



Moving Chile upmarket

New image is key to realising untapped potential, says winemaker

Chile: what does that mean to you? Reliable, good-value wines in, generally, the sub-£7 price bracket? Certainly. That's where the long, thin country that lies along almost 3,000 miles of South America's western coast fits in most wine-drinkers' consciousness.

And so it should, as that is the kind of wine which made Chile's reputation. But there is so much more barely realised potential. I've just tasted some of the wines which prove that potential, and talked to the passionate person who makes them.

Francisco Baettig has been head winemaker at Errazuriz for 11 years. His employer is a pioneer – it was the first Chilean winery, for example, to plant syrah commercially (now the variety is seen as one of the biggest things to come from Chile), and its Don Maximiano Founder's Reserve was among the country's first premium wines.

Baettig is a pioneer too, responsible for a sea change in the style of Errazuriz wines from rich and high in alcohol to something much more elegant and restrained, a French-style approach rather than a forthright New World one. He is, too, a fervent advocate of a new image for his country's wines.

"If you want people to take you seriously, you have to be serious, too," he told me as he urged the need for more individual wines alongside the own-label ones. It's not so much the liquid that has to change, but how it's marketed, he argues.

This quite small man exudes energy and purpose (he was off to run the Médoc Marathon a couple



■ Francisco Baettig, head winemaker at Errazuriz

of days after I spoke to him). And he is doing his own bit to alter the profile of Chilean wine.

A major step has been Errazuriz's introduction of a range of wines made in the cool, coastal, western end of the Aconcagua Valley, towards the northern end of Chile's rapidly expanding wine-growing area. They carry the newly allowed Aconcagua Costa appellation and come as single-varietal sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah.

Differences

An educational aside: Chile's wine topography doesn't fall into the conventional south cool/north hotter mould (it's south of the Equator, remember). Differences west to east in the valleys running inland from the Pacific, where the best grapes grow, are often bigger, with the eastern (inland) Andean designation of each valley appreciably warmer than the western Costa one, where cool breezes and mists blow in from the Humboldt-chilled ocean.

This is the way to go, says Baettig: define wine-growing areas more specifically and insist the most appropriate grape varieties are grown in them – after all, growers can't plant syrah in Bordeaux, for example. Why not set rules (though not as

bureaucratic as the French ones) which will allow Chile to make the best possible wines in each appellation?

So try the Aconcagua Costa wines. These notes are on the latest released vintages, some not yet available (possible sources of alternatives suggested). The sauvignon blanc 2014 heads more to minerally Loire freshness than pungent Kiwi style (2103 Waitrose and Wine Rack, about £13); the chardonnay 2013 (£15, stonevine.co.uk), where no new oak barrels are used, is fragrant, enjoyably lean and long-lasting; the pinot noir 2013 (2011 oxfordwine.co.uk, £18) is prettily light and scented; the syrah 2012 (£15, oxfordwine.co.uk, 2011 stonevine.co.uk, £18.25) has stylish aromatics and dark fruit.

Other excellent wines come from further up the valley. The Blend in its red incarnation (£19, Waitrose) has won many admirers; now it is joined by The Blend white 2011 (£22, Waitrose), where roussanne dominates, marsanne provides extra weight and viognier adds an apricotty flourish to a wine which has style and balance rather than OTT tropical voluptuousness.

Learn more about Chile in The Wine Society's brand-new guide: thewinesociety.com/guides-regions-chile-htb.

restaurant of the week

Paying an awful lot of money for very little lunch

While its vinous offerings are of high quality, the tiny portions of food let this place down

Neal's Yard in Covent Garden is terribly famous, largely for its splendid cheese shop. It is also in the Borough of Camden: not a lot of people know that. The street sign is rather beautiful – far more so, certainly, than any you will see in Hampstead. The Yard itself is just that: a lovely little enclave of old warehouses, now transformed with colour and grooviness, quite as it might have been done in the 1960s – except that now it is viewed as being prime real estate, and worth trillions. There are bamboos planted into brightly painted oil drums, and a plaque commemorating the fact that it was here that the crew of *Monty Python* gathered weekly in order to become very silly indeed. One little shop is called Walk-In Back Rub, a sign in the window making everything clearer: "You can literally walk in and we will rub your back. You don't have to take your clothes off." It would never take off in Soho.

Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels (catchy, eh?) is very picturesquely placed, its full-length windows thrown open to the Technicolor piazza. It's small inside (though there is an upstairs section) with a ham slicer on the bar, very reminiscent of those deployed in Sainsbury's in the days of white

marble counters and sales staff in floor-length aprons and sleeve protectors: you may have noticed that in Sainsbury's, it's not like that any more. There are 1950s low sofas in chunky geometric prints – part chinoiserie, part David Hicks – and black wall panelling which turns out to be upholstered nylon, and is bouncy. This place must quite literally back on to Mon Plaisir in Monmouth Street: both of them very French indeed. The manageress of Compagnie is tres chic (which you might expect of a young urban Frenchwoman) and also very smiley and friendly (which you might not). The menu is surprisingly small at lunchtime, and most things on it are surprisingly cold. As the name of the place suggests, the wine is the thing here, the grub being more of an adjunct to blot it all up. I ordered a glass of Moulin à Vent – and this very superior Beaujolais came just slightly chilled, in a fine Riedel glass. In Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party*, one of the doomed guests brings along a bottle of Beaujolais, and we are all invited to chortle as the memorably fearsome hostess played by Alison Steadman says "I'll just pop it in the fridge." But in fact – although it's red – it's a wise thing to do, and particularly in summer. The wine was lovely, I think: hard to be sure, because for £8 you get a drip.

