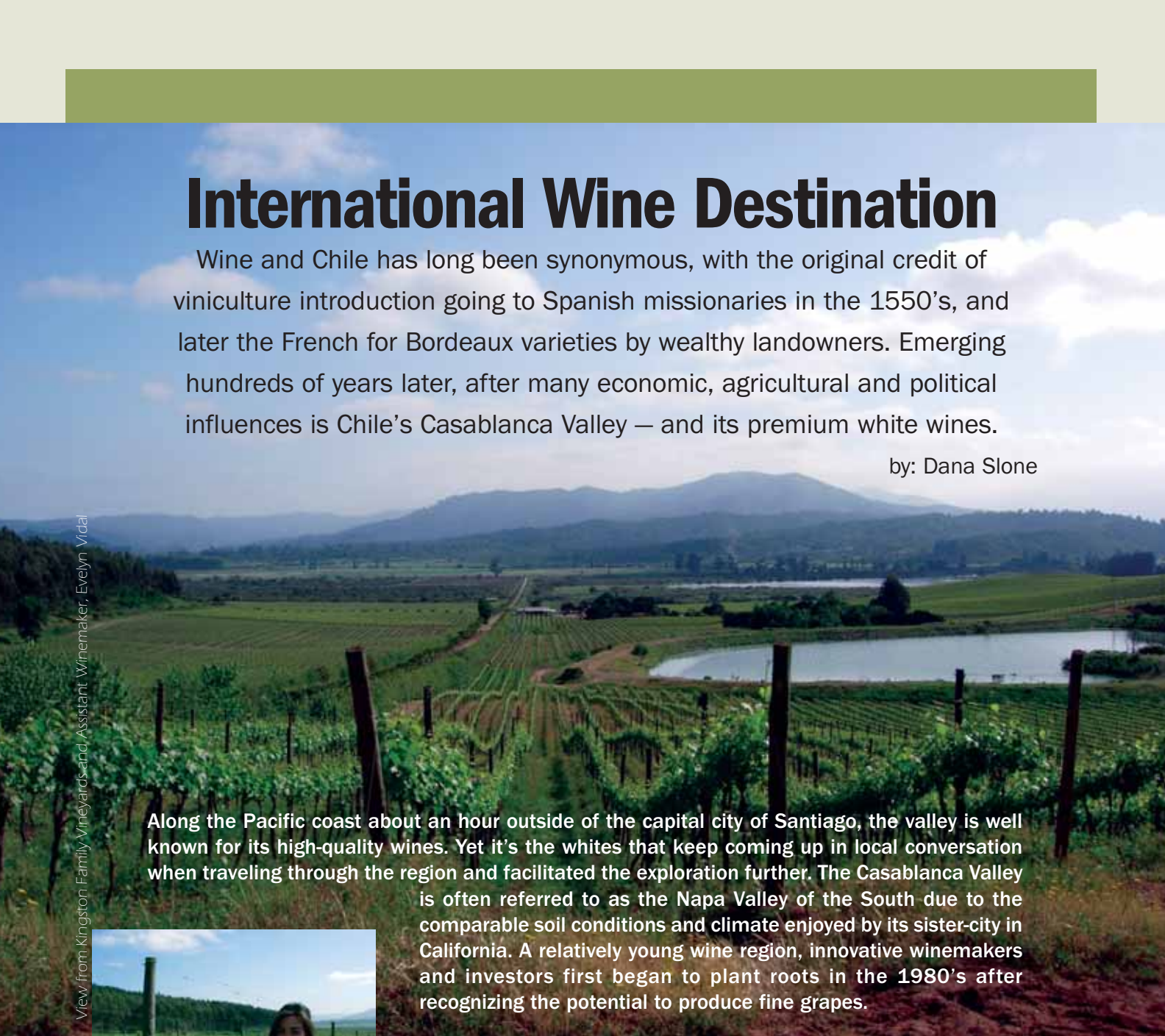


# International Wine Destination

Wine and Chile has long been synonymous, with the original credit of viniculture introduction going to Spanish missionaries in the 1550's, and later the French for Bordeaux varieties by wealthy landowners. Emerging hundreds of years later, after many economic, agricultural and political influences is Chile's Casablanca Valley – and its premium white wines.

by: Dana Slone

View from Kingston Family Vineyards and Assistant Winemaker, Evelyn Vidal



Along the Pacific coast about an hour outside of the capital city of Santiago, the valley is well known for its high-quality wines. Yet it's the whites that keep coming up in local conversation when traveling through the region and facilitated the exploration further. The Casablanca Valley is often referred to as the Napa Valley of the South due to the comparable soil conditions and climate enjoyed by its sister-city in California. A relatively young wine region, innovative winemakers and investors first began to plant roots in the 1980's after recognizing the potential to produce fine grapes.



