



Barrel room at Vina Montes; tending vines at Clos Apalta, below right; Vina Santa Cruz, below

A STAR IS REBORN

The great grape mystery of Chile's vineyards has been solved

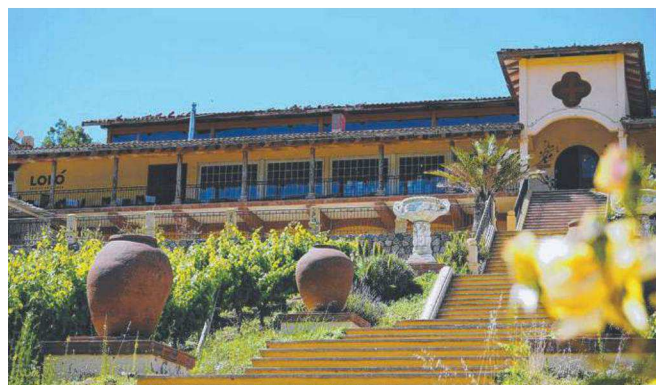
DENISE CULLEN

Gregorian chants echo in my ears as I take my seat in one of the tasting rooms at Vina Montes in Chile's lush Colchagua Valley, two hours by road south of the capital, Santiago. Our group has just left an underground cave in which this soothing soundscape is played around the clock to coax Montes wines to their fullest expression. And now it's time for what's described as a "divine tasting" of some of the winery's full-bodied reds.

Given the air of Christian mysticism, it's appropriate that our tasting flight includes a grape that has, in a very real sense, come back from the dead. In this case, it took longer than three days.

Montes' much-awarded Purple Angel comprises 92 per cent carmenere, a deep inky berry that was, for more than 125 years, believed to be extinct. Since its rediscovery three decades ago, Chile has nursed carmenere back to life, in the process becoming the world's leading producer of this varietal.

I first heard about the case of the missing grape while touring nearby Vina Santa Cruz, founded in 2003 by collector Carlos Cardoen. It showcases Chilean heritage and culture alongside its wines. As we sipped welcome glasses of pais, the "mission grape" brought by missionaries from Spain, our guide, Carolina Macaya De Moras, relayed



a viticultural story as distinctly Chilean as pisco. She said carmenere vines, mislabelled as merlot, slipped quietly into Chile in the 1800s from their native Bordeaux. For decades, winemakers knew there was something strange yet wonderful about their "merlot Chileno", but most just shrugged and got on with the job. Then in the 1860s, an outbreak of phylloxera (a louse that feeds on the roots and leaves of grapevines) wiped out carmenere in its homeland. Everyone thought the grape was gone for good.

It wasn't until 1994 that Jean-Michel Boursiquot, a French ampelographer (an expert on grapevines), strolled past some "merlot" under cultivation south of Santiago and noticed the shape of the leaves deviated from the norm. The flower stamens were twisted, too, and the tips of the shoots were an unexpected orange hue.

Boursiquot realised he was looking at long-lost carmenere. The discovery was greeted with widespread shock and wonder.

Vina Santa Cruz features the grape in its Chaman Gran Reserva Carmenere. We sip glasses while watching the sunset from a hillside terrace, inhaling the sweet aromas of spice and ripe red berries and savouring the velvety tannins on our tongues. The wine pairs well with the procession of dishes emerging from the kitchen, including empanadas, slow-cooked carne (beef), and pastelera de choclo (corn pudding).

Over a week in Colchagua Valley, I hear many variations of carmenere's origin story and its unique flavour profile. At Vina Ravanal, following tastings, lunch and a tour of the vineyard, I press our guide for tips to help me compete in the upcoming wine-blending challenge.

"If you want something fruity, then add merlot – if you want some vegetal notes, you add carmenere," she suggests.

I settle on a blend containing 30 per cent carmenere, bottle it, cork it, design the label, and present it to the in-house oenologist, Tito Ravanal, for judging. No one is more surprised than me when, after much swirling, sniffing and sipping, he declares it "the clear winner".

The following morning, we're hiking through some of the 400ha of native forest at organically farmed Clos Apalta where a puff of coastal fog breathes over vines that cascade down the hillside. Carmenere accounts for 35 per cent of the grapes planted here and Clos Apalta prides itself on producing high-end wines based on it, as opposed to the more commonly planted cabernet sauvignon.

Afterwards, we taste a selection and explore the seven-storey gravitational winery, which includes a tour by torchlight of the owners' private underground cellar.

After a three-course lunch paired with grand vins, I venture back into the vineyard. Here, I run my fingers along the gnarled trunks, and examine the delicate new tendrils, marvelling at how they harboured a century-old secret in plain sight.

Denise Cullen was a guest of the Adventure Travel Trade Association, Rutas Colchagua, and Chile Travel.

adventuretravel.biz
rutascolchagua.com
chile.travel/en



IN THE KNOW

Chile's Colchagua Valley lies two hours south of the capital, Santiago, stretching from the snow-capped Andes Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Diverse terroir and distinct microclimates support the production of a wide range of wines. Vina Santa Cruz offers tours, tastings and experiences, from stargazing to visits to open-air museums celebrating pre-Hispanic Mapuche, Aymara, and Rapa Nui cultures.

vinasantacruz.cl

Vina Ravanal was founded in 1965 by Mario Ravanal, believed to be Chile's oldest winemaker. Guests can enjoy lunch, tastings, vineyard tours and wine blending workshops.

ravanal.cl

Clos Apalta is owned by the Lapostolle winemaking family. Experiences include tours, tastings and a three-course set menu lunch. Stay overnight in an onsite villa or casita (small house).

closapalta.com

Vina Montes vertical tastings of four vintage wines, including Purple Angel, can be paired with a meal at renowned chef Francis Mallmann's Fuegos de Apalta restaurant.

monteswines.com