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The Taste of the Americas trio from left to right: Mark Gambacorta, Regional Sales Manager for Fetzer Vineyards; Italo Jofré, Fine Wine Export Manager for Viña Concha y Toro, and SOMM Journal Global Wine Editor Deborah Parker Wong, DWSET.

TOUR OF THE **AMERICAS**

*EXPLORING NORTH
AND SOUTH AMERICAN
TERROIRS*

BY DEBORAH PARKER WONG / PHOTOS BY REBECCA PEPLINSKI

here's a yin and yang to winegrowing in the Americas: As the vines in North America are stirring to life, the vineyards in South America are ready for harvest. As much as Chile and neighboring Argentina have in common with California—namely international grape varieties, abundant sunshine, and, oftentimes, similar aspects of terroir—those similarities serve as a point of departure for differentiating the quality and style of New World wines.

To that effect, a stage was recently set at The Grill on the Alley in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood for a friendly competition between hemispheres. Joining me for a comparative tasting that spanned the depth and breadth of Viña Concha y Toro's North and South American portfolios were Italo Jofré, the company's charismatic Santiago-based fine wine export manager, and a group of Chicago's leading sommeliers and retailers.

Our first flight deconstructed the terroirs of two Chardonnays poured alongside appetizers and a classic Caesar salad. After segueing into an in-depth look at two Pinot Noirs, the tasting then progressed through five monovarietal wines and Bordeaux blends paired with pan-seared salmon, chicken piccata, and composed steak salad.

A TALE OF TWO CHARDONNAYS

Just 14 miles from the Pacific coastline, the Quebrada Seca Vineyard in the Limarí region lies in what's known as Chile's *costa* (coastal) terroir on the western edge of the Atacama Desert. "This desert is the driest place on the planet," Jofré said as he explained the factors of terroir behind the Marqués de Casa Concha 2016 Chardonnay (\$22). "The unique limestone soils of Limarí protect the acidity in the grapes, resulting in very fresh wines."

Given the arid nature of this cool coastal region, the limestone-rich clay soils also help retain water for the Mendoza-clone Chardonnay vines planted on the north bank of the Limarí River. Viña Concha y Toro Technical Director Marcelo Papa presses whole clusters and sends just 5 percent of the wine through malolactic fermentation before it spends 12 months in neutral barrels.

"The bright fruit of this Chardonnay took us by surprise," said Nancy Sabatini, Director of Wine Education and Sales for Mainstreet Wines & Spirits just outside Chicago. "There was consensus around the table that it was more Burgundian in style, with freshness and vibrant flavors of green apple and ripe lemon."

Limarí has now become Chile's go-to terroir for Chardonnay, with its riper styles readily compared to those from Northern California sites near the Russian River. In Mendocino's Sanel Valley, a narrow, 5-mile-long valley that formed as a flood plain of the Russian River, Bonterra's single-vineyard The Roost 2016 Chardonnay (\$45) is sourced from the Biodynamic Blue Heron Ranch

Viña Concha y Toro's iconic Don Melchor and Trivento Eolo Malbec.



vineyard. Located between the Russian River and a Blue Heron nature preserve, the vineyard lies 50 miles from the coast and sees a significant diurnal swing of as much as 50 degrees during the growing season. Dijon and Wente Chardonnay clones are planted to alluvial Riverine soils and the Hopland series of sandy loam over Franciscan bedrock of sandstone and shale.

Bonterra Winemaker Jeff Cichocki uses a gentle hand with the refined The Roost Chardonnay, which was first released in 2001. Crafted from 80 percent free-run juice, 70 percent of which underwent malolactic fermentation, The Roost sees 30 percent new French oak for 18 months and shows golden apple, lemon crème, and secondary notes of fragrant baking spice.

DIALING IN PINOT NOIR

The cool nights and foggy mornings of Chile's Casablanca Valley, also a *costa* terroir, are ideal for Pinot Noir. The lion's share of the Cono Sur 2016 Ocio Pinot Noir (\$75) is sourced from the red clay and sandy granitic soils of El Triangulo Estate, with the remainder of the fruit hailing from nearby San Juan de Huinca in Leyda. Eighty percent of the wine sees an assortment of new and used French oak, with 20 percent aging more aerobically in large-format foudres. Cono Sur Winemaker Matías Ríos has dialed in the aromas and flavors of this region for a wine that shows meaty tobacco notes, complex red fruits, and harmonious oak elements.

"Our customers gravitate to Chilean Pinot Noirs, which are delicious and come from distinctive terroirs," Sabatini said, adding

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that she sees this wine as one tailored for the American palate. According to Alan Blum, Wine Buyer and Cellar Manager for Sandburg Wine Cellar at Potash Markets, “Cono Sur Ocio occupies a middle ground between leaner, almost austere Burgundies and boldly fruit-forward California styles.” “It’s wine that tastes of place,” he added.

In North America, Fetzer Vineyards Vice President of Winemaking Bob Blue crafts the Beckon 2016 Reserve Pinot Noir (\$50) from one of Santa Maria Valley’s most renowned sites, Bien Nacido Vineyards. Pommard, Martini, Swan, Mount Eden, and a handful of Dijon Pinot Noir clones are planted to low-vigor Elder shale and Pleasanton loam soils on the property, which lies 17 miles inland from the Pacific coast at the foot of the Sierra Madre mountain chain. This particularly cool site relies on a slight elevation and north-south row orientation for optimal ripeness.