The many award-winning white wines are a source of great industry and national pride, a testament to the investments of both capital and talent. Still the fine reds of Syrah, Pinot Noir and Carmenere prove to be formidable international tastemakers and the continual development of premium, cool climate reds is a target for winemakers.

Chile is home to many beautiful wineries of famed powerhouses and fledgling boutiques. The Casablanca Valley's dramatic scenery and ideal climate is growing as a destination for wine tourism. With the help of Santiago-based company, Santiago Adventures operated by wine aficionado and former New Englander Brian Pearson, a recent visit to five wineries demonstrated the dedication of winemakers striving to create new legacies of Chilean quality and taste: Kingston Family Vineyards, Casas del Bosque, Viñedos Organicos Emiliana, Villard Estate – and Casa Marin located in the San Antonio Valley, a distinct wine region even closer to the Pacific than the Casablanca.

Kingston Family Vineyards first planted in 1998, is on its fourth vintage (the first was in 2003 of 450 cases) and has 3,000 hectares in the Valley. 10% of the 100 terrioris with plants are used by Kingston, with the rest of the grapes managed by winemakers such as Concho y Toro and Tarapaca. Nearly all of Kingston's small yield production is for the United States.

Evelyn Vidal is the assistant winemaker at Kingston and works with head winemaker, Byron Kosuge of the Napa Valley on their Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir. The lines are named for the Spanish colors of horses: Tobiano, Cariblanco, Bayo Oscuro and Alazan. A tour with her on a sunny day through the vineyards, and a wine tasting afterwards in the bright, newly constructed winery reveals that enthusiasm Pearson describes.

Vidal speaks lovingly about her grapes walking amongst the hilly rows naming clone numbers and explaining her blends. "You use clones for flavor, for aroma, the ideas is to have different aromas, body and color. We make really elegant florals, aromas and this one....," she muses, stopping at a young vine, "It's like a woman. I am sorry, I am very passionate about wine...and this other, is like a man and they work together really good...they make a nice a blend, like a family. I like making white wine a lot. We work with the vineyard to have the best clusters for the wine."

The tasting of the Cariblanco 2006 Sauvignon Blanc reveals that elegance. With 10% oak, it is citric and lemony with a mineral finish and astringency that is dry and lasts long in the mouth. The wines are unfiltered and a lot work is done in the tank with the lees, the sediment, for more aroma and structure which is "unusual in a Sauvignon Blanc." In NY, NJ, and CT, Kingston is represented by Michael Skurnik Wines.



**Kingston's new winery**

Casas Del Bosque began in 1993 as a "family boutique winery exclusively oriented to produce high quality wines." Casas Del Bosque has 193 hectares in the Casablanca Valley with white vines of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, and red vines Merlot, Carmenere, Syrah and Pinot Noir. Producing around 50,000 cases a year currently,

80% of production is exported with 35% to the United States.

The scenic and stylish vineyard and tourism-receiving facilities includes a gourmet restaurant, Tanino. Winemaker Felipe Garcia Reyes speaks with a clear vision of the future of winemaking for the region and Casas Del Bosque wines. Garcia is new to the group, coming from Kendall Jackson and says his goal is to "make a team to make the winery run like a Swiss watch."

Taking the same attention-to-detail approach as Vidal, Garcia addressed a vine saying, "The idea is to keep the best chute, with the best cluster. Now we can play with the best, the all-star team, like in basketball." He says, "The key to Casablanca is the weather. We don't play with the altitude so much (like in Argentina) though that is next...but how far or close to the ocean you are. The cool climate valley gives you all the conditions to grow grape in the best quality, to have the best conditions to do the best wine in Chile."

The three whites tasted, Casa Viva Sauvignon Blanc 2006, Viña Casa Del Bosque Reserva 2006 and Casa Del Bosque Gran Reserva 2006, showed the variety and subtlety amongst the three styles. The Casa Viva is fresh, tropical, with fruit aromas of apple and pineapple, a sweet hint but not overpowering. The Reserva was a more serious wine, with its minerality, sweeter flavor and almost green, asparagus aroma. The Gran Reserva has a sophisticated finish, and as Garcia says proudly is "a wine that we can put side-by-side with the best world-class wines."



**Whites set for tasting**

An intriguing story preceded the visit to the Emiliana vineyard, one of utilizing the moon calendar to determine planting and harvest, of burying cow bones and quartz, setting up an expectation for bewilderment not bewitchment. And while not witchcraft, it exemplifies the benefits of ancient-now-termed 'biodynamic' farming techniques at the fullest, juxtaposing nicely against a new and modern-designed, not-quite-yet-finished guest receiving facility.

