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WINE, NATURE AND BEAUTY

Though still not a major wine tourist destination, Chile is beginning to attract an increasing number of visitors to its wine routes. Anastasia Edwards reports

Forget the Wild West: Chile is the place to find your inner cowboy. While Josey Wales and Clint Eastwood's various other incarnations might have a monopoly on the image of self as brave, rugged pioneer (or self as Eastwood's squaw, as the case may be), riding through vineyards in the shadow of the Andes provides even the most pasty urban cowboy or girl with the chance to star in an adventure that is just being written.

If the country's natural resources provide virgin territory for the lover of nature and adventure, its wine industry – young yet dynamic – offers a chance to learn more about wine in one of the most inclusive, transparent industries in the wine world – not here the often intimidating, mystique-spinning châteaux and domaines of the Old World.

The Chilean wine world seems to be more and more aware of its powers of attraction. In Chile's Colchagua Valley, for example, tourism is a buzzword, with every other winery seemingly erecting or improving tourist facilities, and the Santa Cruz hotel, the region's first major tourist hotel, planning further expansion hot on the

heels of a new wing completed last year. It is a crucial time in Chile's evolution as both a tourism destination and a wine destination, but with the right promotional strategies in place, and with the right private sector infrastructure, it stands to be a wine tourism success story.

Michael Cox, director of Wines of Chile's UK office, has made wine tourism a priority in his promotion of Chile's wines in the UK and, while aware of the competition the country faces from more established wine tourism destinations, is optimistic about its prospects. 'Up until fairly recently, Chile has remained an undiscovered gem on the tourist map, seen by only the intrepid few,' he says. 'Chile, once described as "a crazy sliver of geography – a boot-lace on the map", is a haven for the modern traveller and is looking to become one of the most sought-after long-haul destinations for young and old. And wine can play a big part in this.'

Wine, in fact, could not only be an added attraction, but the main story, according to Cox. 'In the 1980s, Brits started flocking to

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Thomas Wilkins



Thomas Wilkins, 40, was born in Santiago de Chile, son of Winston Wilkins (architect) and Maureen Biggs, first-generation immigrants from England and Ireland. He was educated at the Redland School, a British school in Santiago, and later studied agronomy at the Universidad Austral de Chile. He worked in real estate for several years and in 1998 assumed the position of general manager of the Colchagua Valley Wine Route. He is also the general manager of two other related companies, Viñas de Colchagua SA and Colchagua Wine & Tours, and the director of the Corporación Tren del Vino de Colchagua. He has lived in the Colchagua Valley since 1999. He is married to Maite Martínez, a commercial engineer, and they have two daughters, aged six and seven.

How did the idea for the Colchagua Valley Wine Route come about?

The idea began with an experience of a group of Colchagua Valley wine industry professionals during a 1992 technical visit to California. The initial group included Osvaldo Bisquertt, José Miguel Viu and Felipe Bisquertt, who were later joined by Alejandro Hartwig and Hernán Gras.

After their return to Chile, they began to meet and discuss the possibility of implementing wine tourism in the Colchagua Valley, given the similarity of its geographical characteristics with those of Napa Valley: two valleys concentrating on high-quality red wines with wineries distributed along the highway and in proximity to a large urban centre. The group later contacted other wineries in the Valley and suggested the idea.

Chile's first wine route was incorporated in late 1996 under the name Ruta del Vino de Colchagua SA, and included the Bisquertt, MontGras, Viu Manent, Laura Hartwig, Pueblo Antiguo and La Posada wineries. In early 1997, the route opened its first office and began to organise tourism programmes, and contact local tour operators and the press to promote wine tourism in the valley.

Today the Colchagua Valley Wine Route is comprised of the valley's 14 most important wineries: Bisquertt, Casa Lapostolle, Casa Silva, Cono Sur, Estampa, Hacienda Araucano, Laura Hartwig, Luis Felipe Edwards, Los Vascos, Montes, MontGras, Siegel, Viñedos Orgánicos Emiliana and Viu Manent.

What were the major challenges in getting it off the ground?

The organisation's greatest difficulties occurred in early 1997, as the Colchagua Valley was devoid of any type of infrastructure for tourism and lacked restaurants, hotels and transportation, etc. The area was unknown as a tourism destination, and the original six wineries weren't equipped to receive visitors.