Blue, who marks his 31st vintage with Fetzer Vineyards this year, cold-soaks destemmed berries for several days and ferments in open-topped oak vats. The wine spends 11 months in 100 percent French oak. In terms of quality, Beckon Bien Nacido Pinot Noir demonstrates a hallmark coastal-region style from a proven site.

REIGN OF THE BORDEAUX VARIETIES

In Mendocino, Bordeaux varieties perform exceptionally well on alluvial fans that lie over the sedimentary seabed of Bonterra Organic Vineyards’ 141-acre McNab Ranch. (The property is named for McNab Creek, which flows eastward through a confined box canyon to meet the Russian River.)

The single-vineyard McNab 2014 (\$55) is a Cabernet Sauvignon—dominant blend of varieties including Merlot, Petite Syrah, Malbec, and Cabernet Franc that showcases the terroir of this Biodynamic site, planted by Jim Fetzer in 2001. The wine sees



Benson Zak, Wine Director at The Capital Grill, compares vintages of Don Melchor.



Certified Sommelier Christopher D. Harris and Kinzie Chop House owner Susan Frasca (in background) assess The McNab.

24 months in a variety of 90 percent new oak and achieves a seamless integration of fruit, tannin, and acidity. “These wines are being built from the ground up,” Blum said. “Mendocino is an up-and-coming region that’s been working its vines and wines for

some time now. It’s good to see the region is finally being recognized for it.”

Fetzer Vineyards, which produces the Bonterra wines, marks its 50th anniversary this year. As an early adopter of organic and Biodynamic practices, the

winery was recognized as an industry leader in sustainability by the United Nations with the "Momentum for Change" Award in 2017. It farms more than 1,000 certified-organic acres in the Mendocino AVA, with approximately one-quarter of those vines also certified as Biodynamic.

Bonterra Winemaker Jeff Cichocki, who crafts The McNab, also selects top-performing Merlot lots from the vineyard for The Elysian Collection 2016 Merlot (\$25), produced with certified-organic grapes. Cichocki artfully blends up to 15 percent reserve wine into the new release, which sees 30 percent new oak and undergoes an oak regime featuring a mix of new and neutral barrels. The finished product shows classic, plummy varietal character with crisp and generous tannins for a veritable North American snapshot of the variety. The sheep that gazes from the wine's memorable label, meanwhile, serves as a tribute to the animals that graze the McNab vineyard during the winter months and contribute to the site's biodiversity.



Mark Gambacorta pours for Amy Mundwiler, Assistant Wine Director at Maple & Ash.

The tasting shifted southward once more to the Bordeaux variety championed in Argentina's Mendoza region: old-vine Malbec grown in Luján de Cuyo, the basis of the Trivento Eolo 2014 Reserva Malbec (\$85). "Trivento is named for the three winds that influence the vineyards there: the Polar, a cold wind from the south; the Zonda, a warming western wind sweeping down off of the Andes; and the Sudestada, or southeast blow, which brings freshness from the Atlantic and Río Plata estuary to the vineyards," said Jofré, who notes that the clay bands in the sandy loam soils help hold moisture in this dry, continental region.

The Eolo vineyard, a 10-acre parcel



Amy L. Lutchen, Wine Director at Del Frisco's, has a keen interest in red wines from both hemispheres.

planted in 1912, is fittingly named after Aeolus, the Greek god of the winds. Winemaker Victoria "Vico" Prandina cold-soaks destemmed berries for five days and utilizes a week of post-fermentation maceration to achieve the rich, dark color of the finished wine, which spends 18 months in 70 percent new French oak. Sabatini highlights complexity from old vines and the wine's additional bottle age as factors that allow it to develop its nuance and impressive mineral-focused character.

Focus then transitioned to the final pair of wines, both Cabernet Sauvignon. Winemaker Sebastian Donoso sources the variety from one of Napa Valley's widest and warmest points, the Rutherford AVA, for the Sanctuary 2015 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40). He blends two very different blocks in the Beckstoffer Melrose vineyard: one planted to Clone 337 that gives him darker fruit and the fine, powdery tannins known as "Rutherford Dust;" and a second to Clone 4, which possesses the subtle pyrazines beloved in Napa wines. "Sanctuary is proving to be a classic expression of Rutherford's terroir," Donoso said of the wine, which spends up to 20 days on the skins and 15 months in 80 percent new French oak.

Viña Concha y Toro's iconic 2014 Cabernet Sauvignon Don Melchor (\$120) hails



Viña Concha y Toro's Italo Jofré brought his firsthand knowledge of Chilean terroir to the tasting.

from the Don Melchor Vineyard in Alta Maipo Valley, located just outside Santiago. Named for founder Don Melchor Concha y Toro, who first planted vines from Bordeaux in the Maipo Valley in 1883, the first vintage of Don Melchor wasn't made until more than a century later in 1987. At over 2,100 feet in elevation, the vineyard was planted to the coldest site in the valley on a gravelly alluvial terrace and spans 320 acres. Ninety percent of it is planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, which is supplemented by small amounts of Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Petit Verdot.

For the 2014 vintage, Winemaker Enrique Tirado blended 92 percent Cabernet Sauvignon with 8 percent Cabernet Franc and held the wine on the skins for 20 days. Aged for 15 months in 65 percent new French oak, the finished wine is refined and complex with a lengthy, powerful finish. "Don Melchor is the most Bordeaux-like of any Chilean wine on the market," Blum explained. "Despite the French influence, it doesn't taste like Bordeaux or California. It's distinctly Chilean."

"This extraordinary vineyard has produced Chile's top Cabernet Sauvignon since the first vintage of Don Melchor released," Jofré added. Given its impressive track record, there's little doubt it will continue to do so. **SJ**