Cristian Martinez of Emiliana explained the practical goals of this approach three-fold of harmony and balance in their environmentally-focused agricultural practices: Stop soil degradation, produce healthy food stuffs and lock out artificial means of survival, creating a strong and healthy grape plant using painstaking care and cultivation of the viticulture.

Viñedos Emiliana was the first Chilean vineyard adopting "the international standards for the care and protection of the environment." Winemaker is

Alvara Espinoza. Proud of its fully organic status, the vineyard is recognized by the Organic Certification as endorsed by the Institute for Marketecology (the IMO) and also the Biodynamic Certification granted by Demeter's Assoc. in Germany.

Simple examples of these practices include using compost made from grape skins, stocks and animal wastes, mobile chicken coops rotated along the vineyards, llamas to 'mow' grass, trees planted to lock out chemical drift from air pollution and the list goes on. Martinez says, "Organic is not quality statement, but a health statement... and the product reflects a very honest and frank way of where it comes from." The wines are made from exclusively organically grown grapes and with modern, technological gravity systems. Their lines include Adobe, Novas and Coyum for Latin American and European consumption. The Sincerity line is made especially for the U.S. palate preferences for a higher sugar residue, exporting about 40,000 cases annually.

The Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc from each line revealed distinct differences. The Sincerity Sauvignon Blanc 2005, harvested late in the season, is a balanced blend of intense fresh citrus, herb and mineral aromas. The Sincerity Chardonnay 2005 is a fruity, buttery blend with delicate oak, vanilla and tropical fruit overtones yet crisp.



**Cristian Martinez of Emiliana**

The opportunity to visit the Villard Estate winery in the Valley had come into a time conflict but what followed was even better; a private wine tasting from a balcony overlooking Santiago at the stylish flat of Jean-Charles Villard, son of noted French winemaker, Thierry Villard. Assistant winemaker Jean-Charles tells the family history explaining that they were the country's, and the region's first

premium boutique winery. After his father "predicted that wine would go well in Chile," he moved the family in 1989 with an aim to "build a name on good whites."

Of the Casablanca Valley, Villard says, "30 years ago there was nothing, only cattle, then they discovered subterranean water, they discovered the agriculture was so good because of the oscillation thermic during the day and night, a 35-degree range just fantastic for ripening the grape. In France you have 120 days, in Casablanca it's 140, much slower and very good for white wines." Combining environmentally-friendly vineyard management, traditional meth-

ods and modern technology, the limited quantities produced, 15,000 cases total in four lines in 2006, are something to savor. While you can find a bottle in Dubai or a Michelin-rated restaurant, the wines are filtering out in the market closer to home. In Connecticut, distributor William Donlan of Altuve Beverage says of Villard Wines, "They are great wines. Even though I have 7,500 bottles on hand...they are like giving up your close friends."

Villard says his father Thierry "is about elegance in his wines, and stylish wines. Smooth so it doesn't punch you in the mouth." The Sauvignon Blanc Expression Reserve 2006 achieves exactly that.

The Chardonnay Expression 2005 is a full-bodied wine, soft vanilla and fruit aromas and nice, long finish. The El Noble 2004 Botrytised Sauvignon Blanc dessert wine is a sweet, creamy, peach and apricot-imbued delight. All of the tasted wines are deliciously complex yet thoroughly and cleanly enjoyable.



**Villard wines and Santiago cityscape**

Only four kilometers from the Pacific Ocean amidst the coastal mountain range, is Casa Marin. Founded in 2000 in the quiet, agricultural community of Lo Abarco in the San Antonio Valley, Casa Marin has the double distinction of its founder and winemaker Maria Luz Marin being the first female vineyard owner and its being the closest vineyard to the ocean.

The family-run, "Chilean colony style" winery is a magnificent expanse decorated with handmade mosaics by Luz's sister with vineyard views from its balconies. Brother Osvaldo Marin led the Land Rover charge through the rolling hills to show the vines. The unique marine microclimate, steep hills and mixes of soils — sand, clay, minerals from fossils — have created terroirs newly revealed capable of fine winemaking. Winemaker Carolina Vasquez says, "I've worked in three wineries and for me it's incredible the quality of grapes here. If you taste the grape, it tastes like the wine." Of the 40 hectares, 90% is on hills. The production yield is lower

than some of the wineries in Casablanca Valley, but the international renown of the brand for quality wine is growing just the same. The wines produced include Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Sauvignon Gris, Gewürztraminer, and Pinot Noir.

