

CHILE: HITTING THE WINE TOURISM TRAIL

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Few countries are gearing themselves more effectively for wine tourism than Chile, although bodegas like to do so on a formal basis.



Appointments are *de rigueur* for the majority of wineries and, as in California, the cost of cellar door tastings are high. The large number of visitors suggests people nevertheless feel they are getting value-for-money, drawn as they are to some superb accommodation options either at wineries or in hotels near enough to them. Some world-class cuisine is also attracting wine tourists.

If heading south out of Santiago, the first winery you come to is Concha y Toro, which is well worth a stop for tasting and lunch. Situated on the outskirts of the capital in Pirque, the estate dates back to 1883 when the mansion there was built overlooking magnificent gardens. Available for tasting is the Don Melchor with the 2016 blend (93% Cabernet Sauvignon), bottled only last November,

living up to its reputation as one of Chile's icon wines.

A short drive away, near Buin, can be found one of the nicest places in Chile for wine tourists to stay. Hotel Casa Real, which lies within the Santa Rita estate in Maipo Valley, is a beautiful old manor house, built in the late nineteenth century. Its special gardens are a delight, and you walk through them to get to the impressive cellar door for both the Santa Rita and Carmen wines. Right next door is the Andean Museum which, with its 3,000 archaeological and ethnographic pieces, is one of the most important private collections in Chile. The estate has 600 hectares of vines planted to Santa Rita and Carmen, the latter being the oldest wine brand in Chile (1850).

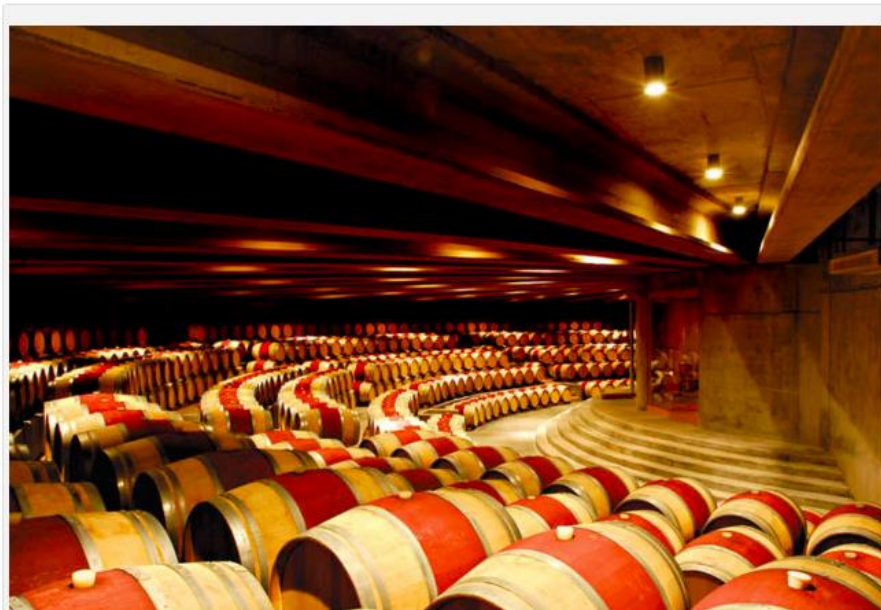
Casa Real's colonial architecture finds a polar opposite in the new Vik Hotel, with its titanium roof. Tucked away in a secluded part of the Cachapoal Valley, both the hotel and the Vina Vik winery itself contain multiple artwork from one of Chile's most famous artists, Gonzalo Cienfuegos. Everything about Vik is absolutely first-class: whether the unusual winery design (underground with a water-cooled roof), the cellar door restaurant, the three red blends from five varietals, superbly crafted by Cristian Vallejo, or the hotel itself. The latter has stupendous 360-degree views, with large, uber-comfortable rooms and world-class cuisine. Riding out through the vines on horseback, or having a spa treatment, is one of the many extras Vik offers. Also in Cachapoal Valley can be found Vina San Pedro, a stunningly situated winery that offers very personalised and exclusive visits for lunch. A maximum of 10 people is permitted.



