

Casablanca Valley is the most famous region in Chile for white wine

Publisher's note: This is the last of four stories on my recent trip to Chile.

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There are a number of superb wine-growing regions in Chile, most situated among its picturesque central valleys. But for those with a craving for some crisp coastal whites, there's nowhere better than the Casablanca Valley.

The **Casablanca Valley** is a wine-growing region of Chile located 60 miles northwest of the country's capital, Santiago. The east-west oriented valley is roughly 20 miles long, stretching to the eastern border of the Valparaíso province. It is best known for its crisp white wines, most notably made from the Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay grape varieties which have gained it recognition as one of Chile's quality wine regions.

The region is relatively new by Chilean standards. Casablanca Valley's first vineyards were planted in the 1980s during the revitalization of the Chilean wine industry. Expansion of vineyards around the industrial town of Casablanca followed, and vines now dominate the valley's landscape.

Chile's coastal terroirs are marked by two major elements that contribute to the wines character and distinct nuances – the Humboldt Current and the Coastal Range.

Because it is only 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean at its furthest point, Casablanca Valley is strongly influenced by the cooling effects of the **Humboldt Current**, which flows up the west coast of Chile from the Antarctic. Cooling afternoon breezes blow from the ocean towards the mountains in the east, filling the vacuum created by warm air rising in the east. The reverse winds in the evening, however, are not sufficiently strong to provide a cool finish to Casablanca days.

The **Coastal Range** is a mountain range that runs from north to south along the Pacific Coast and is made up of various types of granite. While the western slopes of Leyda, San

Antonio, Paredones, and Zapallar are directly affected by cooler maritime conditions, the eastern slopes of Casablanca, Quillota and Litueche are provided with a barrier from cold sea air. These site variations, along with different soil types, result in a wide stylistic range among Chile's coastal Sauvignon Blancs.

Viticulture here is possible largely because of the oceanic influence, which brings cool morning fog and greater cloud cover than is found elsewhere in the north of Chile. It is this cooler climate that makes Casablanca's white wines stand out from their local rivals. With a longer ripening period, the white grapes have more time to develop greater flavor complexity, while maintaining sugars and acids in balance. This cool climate, while undoubtedly beneficial, is not without its dangers – crops have been seriously damaged in the past by severe frosts in spring.

The sandy clay soils in the area, although free draining and otherwise suitable for viticulture, have been something of a bane for the grape growers of Casablanca Valley. It is thought the use of chemical fertilizers in the past caused an outbreak of nematodes – microscopic worms that damage vines by feeding on the roots. They thrive in sandy soils just like those of Casablanca Valley, so growers have had to graft vines onto nematode-resistant rootstocks.

Chilean wine would not look the same without Pablo Morandé. A ninth-generation winemaker, he was the first to plant vines in the Casablanca Valley in 1982, kickstarting a broader move towards the coast for winemakers previously afraid of the cooler conditions. Morandé was influenced by what he had seen on a visit to California. Carneros, California is a cool-climate area close to the San Francisco Bay, and Morandé believed Casablanca's seaside location would provide a similar environment for growing grapes.

After achieving excellent results, it wasn't long before other wineries followed Morandé's lead. By the

1990s, Casablanca, which until then had focused on dairy and livestock farming, was becoming one of Chile's most prominent areas for Sauvignon Blanc and other cool-climate grapes like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

The successes of Sauvignon Blanc in Casablanca led to a wave of new plantings in other coastal areas, notably in Santa Domingo and San Antonio and its sub-region Leyda Valley, as well as in areas further north, such as Quillota, Zapallar and Limarí, and to the south in Paredones.

After over 30 years working for other companies, Morandé started his own family winery with his son in the heart of Casablanca. **Bodegas RE** is unlike any other winery in Chile. It is an energetic family winery that isn't afraid to push the boundaries with thought provoking wines. I had an opportunity to tour the winery and sample some of their wines.

Pablo Morandé Jr studied in Chile before working with the family in Morandé winery and co-founding Bodegas RE in 2012. He is known for being at the forefront of Chile's experimental new generation of winemakers, exploring everything from orange wines aged under flor to unorthodox red blends aged in 250 year old clay amphorae, or classic clay pots, owned by the family for generations.

My guide Filepe showed me around the vineyards, their artisanal liquor room, and the underground winery where you are able to see their old tinajas and oak barrels. They even have an entire room dedicated to vinegar.

Making wines from old vines in Maule and newer vines in Casablanca, the range includes excellent Carignan, daring Chardonnay, and one of Chile's best noble rot wines.