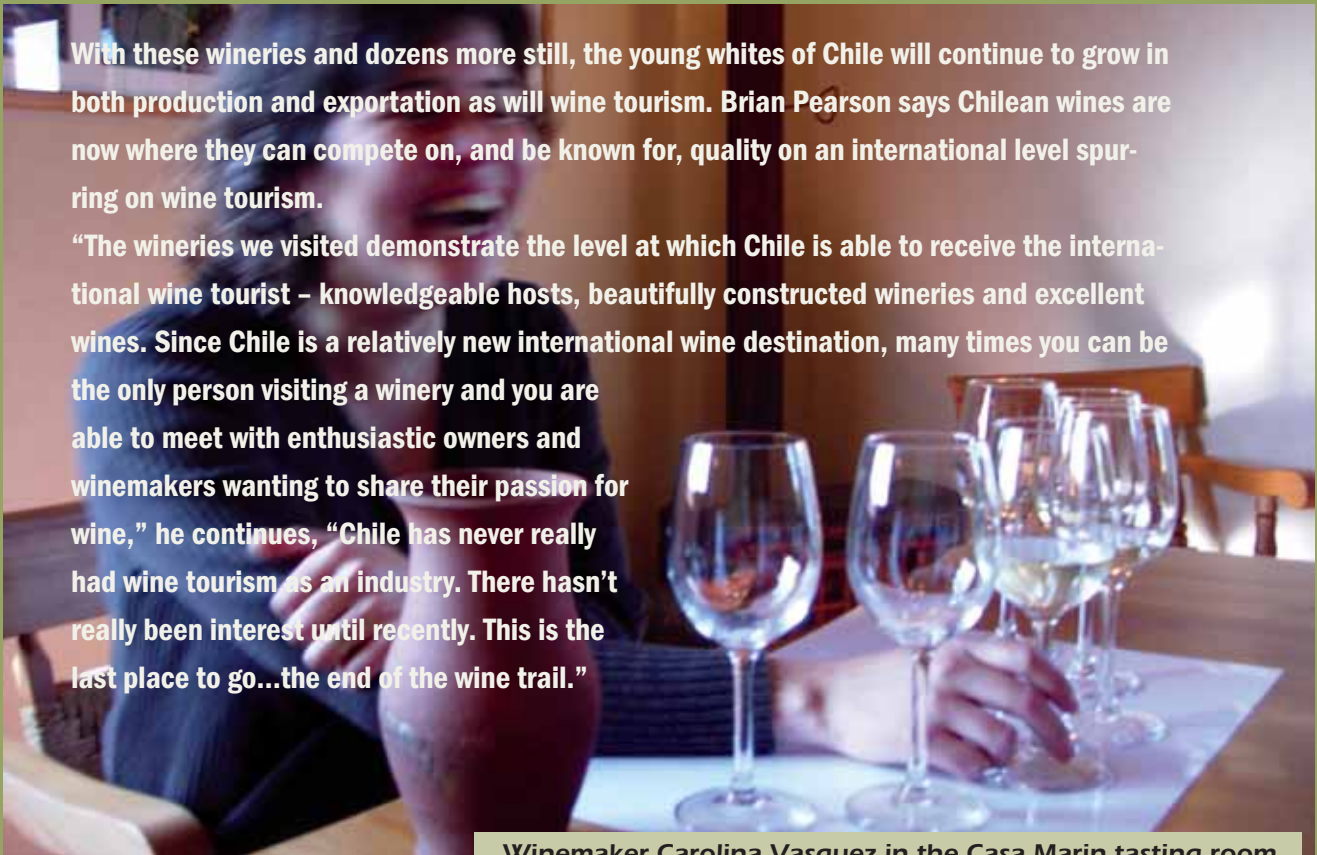
A tasting of six whites in linear progression proved Luz Marin's and Vasquez's skill in mastering the microclimate for maximum results with a true standouts being the Casa Marin Ciprese Sauvignon Blanc 2005 and the soon-to-market 2006, hinting at chamomile, fruity, crisp and clean. The Gewürztraminer 2006 is elegant with its ginger and fragrant tartness. Casa Marin's wines all offered nice surprises in the variety of aromas, flavors and balance. The Ciprese and Laurel lines are available in the US, imported by Domaine Select Wine Estates in New York and Perfecta Wine Company in New Hampshire.



Courtyard at Casa Marin

**With these wineries and dozens more still, the young whites of Chile will continue to grow in both production and exportation as will wine tourism. Brian Pearson says Chilean wines are now where they can compete on, and be known for, quality on an international level spurring on wine tourism.**

**"The wineries we visited demonstrate the level at which Chile is able to receive the international wine tourist - knowledgeable hosts, beautifully constructed wineries and excellent wines. Since Chile is a relatively new international wine destination, many times you can be the only person visiting a winery and you are able to meet with enthusiastic owners and winemakers wanting to share their passion for wine," he continues, "Chile has never really had wine tourism as an industry. There hasn't really been interest until recently. This is the last place to go...the end of the wine trail."**



Winemaker Carolina Vasquez in the Casa Marin tasting room