

*Trip report...*

## Chile Wine Tour and Vinos de Chile 2004 September 27 - October 3, 2004

Jane Townsend  
Senior Editor  
[LatinTravel.com](http://LatinTravel.com)

There's something magical about flying into Santiago, Chile, on the red-eye if you happen to be on the left side of the plane. After dinner and a movie, a nap and an early breakfast, you can open the window shade and watch the sun rise over South America's backbone – the snow-capped Andes Mountains.

Our austral spring trip in September to Santiago and its nearby wine-producing valleys began with a stunning sunrise viewed from our LanChile Miami-Santiago flight. Upon arriving in Chile's capital, crisp, dry mountain air and sunny weather welcomed us.

We arrived at the Hotel Plaza San Francisco early Tuesday morning. Pre-arranged early check-in allowed us to settle in and still enjoy the hotel's breakfast buffet, which was included each day of our stay. (Eggs, bacon, ham, cheeses, yogurt, cereal, fruit, bread and pastries)

We had a scheduled afternoon city tour so we spent the morning at leisure. Some of our group rested, some explored the San Francisco church and museum adjacent to our hotel and some headed for the pedestrian mall across from our hotel that leads to the city's historic Plaza de Armas. We all visited a nearby grocery, to purchase bottled water, and a money changing office that offered good exchange rates.

Our afternoon city tour provided the perfect Santiago overview for first-timers and returning visitors alike. Our guide was knowledgeable about the city's history and, also, well versed in global politics and the impact the new Free Trade agreement with the U.S. is having on Chile. We were treated to a fine overview of the city and an insight into Chile's past, present and future

policies. Santiago is a beautiful, clean and well-maintained city with strong European roots and our tour presented the soul of the city.

Tuesday evening we enjoyed a private wine tasting in our hotel, conducted by a sommelier, followed by dinner in the hotel's famed Bristol Restaurant.

The wine tasting began with a test of our sense of smell. Sommelier Eugenio Garcia asked us to list a series of numbers on paper and then write our impressions of the scent of tiny vials he passed around that corresponded to the numbers on our list. Oil of clove, liquid smoke, anise extract, and more awoke our senses to the number of scents and flavors frequently used to describe wine. We then tasted a flight of Chile's premier wines concentrating on our now-enlightened senses and the sommelier's knowledge of local wines.

After the wine tasting we headed to the hotel's Bristol Restaurant for dinner. The restaurant, under the management of world-recognized chef Guillermo Rodriguez, is noted as one of Santiago's finest. Our meal was a feast for the eye as well as the palate – beautifully presented offerings accompanied by fine Chilean wines. A desert medley was the perfect ending to our first full day in Santiago.

Although our itinerary intended Wednesday to be a day at leisure, our group elected to visit Chile's port city of Valparaiso and its neighboring Viña de Mar resort area as a full-day optional excursion. Heading west toward the Pacific coast through Chile's Coastal Mountains we passed lemon, avocado, and nectarine groves as well as some of Chile's finest white wine producing vineyards. A stop along the way at a typical restaurant with outdoor, eucalyptus-burning brick ovens offered a chance to try the local favorite, *empanadas fino*, pastry with a savory beef and onion filling hot from the oven.

Our tour of Valparaiso took us through neighborhoods clinging to hillsides lining the Bay of Valparaiso. Because of the temperate climate and moist air along the coast, spring arrives earlier in the area and wild flowers line the highway and untended land along the way. Huge magnolia trees, more than 150 years old, anchor city parks and modern buildings wrapped in historic facades lend charm to the city. A stop at a handicraft market overlooking the bay allowed for a fine view of the city and the busy port.

We continued north along the coast to the resort city of Viña del Mar. Here Chile's first casino hails to elegant times and the surrounding area showcases the vacation homes of Chile's upper crust.