Vik Hotel

In the neighbouring Colchagua Valley, in the village of Angostura, the Casa Silva Boutique Hotel is a delightful place to stay. Situated beside the winery, it is the owning family's old manor house, with its seven bedrooms. Within the estate's vineyards, by a polo field, is the Casa Silva Rodeo & Polo clubhouse, which is an excellent place to have lunch. So too in the same valley is Viu Manent, at its Rayuela restaurant, right by the vineyards. Horses, looked after by their 'huasos' (the Chilean equivalent of gauchos) transport you around the bodega on historic old carriages. Throw in cooking classes and an equestrian centre with jumps, and you have enough to keep the family busy for a half-day visit.

The Montes winery, also in the Colchagua Valley, is another to offer visitors experiences other than tasting. For a start, there is the well-known Fuegos de Apalta restaurant, the outstanding cuisine for which is the work of celebrated Argentine chef Francois Mallmann, who flies in periodically for several days. It is open seven days a week, including dinner every night. Guided treks of up to three hours can be taken up to the surrounding scenic hills where the gradient of some parcels is 45%. A house on the estate, which sleeps six, is available for rent. Meanwhile, in the cellar itself, Gregorian monastery chant music is played to the premium wine barrels all day to 'soothe' them. It is easy to see why as many as 17,000 people visit Montes each year, although Viu Manent, with 15,000, are not far behind. Another restaurant that deservedly gets a lot of custom is Miguel Torres in the nearby Curico Valley.



Barrels at Vina Montes

Heading south from there into the Maule Valley are two wineries that should not be missed – J.Bouchon and Gillmore. They are also very enjoyable places to stay. Julio Bouchon just took over as president of the Carignan Old Vines Association from Gillmore's Andres Sanchez, and the pair each craft wonderful versions of that varietal under the "Vigno" label. To qualify, wines must come from Carignan dry-farmed bush vines of at least 60 years age and be matured in old foudres. These are fine wines of poise and elegance with a real future.

You can keep travelling further south to Bio Bio and beyond, as Chilean viticulture seeks cooler latitudes, but personal time constraints took me back up to Santiago via De Martino in Maipo Valley. Their collection of 'viejas tinajas' (old amphorae) are worth the stop alone, and a result of the bodega's style-change decision in 2011 not to utilise any new oak. Apart from having a fine range to taste, the bodega also has a really good shop.

The Valleys of Casablanca, Leyda and San Antonio can be visited from either Santiago or the seaside town of Valparaiso. Or there is a good third option half-way between the two, named Casa Macaire. In Santiago, the Singular Hotel is an ideal choice, enjoying the perfect location in trendy Lastarria. It also has a superb Chilean wine list, but so too does the excellent Baco restaurant in Providencia in central Santiago. In Valparaiso, the Wine Box offers the most unusual place for visitors to stay. Built from 25 decommissioned containers, the rooms are necessarily long and thin, but offer guests spectacular views over the harbour. Quirky owner, Grant Phelps, a New Zealander and former winemaker for Casas del Bosque in Casablanca, dreamt up the idea, and makes his own wine in the hotel's underground carpark. A less expensive option in Valparaiso is the boutique hotel, Cirilo Armstrong, which has eleven very comfortable loft bedrooms, each containing sculpture and art.



Cable car in San Cristobal hill overlooking Santiago

Casa Macaire, near Taphue, cannot be too highly recommended. It is set in a small vineyard, but the quality of the accommodation – it was built as a private house – the cuisine and the friendly service is second to none. Its beautiful quiet location, with swimming-pool and hiking/biking options, make it perfect for families but it caters equally well for individuals or couples. It is also very close to a string of wineries in the Casablanca Valley.

One of these, Bodegas RE is among Chile's most unconventional wineries. Pablo Morande, the winemaker, loves coming up with unlikely blends, such as Pinot Noir and Syrah, which he co-ferments. His weird and wonderful range is well worth tasting through, the cellar door shop entices you in as does the restaurant. Exactly the same can be said for two other wineries that do champion lunches in beautiful settings – Errazuriz (in Aconcagua Valley) and Casas del Bosque. The lengthy list of top-class wines from the last two make them must-visits in a country with so many wonderful bodegas. And I haven't even been able to include those alluring wineries far north of Santiago in the Elqui and Limari Valleys.