middle of the vineyard property, which can provide for up to 20 visitors. Meals are also included, and one evening a whole sheep was roasted outdoors in the traditional style, seasoned with salt and splayed out on sticks. It was cooked by rotating it next to a blazing fire of eucalyptus wood. Absolutely delicious. Other Chilean specialties include corn pie, a corn meal dish with onions, egg, raisins, olives, chicken and beef, wonderful fish soups and fried and baked breads, which are served with homemade salsa called pebre.

In the Maipo Valley southwest of Santiago, the historic 1880 Santa Rita vineyard, the third largest in Chile, inhabits a long, mission-style building and features a central garden, a lovely restaurant open to the public and a contemporary art museum.

In Santiago, I stayed at the Ritz Carlton, which has an extensive wine program that includes tours of selected vineyards and wine and food pairings in the hotel restaurant 365, which is the number of Chilean wines in stock, one for every day. The

wine program is directed by Branko Kerlezi and the restaurant sommelier, who can arrange a flight of wines for tasting. The afternoon I attended we tried 10 different wines, from dry sauvignon blancs to a delicious late-harvest muscat from Tamaya Vineyard in the Limari Valley. I was even treated to the country's best beer, Kunstmann, a hoppy pale ale. The hotel also offers a wine bath to guests, which I enjoyed with a glass of pinot noir.

IF YOU GO

Once in a blue moon or lunar eclipse you should plan a Chile reception in this warm and friendly country. LAN Airlines (www.lan.com) offers daily flights to Chile, by way of Peru and Argentina, with excellent service that features Chilean wine with meals. It was voted "The Best Airline to Central and South America" by the Official Airline Guide and Global Traveler Magazine in 2006.

Make sure you pack an extra \$100 when you go. There is a one-time immigration fee charged to Americans because we charge Chileans the same fee to visit America. For housing options, wine and restaurant information, shopping tips, event listings, guidebooks, brochures and maps, contact the Chilean Tourist Office, www.visitchile.org. For information on the wine train, www.trendelvino.com.

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