The second major problem was that although the wineries were interested in developing tourism, they were committed to making large investments in new technology, plantations and markets, so tourism was understandably not their first priority. They also had no experience in the tourism business. In order to convince themselves to make the necessary investment in the appropriate infrastructure, they needed to see sufficient interest on the part of the tour operators who would promote the tours and bring the first tourists to their wineries, and, of course, the operators demanded better infrastructure before bringing their tourists.

The third major obstacle was that Chile had no prior history of wine tourism, so the Chileans themselves were not accustomed to visiting wineries, which therefore prompted the decision to concentrate on foreign tourists, primarily North Americans.

Since Chile's only international airport is located in Santiago, all connecting flights for other tourism destinations, such as Patagonia, the Atacama Desert and Easter Island, go through the capital city, often requiring tourists to spend two or three days in the city. Because there were no hotels in the Valley when the Wine Route was inaugurated, we designed a day trip from Santiago to Colchagua which included a guided visit to two wineries, lunch in the 'Club Social' in Santa Cruz and a visit to the Colchagua Museum.

The initial programme was approximately 6 hours long, although construction on the Pan-American Highway in 1998 doubled the travel time between Santiago and Colchagua, extending the tours to nearly 12 hours, which was ridiculous. Even so, the number of visitors arriving for day tours jumped from 500 in 1997 to 1,200 in 1998, 80% of whom were foreigners, primarily from the US.

Plans for a 44-room hotel were announced in 1998, and the Hotel Santa Cruz Plaza finally opened its doors in November 2000, which allowed us to design multiple-day programmes with lodging in the hotel, and the wine route project really took off.

Five new wineries joined the project in 1999: Caliterra, Casa Lapostolle, Siegel, Luis

Felipe Edwards and Casa Silva. A new initiative for the international promotion of the Colchagua Valley appellation as one of the top wine regions in Chile and in the world, resulted in the resignation of the Pueblo Antiguo and La Posada wineries from the programme. The new project would include only the Valley's finest wineries, and would form a solid group in terms of quality as a tourism attraction, as we had also realised that wine connoisseurs sought out the best wineries and their finest wines, evidence of which is the development of tourism leaders such as Bordeaux, Tuscany and Napa Valley, which are all based on this same concept.

Other difficulties have included forming a bilingual team of tour guides specialised in wine in the Colchagua Valley, as there were previously no professional guides in the area. We began by looking for English speakers living in Colchagua. We found that there was only a small group of women married to winemakers or other winery employees and who were not employed elsewhere. Our oenologists trained them in wine and we provided further instruction on the histories of each of the member wineries and the Colchagua Valley in general. But there is an inherent difficulty in that they are mothers and housewives with little time available each week to guide tours, and no one wants to work on weekends.

However, working with this type of guide has become a strength in that they work not only for money, but also because they enjoy it, and the warmth and dedication with which they receive the tourists makes them our best hosts.

How and where do you promote the wine route, and what activities do you offer to tourists?

Our primary promotional strategies have been to continually invite national and international tour operators to visit and familiarise themselves with the route. For the national market, we participate in most of the wine-related events held in Chile, and we organise the annual Colchagua Valley Wine Harvest Festival, the country's largest, and we support other local events related to wine, jazz and gastronomy, etc.

We also have very good relations with the specialised press and mass communications, which regularly cover the events and important news of the Colchagua Valley, as we are continually in the news because of the prizes our wines earn, along with the new projects and activities we undertake.

We do not have any special promotions programmed for the UK during the 2005 season, beyond participating in the information and brochures that our



Wine and ride: finding their inner cowboys on the Colchagua Valley Wine Route

associated wineries will take with them to the London International Wine & Spirits Fair in May and the Chile Annual Tasting in London in September.

A large part of the international promotion and sales of the Colchagua Valley Wine Route takes place through Chilean and international tour operators who attend all the international tourism fairs, and to whom we supply our promotional materials and resources. This year we will concentrate on Brazil, specifically on Rio de Janeiro, where we will hold an event called 'Colchagua in Rio' in July to promote Chile's wine, gastronomy and tourism for importers, supermarkets, wine shops, restaurants, sommeliers, chefs and tour operators. This is primarily because of its proximity and the growing consumption of Chilean wine in Brazil, as well as the large number of Brazilian tourists who visit Chile each year.

