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A New Chapter in California Wine History

*Jean-Charles Boisset
Looks to the Past to
Envision the Future
at **Buena Vista***



New owner Jean-Charles Boisset sits inside the historic cellar at Buena Vista while founder Count Agoston Haraszthy, played by character actor George Webber, looks on with obvious approval.

PHOTO: BEBECALVILLO/ASA

Inside: IN MEXICO WITH THE DOS EQUIS "LEAGUE OF THE MOST INTERESTING"

Carmenère Is Viña Carmen

THE VENERATED WINERY STILL LEADS THE CHILEAN WINE INDUSTRY

by Randy Caparoso

What wine professional isn't familiar with the wines of Viña Carmen? This celebrated winery was founded over 160 years ago (in 1850) in Chile's Alto Maipo Valley, just outside the huge, bustling, cosmopolitan city of Santiago. Its offerings fulfill all the Chilean hallmarks: solid winemaker, consistent quality and, always, super value.

But what many wine professionals may be unaware of is Carmen's leadership in a country that has certainly never lacked for wine industry leaders. During the past 20 years, for instance, Carmen has focused strongly on terroir, branching out from its historic plantings in the vicinity of Maipo to other sub-regions of the Valle Central to establish more ideal grape sources. They've gone to the cooler-climate Casablanca Valley to source richer yet more crisply balanced Chardonnays, and turned to even cooler sections of Ledy Valley to produce zestier, fresher Sauvignon Blancs. Viña Carmen was also among the first of Chile's modern-day growers to venture into organic viticulture, under the *Nativa* label, first established in 1995.

Then there is Carmen's leading role in the

story behind the *Vitis vinifera* grape variety that has, in many ways, come to symbolize the dramatic history and signature style of Chilean wines: Carmenère (also spelled Carménère outside Chile).

There are some 20,000 acres of Carmenère planted in Chilean vineyards, mostly alongside or intertwined with roughly equal proportions of Merlot. In fact, up until 1998—when Carmenère was first officially recognized by Chile's Department of Agriculture—virtually all of the Carmenère grown in Chile was bottled as Merlot. An honest mistake, as it turns out. But once this was sorted out, Viña Carmen produced Chile's first varietal bottling of Carmenère, starting with the 1996 vintage.

Unraveling the Story

As in California—where both Melon and Chardonnay were once bottled as a "Pinots," Petite Sirah was confused with Syrah, Valdiquíe was mistaken for a Gamay Noir and no one, for the longest time, had any real idea what Zinfandel was—the tale of Carmenère in Chile is an intriguing one:

- ▶ Carmenère originated in Bordeaux's Médoc region, and was one of six red wine grapes commonly planted there up until 1867, when phylloxera began to wreak serious havoc. Because of Carmenère's susceptibility to coulure, or grape shatter, during the cold, damp springs typical for Bordeaux, virtually none of the vineyards in this vast region bothered to replant the grape when propagation on American rootstocks subsequently took place.

- ▶ Despite historical ties to Spain, mid-19th-century Chilean winemakers were inspired by Bordeaux more than any other European wine region, which is why Carmenère came to be planted extensively in Chile. However, neither Chilean nor French-born growers working in Chile recognized the

Apalta soil results in wines with a focus on black and blue fruits, richer textures, round rather than green tannins and virtually no green vegetal notes.





Carmenère vines in Chile's Apalta appellation, source of Viña Carmen's Gran Reserva Carmenère.

grape as a distinct variety. Instead, it was commonly identified as a "Merlot selection"—and even called Merlot Peumal in some parts of Chile—due to physical similarities to Merlot (with subtle differences, such as reddish hues in young leaves and crimson coloring just before dropping).

▶ Chileans continued to devote thousands of acres of ungrafted vineyards to Carmenère because phylloxera has never been much of a factor in the sandy soils typical of this country, and also because the grape thrived in this drier environment.