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Joseph Connolly at Compagnie des Vins Surnaturels



■ Joseph Connolly with artist and caricaturist John Springs

Pictures: Polly Hancock

It says on the list that you get a glass, but you don't: you get a drip. The full wine list is the length of a Dickens novel, though far more intricately plotted.

My guest was John Springs, an enormously talented artist and caricaturist who once did me for *The Spectator*: admittedly one of his less demanding subjects. Over the years – and in every national newspaper and glossy magazine, most recently *The New York Review of Books* – he has caricatured just about every author you can think of, and hundreds of celebs: he captures them all, unerringly. He has attempted self-portraits on many occasions, however, “and”, he says, “always sadly failed”. His studio is just around the corner from the Chelsea Arts Club, of which we both are members ... and he had walked from there to Covent

Garden. “It took me 70 minutes”, he said. “Please do remind me to buy a bottle of aquavit.” Why...? “Well to go with my pickled herrings, of course.” He’s an enthusiastic cook, you see, holding cooking competitions with his great friend John Mayhew, owner of Rules restaurant.

Little plates

One is never quite sure just how many little plates to order ... but we went for “Posh Madame” – a Croque Madame with truffled ham and quail egg – largely because it was hot. Then “Trois Saucissons”, Dover crab with crusty bread, and “mountain chicken”. What be that, you wonder? Why it’s fried frog legs, of course: what else would it be? And a bottle of Brouilly (another sort of Beaujolais) at a fairly tear-making £39: one of the cheapest on the

list, and at least you get more than a drip. The manageress brought the food and said: “In France, we say, ‘Bon appetit!’” Well blimey: after all my years of eating, this was a new one on me. John and I had presumed, oh so foolishly, that “Trois Saucissons” might be, uh ... three sausages. All wrong: wafer thin slices of a trio of salami, largely undistinguishable, and barely enough to fill a sandwich. The “Posh Madame” was very welcome for being recognisably food, if hardly lunch. The quail eggs oozed very nicely into the melted cheese, though ham – truffled or otherwise – was no more than a ghostly presence. We basically had a rarebit on our hands, at a ludicrous £12. The crab was nice white meat, generous by the standards of this place: we heaped it onto more bread. If you tasted the frog legs

blind, you would have thought, ah, how terribly interesting: paprika-flavoured crunchy bones. Honestly: they could have been anything but frog legs, and I rather wished they were. The Brouilly was beautiful and scented: as my guest remarked – “like winter flowers”.

Although John hails from Leeds, he talks like Prince Charles – and when he isn’t drawing or painting, he is writing a monthly illustrated column for *Kensington & Chelsea Today* entitled “Dandy About Town” (and can this town be big enough for both of us?). Or he is driving his 1979 Ferrari (not red – blue). Or he is tobogganing. Yes – and near maniacally, being a full member of the extremely elite Cresta Run Club. The correct term for what he is is a “rider”. “I’ve done the Cresta Run hundreds of times. My time is about 47

seconds. The record is around 41. The most nerve-wracking moment is actually waiting to go down. Still, after 10 years of doing it, I get incredibly nervous. The most dangerous part is Shuttlecock Corner – that’s where you can come right off at about 50 miles an hour. People have been killed, of course. By the end of the run, you’re doing 80. You really ought to try it,” he said to me. “It’s exhilarating.” Yes well – I think I shall stick to going downhill at an altogether more leisurely pace, thank you.

Biblical meal

Then we had “Trois Fromages”: Comté (one of my favourites), Camembert and Cashel Blue. The tiny triangles of Comté were practically transparent, the rather unyielding piece of Camembert the dimensions of an eraser, and the Cashel Blue barely detectable to the naked eye. Cost? £14. The bill was nearly £130 ... and for that, we could have had a truly cracking lunch in a dozen good places within walking distance. “We have had a very biblical meal,” said John. “Bread and wine...” So what else has been going on, John...? “Oh ... struggle and disappointment, largely.” He became philosophical: “Life’s too short,” he said. “But still quite long enough to be annoying...”

■ Joseph Connolly’s *The A-Z of Eating Out* is published by Thames & Hudson. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- COMPAGNIE DES VINS SURNATURELS
8 Neal’s Yard, WC2
Tel: 020 7734 7737
- Open Monday-Saturday, 10am-midnight; Sunday, 10am-11pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Beyond absurd, really. Stick to bread and wine ... if you can afford the wine. Or the bread.

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