Do you have any figures comparing the number of visitors to Colchagua to those visiting other wine regions and Chile in general?

Between 1997 and March 2005 we received approximately 45,200 visitors who had

purchased Wine Route programmes, although more than 40,000 people attend the Colchagua Valley Wine Harvest Festival alone each year.

The Colchagua Valley Wine Route was Chile's first, and the idea was later reproduced in the country's other wine regions with varying degrees of success. Although we do not have access to their statistics, we do coordinate with them periodically, and they have always maintained that they receive far fewer tourists per year and recognise that the Colchagua Valley Wine Route not only has the best infrastructure, but is the best-organised and most attractive as well.

Is there a discernible profile of the wine tourist to Colchagua?

The tourists who visit the Colchagua Valley Wine Route are primarily upper-middle and upper-class, well-educated foreigners between the ages of 35 and 65, 25% of whom describe themselves as wine connoisseurs. The remainder include the Colchagua Valley Wine Route in their tours because wine is clearly Chile's most representative product and primary image throughout the world.

What are your future plans for the Wine Route?

Future plans include increasing the frequency of the Colchagua Valley Wine Train's weekly departures from one to two during the 2005-2006 season (September-April). Today it runs only on Saturdays and makes special trips for charter groups. We also plan to increase the availability of international-level lodgings in the Valley. We currently have 200 high-quality rooms provided by the hotels at Casa Silva, Santa Cruz Plaza, Parador de La Viña, Hotel La Playa and Hacienda Los Lingues, as well as two excellent museums. Our goal is to have 700 rooms available by 2010, a casino and more restaurants, in order to be equipped to receive more than 100,000 tourists each year, thereby making the Colchagua Valley the most exclusive and important tourism destination in the country's central zone.

What, in your opinion, are the most successful wine routes/wine tourism destinations in the world?

I can only comment on those I have visited personally. Those that have impressed me most are Porto in Portugal, the Route des Châteaux between Bordeaux and Pauillac, Napa Valley in California and, of course, the Colchagua Valley Wine Route. I believe that while each is quite different from the rest, they all reflect the culture and best wines of their respective countries. ■

Australia to gaze at the Sydney Harbour Bridge, hoping to catch a glimpse of a Crocodile Dundee or Kylie Minogue – and they discovered great wine in the process,’ he explains. ‘With Chile, it’s likely to be the other way round. Their growing love of Chile’s attractive and reliable wines will ultimately transport them from Tesco’s shelves to the Colchagua Valley.’

But putting the wine cart before the horse in promoting the country requires a focused, tightly managed campaign. In an effort to ‘fire the imagination’ of the consumer, Cox explains that the Wines of Chile campaign has, ‘for the past two years, placed much emphasis on promoting the image of Chile the country, as well as Chile the wine producer’. ‘The Wines of Chile concept is “Explore a New World”, and the images we depict in all the literature and information about Chile and its wine regions deliberately do not dwell on vineyards, barrels, tanks, cellars, etc – everyone has those!’ says Cox. ‘But which other country has the Atacama Desert, snow-capped volcanoes, Patagonian glaciers, monkey puzzle forests, moai statues on Easter Island and, of course, the pure snow melt from the Andes? It is the beauty and naturalness of Chile that inspires, and one of the elements that adds to this rich canvass is the vineyard. The wine valleys and the hills and mountains that surround them complete the picture and help cement the relationship in the consumers’ minds between wine, nature and beauty.’

But while two of the major London-based South American travel specialists agree that wine is a bonus in visiting Chile, wine tourism per se has not yet taken off as a discrete category within their offers. ‘We have offered Chile for over 20 years now – it was one of the first countries to be included in our brochures,’ says Tim Murray-Walker, marketing manager for Journey Latin America (www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk). ‘While we do not offer “wine tours” as specific holidays, visits to the vineyards near Santiago (eg Concha y Toro) have been offered for years.’ While Walker does not have any specific statistics for the number of people who go on wine tours to Chile, he says that of the visitors the company sends to Chile on tailor-made holidays and escorted group tours, ‘probably around 50% go on an excursion to one of the vineyards around Santiago’. ‘The clients we send to Chile will be going for a number of reasons, usually the outdoor activities, national parks and incredible diversity of its geography, and the wine element will always form a part of a longer trip,’ he explains.