The **RE Cabergnan** comes from Maule Valley and is made with 90% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Carignan. It is fermented and macerated for more than two months and aged in foudres and in bottle for two years.

The **RE Chardonnay** is a blend of 65% Chardonnay and 35% Pinot Noir from Casablanca, looking to recreate a traditional blend from Champagne.

The **RE Pinot** is a blend of 80% Pinot Noir and 20% Moscatel Rosada from Casablanca.

Vigno RE is a red wine from Carignan from Maule. It is fermented and macerated in big amphoras for more than two months and aged in foudres and oak barrels.

RE Nace is a wine from Maule. The grapes come



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from Carignan bush vines planted in 1950 and dry-farmed.

RE Noble is a sweet wine made from botrytized Sauvignon Blanc grapes from Casablanca.

Besides its wine portfolio, Bodegas RE also produces olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and artisanal fruit liqueurs.

Other wineries in the Casablanca Valley worth visiting include:

- **Indómita** which is centered around an elegant castle-like building sitting on top of a hill at the entrance to the valley. Chardonnay is their signature drop, while the excellent in-house restaurant is a great place to have lunch before hitting the other vineyards. Viña Indómita, Ruta 68, Casablanca.

- **Veramonte** is one of the country's biggest wineries. This family-friendly California-style operation is famous for producing premium-quality product, year after year. Veramonte, km 66, Ruta 68, Casablanca.

- The grounds of **Viñamar** may appear ostentatious to some, though that's of little consequence because their sparkling whites are about as good as they come. Viñamar de Casablanca, km 72, Ruta 68, Casablanca.

Another important place to visit in the Casablanca Valley is the **Sanctuary of Nuestra Señora Purísima de Lo Vásquez**, Ruta 68 s/n, a Catholic sanctuary located in the town of Lo Vásquez.

Hundreds of thousands visit the Lo Vasquez Shrine every December 8 on the **Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception**, taking part in one of the most important and well attended pilgrimages in Chile.

This is a very religious holiday in a very religious nation. Shops and businesses are closed for a three day period from December 7-9. During the festival of Lo Vásquez more than one million people make the pilgrimage on foot or by bike from Valparaíso and Santiago to the Lo Vásquez Shrine. The main highway between the two largest metropolitan areas of the country is closed to accom-



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modate them. Alcohol is not permitted to be sold or even shown during this time, so many of the wineries even cover the wine in their tasting rooms with sheets.

Our Immaculate Lady of Lo Vasquez, known in Spanish as "Nuestra Señora Purísima," is a devotion that dates back to 1850. Catholic traditions have Mary being conceived by her mother Saint Anne – her father being Saint Joachim, on December 8. The doctrine states that she was preserved from all sin from the moment of her conception and throughout her entire life.

Praying or singing to the Virgin Mary and listening to sermons on Mary and her sinless conception and life are the main activities.

Pilgrims who come to the shrine are also able to go to confession all day long and attend one of many Masses which start on the hour from midnight to 7 pm on December 8.

Don José Ulloa built a hermitage in the garden at the entrance of his house where he placed a beautiful image of the Virgin. Over time the number of visitors to the Virgin began to increase, so Ulloa considered it necessary to renovate an adobe shed on his property as a chapel. Moved by the enthusiasm of the growing popular devotion that he saw around the image of the Immaculate Conception, he also looked for a priest to

officiate in the chapel and guide the devotion.

In the parish archives of Casablanca there are the first baptisms made by the parish priest, Don José Manuel León, in the Chapel of Lo Vásquez in 1849.

In 1850, Fr. José Manuel Troncoso made a decision to move the image of the Virgin, the ornaments and the sacred vessels to a shed that was about 300 feet to the north on the road to Valparaíso which was located in front of what is now the Temple of the Virgin. This shed over time served as a public school and later a parish.

Fr. Troncoso asked the neighbors and travelers who passed through the place for the necessary help to construct a new chapel. The Leiva Vásquez family was the main collaborator who donated a piece of land for the chapel, which corresponds to the current temple. In 1854, the third chapel for the Blessed Virgin of Lo Vásquez was dedicated and Fr. Troncoso sent a new image of the Blessed Virgin from Spain. This is the image found in the temple today.

On August 16, 1906 a violent earthquake demolished the chapel. The chronicles say after the earthquake people were astonished and moved to see that despite the rest of the chapel being destroyed, the altar wall with the image of the Virgin had been left standing.



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