▶ Carmenère was "rediscovered" on November 24, 1994 in Viña Carmen's Alto Maipo vineyard by visiting French ampelographer Jean Michel Boursiquot—an event of some significance, since Carmenère was by then presumed to be virtually extinct, save for a few plants preserved in Bordeaux nurseries for academic purposes.

▶ The plot thickens: In the early '90s, some cuttings of Carmenère were accidentally sent from a French nursery to prestigious Lombardy estate Ca' del Bosco, which had ordered Cabernet Franc. A few years later, once the error came to light, misidentified plantings of Carmenère were recognized in existing vineyards in other parts of Northern Italy. The world will soon see Italian bottlings of varietal Carmenère.

An Evolving Reputation

When varietal Carmenères from Chile first began to appear in the international market in the late nineties, the grape quickly developed a reputation for being more like Cabernet Franc than Merlot in varietal definition: soft in tannin, moderate in body and pungent, with herbal aromas often suggesting bell peppers, sometimes jalapeño and even tabasco chilies.

This herbaceous quality is in part due to the fact that it took a few years for Chilean growers to get a strong grip on the grape's specific growing habits—particularly the fact that Carmenère buds and ripens later than Merlot. If picked at the same time, Carmenère typically ends up tasting green and underripe.

However, recent vintages of Viña Carmen's Carmenère, grown in the crushed granitic hillsides of Apalta in the Colchagua Valley, exemplify the Chileans' growing mastery of this grape. Recent releases show significantly more focus on black and blue fruits, rich, fleshy, chocolaty textures, round rather than green tannins and virtually no green vegetal or chile-like sensations. The idea that Carmenère, like Sauvignon Blanc or any of the Cabernet varieties, always makes a high-pyrazine wine has effectively been laid to rest.

Although this venerated winery does other things worth paying attention to (see Tasting Notes), in many ways, Carmenère is Viña Carmen.

Tasting Notes

Here are my notes on the current crop from Viña Carmen's Gran Reserva portfolio. —R. C.

Carmen Gran Reserva 2009 Carmenère, Apalta (\$17) Opaque, almost black-ruby wine of almost Cabernet Sauvignon-like muscle and density, filled out by aromas and flavors of blackberry, dried plum, dark chocolate and smidgens of sweet paprika, merged with cedary oak and sustained by firm tannins. Definitely a wine for roasted red meats.

Carmen Gran Reserva 2010 Merlot, Maipo Alto (\$17) Deep purplish ruby and nose of sweet black cherry, veering towards strawberry, with sprigs of leafy spearmint and smoky oak nuances; soft, round entry turning zesty in a medium-full middle, finishing with smoky, coffee ground spices.



Carmen Gran Reserva 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon, Maipo Valley (\$18) Deep, dark wine spiked with sweet raspberry verging on cassis, plus smoky oak and whiffs of eucalyptus; medium-full on the palate with fairly grippy yet rounded tannin, finishing dry, with an almost rope tobacco chew.

Carmen Gran Reserva 2008 Petite Sirah, Maipo Alto (\$17) Now for something completely different . . . for Chile. Black, purplish ruby typical for this varietal, forewarning the tightly wound, jammy, blueberry/blackberry sweetness in the nose, underlined by a green leafiness; the sweet, jammy fruit rounded out by dollops of vanillin oak and enlarged by sturdy tannin, cutting a broad swath across the palate.

Carmen Gran Reserva 2010 Chardonnay, Casablanca Valley (\$17) Bright golden straw color and ripe, sweet apple and candied lemon aromas, underpinned by creamy/vanillin nuances; silky entry, feeling full without being heavy, with crisp edges tracing apple-in-crème anglaise flavors.

Carmen Gran Reserva 2010 Sauvignon Blanc, Leyda Valley (\$16) Pale straw transparency and nose of sweet melon, cut grass and wispy tobacco; lemony tart, medium-full body, the melon and citrus flavors adding to a lip-smacking finish. ■■

*Viña Carmen is imported by
Trinchero Family Estates.*