



Feature Interview – Patrick Valette

1. Why would you leave France for the struggle and poor current reputation for Chile has to offer as a category? What can you and your reputation do to change this around and are you committed permanently to achieving this?

First of all, I do not think that Chilean wines have a poor reputation. On the contrary, all Chile needs is more positive history on their wine, which will give them a reputation on quality. A better collective organization of all bodegas working together on the country's image as a wine producer (like Australia did 15 years ago), focusing on the quality first.

There is a great potential with the Chilean terroirs – First, we have to accept to make quality efforts (which means more financial investments) in order to offer the best wines, with a constant quality, to consumers.

I came to Chile after living 40 years in France, to participate actively to the elevation of the wines I produce with the experience I have gained in over twenty-five years of winemaking.

2. Of your Chilean projects - which in your eye will have the best success long term for the North American market?

In a viticultural project, there is not only the wine factor (quality, volume, image, etc.), but also the positioning of the brand and the price of the wine which are preponderant elements in the commercial result.

I think that all the wines I make are qualified to sell to American importers and appreciated by consumers. This does not mean that all wines are identical, and the difference is made at the commercial level.

The wines we are making at Chocalán correspond very well to the American taste (strong but drinkable wine, structured with exotic aromas and ripe tannins, and a great elegance at the end of the mouth).

The great quality of Chilean terroirs is that they offer a diverse selection of products, with different varieties. I consider Chocalán as being in one of those great terroirs. Our work will bring Chocalán more structured wines with well-defined tannins (which used to be a bit aggressive), always preserving the aromatic expression.

3. Is there potential for wines from Chile over \$40.00 US retail?

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Yes certainly, with a good media campaign behind the country's image, I think Chile has the terroirs to make and commercialize these wines.

4. You have had extensive experience working with the traditional Bordeaux varieties... How challenging will Syrah and Carmenère be for you?

They aren't really a challenge, since I have been working with those varieties since 2000, and I acquired my reputation in Chile mainly on Carmenère (there is Carmenère in most of the blends (Premium) I make in Chile). This does not mean it is a deliberate choice to include Carmenère in the blends I make, but I have always appreciated this variety's quality, which brings exotic aromas to the blends, with a very well-marked structure and an elegant finale in the end of the mouth. Don't forget that Carmenère comes from the Carmené family (same origin as the Cabernet Sauvignon and the Cabernet Franc). The Carmenère is closer to Cabernet Franc than to Merlot, which is not really a surprise to me.

As for Syrah, it was harder in the beginning, but now I know that variety very well, and I think the American market accepts a nice diversity of character type of different wines in which the Syrah is present. I had a long talk about Syrah with James Molesworth (Wine Spectator), and he agreed with me in the diversity of Syrah.

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Patrick Valette Interview Continued...

6. How many properties are you now consulting for in Chile?

Seven – Chocalán, Domus Aurea, J.Bouchon, Neyen, Santa Rita, Tamaya, Terramater – plus an en route project for an international group.

7. What is the future of Maipo, and what other sub-regions in the country do you see emerging to the forefront?

Maipo is and will remain the valley of high quality reputation, mainly for its Cabernet Sauvignon. The quality of its terroir, its historical reputation, its closeness to Santiago, and its economic wealth all contribute to the making of a prevailing wine valley in Chile.

But the main interest in its Chilean wines is the diversity of the wine varieties. Each valley offers different wine types, and consumers appreciate this diversity.

Chocalán has a great diversity interest within the Maipo Valley, because of its closeness to the ocean. The ocean's influence creates advantageous effects for the ripeness of Chocalán's fruits. We have produced this year beautiful Pinot Noirs, excellent Cabernet Sauvignons, fine Merlots, very expressive Syrahs and exotic Carmenères.

8. Argentina is doing terrific with Malbec. Can Carmenère ever achieve this "fame" on its own? What will it take for this to happen?

The Malbec is a varietal which can be produced and commercialized alone. It is a varietal close to Merlot (conceptually speaking), with a weak structure, present but not strong tannins. It is a varietal offering easy to drink wines, which sometimes miss elegance.

As for Carmenère, it generally has to be blended because it sometimes has no structure in the end of the mouth. Blending it with Cabernet Sauvignon makes it more charming, with a more dynamic structure in the middle mouth.

The Malbec reputation is a good thing for Argentina, but I think the main varietal in Chile is the Cabernet Sauvignon. Everyone wishes for Carmenère to be Chile's flagship, me before anyone else, but we have to be realistic, and the varietal that best defends Chilean wines' reputation is and will always be the Cabernet Sauvignon.

Argentina has principally only one varietal, while Chile offers an important diversity of varieties. Chile has based its reputation on Cabernet Sauvignon, and it is difficult to modify this stability, because a lot of years are necessary to build varieties' reputation.

The Carmenère is a standard bearer for Chile, because not many countries produce this varietal, and its rarity creates its fame.

9. What is your goal having relocated to Chile – now, 5 years?

I started to travel to South America in 1999 in Uruguay, to produce a wine called Filgueira (that I left in 2005), and I naturally I came back to Chile to keep working on the El Principal project my father started in 1998. After he died, I continued this project and I gained a very nice reputation which allowed me to produce more wines, and step by step my consulting firm expanded.

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Because of these demands for my consultancy work, I chose to relocate to Chile with my family to develop my company in South America. I might return to France one day, where I kept my wine property in Bordeaux (where I produce an excellent 100% Merlot wine, acknowledged by Jancis Robinson as Wine of the Week in 2004).

The fact that I accepted contracts with Chocalán and Santa Rita has made my relocation to Chile for at least a few years, to give us time to correctly set up the viticultural concept. At this point, we do not know how long we will stay in Chile.

10. What are your thoughts on the new Melapia property and varieties of Chocalán? What price range do you foresee the white wines at?

I have a lot of hope in this property, and think we will obtain very nice wines from this terroir. As per the price range, it is (according to my humble opinion) a little too soon to talk about it before the wine is made. We will work perfectly on the grapes quality to get the best answer, and then evaluate its potential. But from the neighbours' results, I think we have a beautiful card to play with.

11. What makes Chocalán special?

Its geographical situation, the quality of its terroir, the quality of its wines, the concept encouraged by Aída Toro. Aída is making great efforts to position her wines well, and I think the results are improving vintage after vintage. We are refining the quality, and in less than a year, we will be ready to offer you a new version of these wines, which I am sure, will surprise you.

12. Who are the rest of your team in Chile and what makes them an essential part of your work?

Here in Chile, I work with Gonzague de Lambert (son of Château de Sales' owner in Pomerol) and in France with Thomas Le Grix de la Salle (son of Château le Grand Verdus' owner in Bordeaux).

You notice that both of them are from the wine world as owners, and this is fundamental because it gives them a better understanding of the necessities. The fact that they are younger than me helps me take my decisions, because their freshness and dynamism force us to go forward. They are passionate about our work and don't count their work hours. They are both also very good tasters.

These young professionals are always close to the oenologists, and permanently participate to the elaboration of the wines. Gonzague is in the vines all year long, which gives me time to follow-up the wines we produce.

But I take all the important decisions myself, always considering the opinion of my collaborators and each member of the team. Our work is a collaboration work between two teams, and it is important to maintain a team spirit.