We stopped for lunch at a seafood restaurant along the coast where the locals gather. The day was overcast and an appetizer of *machas del parmesan* (razorback clams smothered in parmesan cheese) and a casserole of *locos* (abalone) paired with a hearty bottle of red wine warmed our spirits. After a drive up the coast where we saw new development mixed with older resort homes, we stopped at an overlook to view a sea lion preserve and then headed back across the coastal range to Santiago.

Because we ran out of time on our city tour the previous day we weren't able to visit one of Santiago's premier tourist destinations, the Los Dominicos handicraft community. We therefore allowed time for a visit after our trip to the coast and were glad we did. Nestled in the foothills of the Andes, this artisan community situated in the outbuildings surrounding Los Dominicos church offers a variety of the area's finest crafts in a peaceful, beautiful setting. A new gallery in the church's former barn offers a chance to purchase works by local artists. This is the place to buy capes and shawls woven from the wool of baby alpaca, copper sculptures and Lapis Lazuli jewelry.

An early dinner in Santiago's upscale Providencia neighborhood and a quick ride back to our hotel on Santiagos's clean, quiet and safe Metropolitan subway ended our day.

Thursday morning was clear and crisp. We were scheduled to visit three vineyards in the Casablanca Valley so we headed west again, back through the coastal range.

Our first stop was Veramonte Vineyard, a modern facility partly owned by the US Constellation Wines group, whose Franciscan label is well known in the U.S.. The sprawling vineyard and gift shop/tasting room had a decidedly California feel. They export most of their wine – most notably Primus, their blend of Carmeniere, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, which has been hailed both in Chile and abroad.

Our next stop was at William Cole Vineyards. This winery, a little off the main highway to the coast, was founded by U.S businessman William Cole and his wife Beatriz. The winery receives visitors by appointment and we spent a pleasant morning sampling wines and talking to their P.R rep Carolina and winemaker Claudia.

We next visited the Viña Morande vineyard's restaurant for a late lunch with the winery's enthusiastic PR rep., also named Carolina. Excellent food presented with a gourmet flair and Viña Morande's wines made for a relaxed meal in the beautiful, modern restaurant.

We arrived back at our hotel in plenty of time to relax before the grand opening of *Vinos de Chile*, the wine fair taking place in our hotel.

*Vinos de Chile* is a wine trade show hosted each year by Hotel Plaza San Francisco. A tent is erected in the plaza adjacent to the hotel and more than 40 of Chile's finest vintners host booths from which they offer samples of their finest wines. Servers circulate with appetizers and mini-empanadas. Carving stations offer ham and beef sandwiches on fresh-baked rolls. Elegant desert canapés appear toward the end of the evening. This was our first of two night's opportunity to sample a variety of Chile's wines not exported to the U.S. We did the best we could.

Friday was another clear, sunny day and after the hotel's buffet breakfast we headed south to the Maipo Valley. Santiago is located in Chile's Central Valley with the Andes range to the east and the coastal mountains to the west. Our trip toward the Maipo Valley vineyards allowed us to see the tremendous growth Santiago is experiencing. Country land once owned by the area's original wine producing families is now being developed as suburban housing and the vineyards are moving farther from town.

Our first stop was at Causiño Macul, a family-owned vineyard that was a short horse ride from Santiago in the boom days of the late 1800s. Candles still light the way down the stairs to the vineyard's cellars and a small museum displays antique winemaking equipment. After visiting the tasting room we strolled through rows of vines covered with early spring growth.

In the late 1800s, when phylloxera devastated much of the world's grape rootstocks, Chile was left untouched and still remains free of the disease. Because legend says that the pest responsible for the blight attacks the

sweetest thing in the vineyard first, you'll often see rose bushes planted at the end of each row of vines in Chile. At Causiño Macul rows of flowers planted between the vines and the snow-capped Andes in the distance brought to mind the history and majesty of wine production in Chile.

Our next stop was Chile's huge wine producer, Concha y Toro, although you would never guess the size of the company by touring its headquarters in Pirque, south of Santiago. The family's large country home surrounded by gardens and overlooking a lake now houses corporate offices. We first sampled Chardonnay in a souvenir crystal glass, poured at a tasting station in the garden, as we explored the estate.

