

DRINK

Kiwi adopts Chile and its wines

Thanks to a "nice Chilean girl," New Zealander Brett Jackson is settled there now. At Valdivieso, he is helping to transform the style of Chile's wines and upgrade the quality.

By Craig LaBan
INQUIRER RESTAURANT CRITIC

Brett Jackson thought Chile was going to be just another stop on his whirlwind working tour of the world's great wine regions.

He'd already spent time making wine in his native New Zealand, as well as Napa Valley, France, and South Africa's Stellenbosch. And when he landed in Chile's Curico Valley 14 years ago, he was part of a wave of foreign winemakers who arrived with ambitions to transform this promising South American country into one of the world's new wine superpowers.

"Then I met a nice Chilean girl," he said. "And now I've got two Chilean boys, and a Chilean mortgage."

Jackson now also has some serious Chilean wines to



Valdivieso, long known for its sparkling wine, is now producing some of Chile's most distinctive reds.

look after now at Valdivieso, where, as chief winemaker, he is crafting some of that country's more distinctive offerings.

He has witnessed Chilean winemaking as a whole undergo a major two-part transformation since his arrival, Jackson said. Part one was the "cleaning up" phase, he said, transforming Chile's traditionally austere European style into a more New World approach, using modern technology and techniques, "to capture the fruit."

Part two has been the ramping-up of quality, and a quest to discover what regions are best suited for different grapes, to define, in fact, what makes Chilean wines Chilean.

Like many emerging regions, Chile has gotten a foothold in the international market with quality value wines. But "we're much more now than those \$7 bottles," Jackson says.

Indeed, some of Chile's best-known wines — Almaviva, Concha y Toro's Don Melchor, the Vina Montes M, and

Casa Lapostolle's Clos Apalta — are scoring major ratings and hefty prices (from \$50 to \$100) for cabernet-blended bombs. Syrah has also shown marquee promise.

The 128-year-old Valdivieso has long been known for its sparkling wine (which at \$9.99 is still a bargain). But its relatively recent efforts with still wine under Jackson have produced some of the most distinctive reds coming from Chile, at very reasonable prices.

The single-vineyard reserve cabernet franc, for example, is a great deal at \$16.99 from a grape not usually featured as the main event. Typically a vegetal and earthy blending red, cabernet franc takes on a deeper ripeness in the Chilean sun, the grape's trademark raw bell-pepper flavor exuding more roasted red sweetness, wrapped in the savory finish of oil-cured olives. It's no wonder sommelier Eric Simonis at Lacroix at the Rittenhouse (where I first tasted it, and where it is now steeply marked up to \$68) is one of this winery's biggest local advocates.

I'm most excited, though, by the very original Caballo Loco, at the top of Valdivieso's range (\$33.99). The Bordeaux blend — cabernet, malbec, merlot, cabernet franc and carmenere — is not unusual. But it's the only still red I've heard of to be blended "solera-style," a technique usually used with sherry, in which a portion of each new harvest is mixed and aged with a mother blend of numerous previous vintages. Each year's new edition is marked with a batch number, rather than a vintage.

The result, in soon-to-be-issued Caballo Loco Number Nine, is a deep wine that unfurls in layers of flavor, with the fresh dark plum fruit peeling back to reveal nutmeg, coffee, leather, and a puff of tobacco smoke.

It would be the perfect bottle to tame the churrasco-grilled meats at Fogo de Chao, where it's listed, with a hefty mark-up, for \$90.

Yes, today's Chilean wines have gone way beyond "those \$7 bottles." Then again, just imagine if local restaurants could resist such egregious wine-jacking. More people might be persuaded to take a taste of the good stuff, and discover exactly why Brett Jackson's whirlwind tour landed him someplace well worth staying in.

In selected Pennsylvania state wine stores, Valdivieso's Single Vineyard Cabernet Franc Reserve 2003 costs \$16.99 and Caballo Loco Number Eight (most recent release available) costs \$33.99.

ERIC MENCHER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Brett Jackson, Valdivieso's chief winemaker, holds one of the Chilean vintner's cabernet francs (left) and a Caballo Loco.