He adds that ‘linking the wineries to the destination (lifestyle and tourism) is an excellent way to increase exposure and recognition for the region as a whole’, but



Well chilled: tasting wine on a glacier with Karen Gilchrist's Wine Travel Chile

emphasises that ‘the region will need to be promoted well if it is to become known in its own right’. While he feels that the Chile Tourism Board (CPT) ‘should be persuaded to spend more on its UK promotion’, Journey Latin America collaborated last September with Wines of Chile on a Chile supplement in the *Independent* and with *Wanderlust* magazine on an Andes supplement earlier this year. He clearly believes that private sector outfits like his own have a key role to play.

Like Walker, David Gilmour, of London-based travel company South American Experience (www.southamericanexperience.co.uk), feels that wine is only part of the tourism story, though the company does offer wine-only private tours. ‘It has to be said that most of our passengers are visiting Chile for the scenery,’ Gilmour says. ‘But as wine is one of Chile’s leading exports, it certainly helps to put the country on the map. Chile is an important destination, and over the past few years we have noticed its popularity increasing. Most of our clients spend a few days in Santiago, and from our earliest days we decided to suggest a visit to one of the local vineyards. It quickly became apparent that most of our clients are highly receptive to the idea of a spot of wine tasting.’

The most concrete proof of Chile’s promise as a destination for a spot – or more – of wine tasting comes from the country itself. Statistics are hard to come by, but Thomas Wilkins, general manager of the Colchagua Valley Wine Route (www.colchaguavalley.cl), widely held to be the most successful wine route in Chile, says that 42,500 people have been on the wine route’s programmes since 1997, and that some 40,000 visit the Colchagua Valley Wine Route each year (see interview, p.28). And a further portent of the maturing of the wine tourism industry is a new specialist company focused solely on wine tourism. Two years ago, Sorbonne-educated Karen Gilchrist founded Wine Travel Chile (www.winetravelchile.com), a Chile-based company offering personalised wine trips to Chile and Argentina. Although Gilchrist acknowledges that while ‘in Chile the wine tourism culture is growing, but it is not very common’, she wanted to create

Wine Travel Chile because ‘in Chile there weren’t any companies focused on wine tourism. All tour companies in Santiago had a very reduced and somewhat boring offer, and they did not have any guides specialised in the subject,’ she explains. In its second year of operation, the company has had around 300 people from various countries, around 70% from the US and 30% from Europe, though only 10 so far from the UK. While most visitors have, as with the companies mentioned above, stayed close to Santiago, recently groups have started venturing further afield. ‘The most popular destinations are the one-day tours, near Santiago, to the San Antonio, Casablanca, Maipo and Colchagua Valleys,’ explains Gilchrist. ‘These tours go hand in hand with a cultural visit to the port of Valparaiso, walks through vineyards and visits to regional museums. People who are just passing through Santiago and have very little time available mostly request these tours. However, in the past six months we have received groups of 10 to 25 people who are visiting Chile and Argentina for 12 or more days. Here we are talking about a wine connoisseur public who prepare their trip many months in advance.’ Her first large group of connoisseurs was a group of 14 Finns, who six months ago visited both Chile and Argentina.

But the most exciting venture to date took place last month, when Gilchrist surprised a group with a tasting on top of a glacier. ‘It was a special surprise within the general programme,’ she says, ‘but we had to quickly bring the activity to an end because the group became very animated and with a cup of wine on a glacier it could have become quite dangerous. It was one of the most entertaining experiences in which I have taken part.’

So if the CPT or Wines of Chile are looking for a poster image that ties in wine, adventure and the breathtaking panoramas that Chile specialises in, they could do worse than to get in touch with the winsome Gilchrist. An urbane, elegant blonde, she is proof that it is possible to live in an urban jungle and still stake a claim in the New World’s Wild West. ■