We then entered the winery's caves where we tried its famed "Casillero del Diablo" Carmeniere, wine made from a grape long thought to be Merlot until DNA testing proved otherwise. Now Chile's Carmeneires are gaining worldwide recognition.

Glass in hand, we entered the "Casillero del Diablo" (Devil's Cellar) where the original owner stored his finest wines. He spread the rumor that the cellar was haunted to prevent the pilfering of wine when he was away from the estate.

Our last tasting station was in the large, but quiet, gift shop where the vineyards wine's could be purchased and packaged for travel.

We stopped for lunch just down the road from Concha y Toro at Septimo Cielo (Seventh Heaven), a restaurant located in a 150-year-old farmhouse. Owner Sergio Carvalho, a structural engineer in a previous career, has decorated the dining rooms with antiques, collectibles and colorful art. The eclectic setting, delicious and beautifully presented food and, of course, more wine prepared us for our journey to the day's last vineyard, a little more than an hour to the south.

Our visit to Viña De Martino, formerly known as Santa Ines, gave us a chance to taste the wines of one of Chile's few certified organic wineries. With stainless steel tanks and French and American oak barrels they produce wine mainly for the export market. At our private tasting with PR manager Kaschka Glazewska we discussed many aspects of wine production in Chile. In the courtyard well-marked vines of Chile's predominant varietals covered

with new spring growth made clear how similar the Merlot and Carmeniere foliage is.

After the hour-plus drive back to our hotel we weren't quite ready to head straight for the *Vinos de Chile* wine fair at our hotel. A friend and I headed to the pedestrian mall across from our hotel that leads to the Plaza de Armas. We browsed through shoe stores and ended up in an outdoor café in the Plaza where we shared a vegetable pizza and a bottle of wine. Another couple in our group opted for dinner and a sampling of local beer in a traditional Chilean restaurant just off the plaza.

We returned to the wine festival later that evening for more wine and elegant desert canapés.

Saturday was a day at leisure until our late check-out from the hotel at 5 P.M. A group of us walked from our hotel to the Palace Museum, the former home of the family who founded the Cousiño Macul Vineyard. The state-owned mansion provides a window into the lives led by wealthy Chileans during the economic boom times – inlaid wooden floors of imported and native woods, marble floors, walls and ceilings imported from European quarries, fine brocades and tapestries covering windows, walls and furnishings, Santiago's first elevator and more. A beautiful place!

After a quick subway ride to the handicraft market opposite Santiago's Santa Lucia hill for last-minute souvenirs, we met the rest of our group and headed to the Central Mercado for a seafood lunch. The city's main market is the clearinghouse for fresh seafood from the nearby Pacific coast. Small restaurants and seafood stalls surround a central hall where produce vendors and one of the larger and better-known restaurants are located. It's easy to enjoy a seafood entrée, a side of rice, potatoes, or salad and a beverage for less than US\$10. Add wine or Chile's national drink, the Pisco Sour made from grape brandy, and spend the afternoon watching life in the busy market.

We later headed back to Santiago's airport for the overnight flight to Miami. After clearing immigration we sat in an airport bar and talked about our trip over Pisco Sours. It was hard to believe we had seen and done as much as we had during our short visit to Santiago. In five days and four nights we had explored Santiago on tour, on foot and by subway, visiting several neighborhoods and becoming quite at home in the central historic district

surrounding our hotel. Our winery excursions took us to large, medium and small-sized vineyards in two of Chile's finest wine producing valleys. Our optional excursion to Valpo and Viña offered a chance to see spring flowers in bloom in resort towns clinging to the hills along the Pacific coast. The wine fair in the hotel allowed us to taste a variety of Chile's finest wines. We all were amazed that, after all the fine food we had tasted in the varied restaurants, we were hungry enough to share Chile's famed *chacarero* sandwich – sliced beef, green beans, mild chiles and tomatoes – as we waited for our flight to be called.

I'm already looking forward to next September and Vinos de Chile 2005!