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Chile's under-rated Reds

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My first recollection of tasting a Chilean wine is from the early 1980s. It was a Cabernet Sauvignon and it was surprisingly characterful.

The one thing it lacked was sophistication. It was more rustic than polished. Though the varietal aroma was intriguing, the winemaking had been rudimentary, and the wine was worth what I paid: \$3.99.

This set off a series of encounters with various Chileans connected to Chile's wine industry, including Augustin Huneeus, who ran a wine company during the reign of socialist President Salvador Allende and who later escaped dramatically after the bloody 1973 coup that overthrew Allende and put Augusto Pinochet into power.

During the turmoil, Huneeus left his native country and soon became involved in various wine ventures in the United States, including importing the Chilean brand Veramonte, which still represents good value.

Today, Huneeus heads up a successful wine group in the Napa Valley with highly acclaimed Quintessa as its key brand, housed in a stunning architectural edifice.

Since the 1980s, I have witnessed many changes in the Chilean wine industry, and a visit four years ago to the exciting cool, coastal Casablanca Valley north of Santiago was eye opening and provided insights into Chile's wine potential.

I saw that same potential in 2000, and said so in several articles. That was about the time Larry Challacombe saw it was time to leave a California wine marketing position and leap into South American wines as an importer.

Although quality has improved markedly for Chile's wines, the U.S. public has yet to embrace them for the great values they are. Most are underpriced and deliver more than most consumers realize.

One of the problems for Chilean wines, from the mid-1990s to late 2000s, was what I now see as marketing doldrums — an era when Chile's wines were fast improving in quality, but American consumers still demanded that they pay no more for them than they had when the wines weren't as good.

“It was whole different era of South American wine, back in 2001 when we founded Global Wine Importers,” said Challacombe.

“People didn’t want to pay more than a certain price point, and above that, they’d go to California (wine). It had to be under \$20 retail, or most distributors couldn’t sell it. Just 15 years ago, anything over \$12 was a challenge.”

Today, the three largest Chilean wine companies are Concha y Toro (and its lower-priced brand Walnut Crest)

San Pedro, and Santa Rita. All have an array of the most popular varietal wines and for most, retail prices are about \$10 a bottle, or less.

But even though Challacombe says Chile’s better wines are significantly improved over what they were just a decade ago, prices haven’t moved up as much as has the quality.

“Twenty-five years ago, most vines were over-cropped, the wines were over-pressed, and most of it sold for under \$10,” he said. Far under, in some cases.

“Today, fine wine from Chile starts at \$15,” he said, “and they still represent a bargain – they are in there with the best buys in the world. About 80 percent of what they make is red, and today some of the finest wines are the Cabernets from Maipo Valley.”

Especially in the hills. When Cabernet is grown at the highest-elevation vineyards in Maipo, Chilean wine lovers will tell you the best wines rival the best wines made anywhere. And they can be pricey.

Concha y Toro has a top-of-the-line Cabernet Sauvignon called Don Melchor that sells for nearly \$100 a bottle. It comes from high-altitude Maipo Valley.

“But if you go to the average wine store, most of the Chilean wines you’ll see are \$20 or less,” he said, “because retailers can’t sell it above that.”

Last week at Copia in the Napa Valley, the huge Italian wine company Zonin debuted a new line of Chilean wines it recently produced there. The line includes six stylish, well-made Dos Almas wines that each have a suggested retail price of \$15.

I believe most are underpriced.

Unlike the unpolished Santa Rita 120 wines I bought in the early 1980s, the Zonin project wines are sophisticated.

A 2017 Dos Almas Sauvignon Blanc (Casablanca Valley) has varietal aromas of fresh hay, chamomile tea, and lemon, and is dry enough to enhance seared scallops.

A 2015 Carmenere is a dramatic statement of this handsome red varietal with a quaffability rarely seen with this grape.

A 2015 Red Blend (based on Carmenere and Cabernet) may be the best value of the bunch, and a 2015 Maipo Cabernet shows lovely balance and potential to improve.

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Chile's red wines have come a long way since political upheaval ravaged the country, including its wine industry. Quality now exceeds price almost across the board.

Some Americans with long memories, those who recall the rustic reds of 35 years ago, have ignored these wines and that has kept prices from rising, a benefit to bargain hunters.