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A Sit Down with Chile's Los Maquis

The winery chooses to pick early, rather than late  
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Ricardo Rivadeneira's Los Maquis winery is located in Chile's warm Colchagua Valley, where wineries like Viña Montes, Casa Lapostolle, MontGras and Viñedos Emiliana are producing ripe, black fruit-filled reds made from grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère and Syrah. But Los Maquis only shares a proximity to those wineries, rather than a winemaking philosophy or style. I sat down with Rivadeneira and his consulting viticulturist Xavier Choné to talk about that difference.

Like the other top Colchagua-based wineries, Los Maquis produces red wines. The winery's value-priced (\$13) Calcu bottling is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère, Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot, while its \$19 Lien bottling is made from Syrah, Carmenère, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Malbec. It's the Cabernet Franc portion that sets the wines of Los Maquis apart from its neighbors, however.

Los Maquis has 40 hectares of Cabernet Franc vines, a total that Rivadeneira thinks is easily the most of any winery in Chile. Initially the grapes were sold off in bulk, but after connecting with Choné a few years ago, they began to change the approach in the vineyard. By reducing irrigation and adding cover crops, they reduced the vigor

of the Cabernet Franc vines and eventually brought the quality level of it up so it could be included with the estate wines (reduced vigor in the vine results in reduced yields at harvesttime, which results in better concentration and depth to the fruit itself).

"Vine vigor is more important because that controls tannins more than just ripeness," said Choné, 39, who also works with California's Opus One and Joseph Phelps wineries. "You can have ripe grapes but still have coarse or green tannins if vine vigor isn't managed properly."

Avoiding coarse or green notes in the wines at Los Maquis is key, since the overriding philosophy is one of picking earlier rather than later. While most Chilean wineries harvest their red varieties in April or even into May (particularly for the notoriously late-ripening Carmenère), Los Maquis finds itself picking in March. In 2009, the winery had completed its harvest by the end of that month.

"Overripe grapes taste alike," said Rivadeneira about his decision to aim for earlier pickings. "Overripe Cabernet Sauvignon tastes like overripe Carmenère. You lose the expression of place and individuality. We want to pick when the grapes have the most character. There are risks of course, but that is what we prefer."

The risk is picking grapes that display the green, sometimes harsh flavors that many consumers are not fans of. It's a risk similar to but at the opposite end of picking overripe grapes and then producing a jammy, soft wine without focus. But more wineries can get away with

waiting to pick than can with picking earlier since soft, jammy wines still find acceptance in the marketplace while harsh, herbal reds tend to be a very tough sell.

“It is possible to make great wines without picking late,” said Choné. “I should say we are picking ‘ripe’ though, rather than picking ‘early,’ because I think most people are picking overripe grapes.”

Reviews on the 2006 Lien and 2007 Calcu bottlings from Los Maquis will appear in the near future.

In addition to the Los Maquis property in Colchagua, Rivadeneira and Choné have also been among the handful of vintners developing vineyards in Marchigüe (Viña Montes and Agrícola La Viña, among others), an area located at the far western end of Colchagua, where the cool, coastal influence holds sway. Plantings began in 2005 and a little 2007 Syrah was the first harvest.

The first commercial release for wines from the property will be from the 2008 vintage, though no name has been selected. A barrel sample of the 2008 Carmenère from the Marchigüe property showed a lovely silky feel, with good buried acidity and bright violet, plum and white pepper notes, clearly in the more elegant camp, though still with good fruit and vibrancy.

An additional spot near Valparaiso has also been earmarked for vines, though the area is so undeveloped there were no weather stations there initially. Rivadeneira and Choné had to install their own and have been waiting an extra year to accumulate weather data before starting to plant, though they’ll likely aim for Pinot Noir.

“It’s an area at 500 meters of elevation but just 3 kilometers from the coast, so a rare combination of altitude and proximity to the coast,” said Rivadeneira.

“It’s really at the limit of ripening,” said Choné.

Pushing the limits, in either direction of ripeness, adds diversity to the wine world, regardless of which side of the spectrum you personally prefer.

It will be interesting to watch if Rivadeneira and Choné can pull it off by going in the direction of early picking, rather than late.

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