



COUSIÑO -MACUL'S MASSAL SELECTION PROGRAM

At Cousiño-Macul, “terroir” has a very special meaning. The Cousiños have always selected and propagated their own vines by the French technique of “selection massale” (massal selection), rather than by using clones. Arturo Cousiño, President of Cousiño-Macul explains, “Clones, while technically useful and easier to manage, would do away with the unique qualities of our wines which have made them successful for almost 150 years.”

Massal selection is a kind of “survival of the fittest” for vines where cuttings from only the best vines are propagated in the Cousiño’s own nursery. This program requires meticulous field selections and takes decades to perfect. In France, many Burgundy houses are going back to this technique as they have learned that through clonal selection, wines lose their identity. “Although labour-intensive, time-consuming and expensive, massal selection was the logical choice for us in order to produce high-quality wines that are distinctively our own,” adds Cousiño.

Massal selection differs from clonal selection in several important ways. A clone is a vine propagated from one single vine, a mother vine, and each plant is identical in DNA and uniform in personality. Massal selection involves choosing a number of outstanding vines from a vineyard and then propagating new vines from their budwood. This selection process continues from one generation to the next. What results are vines from the same family, with the same genes, but the individual plants are not identical.

Jorge Figueroa, Cousiño-Macul’s viticultural manager, oversees the massal selection program at the nursery which contain over 500,000 vine stocks. Figueroa explains that the process begins with singling out and marking with a white stripe vines which, from year to year, consistently yield the most flavourful and balanced fruit. During the pruning season, budwood is taken from these vines, with each containing 6 or 7 buds. The wood is bundled into groups of 200 which is a convenient size to handle. Sand is added for drainage and the bundle is then buried. After 2 or 3 months each of the stocks begins to develop a root system. Soon after, they are unearthed and planted in the nursery. The vines are planted directly into the soil since there is no need to graft each onto rootstocks. By the following spring, most vines have developed a healthy leaf system. Any that are less successful are removed. When it is time to plant the vines in the vineyard, they are uprooted along with the soil by a special machine that protects their roots.

Winemaker Matias Rivera adds, “For our Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon cuttings, we choose vines that give us smaller clusters and berries, more resembling those in Bordeaux than the New World. We prefer these small clusters because they produce fruit that ripens evenly within each cluster.” It all comes down to quality. Small berries deliver concentrated flavours as the favourable skin to juice ratio provides desirable flavour anthocyanins.”

As one of the few remaining independently-owned wineries on the international scene, Cousiño-Macul’s goal is to make world-class wines, not wine in the so-called “global style.” The winery’s President, Arturo Cousiño says, “Our objective is to offer high quality wines that are authentically Chilean, wines that have true varietal character and express our unique terroir. At the same time, we are taking advantage of the latest technology in viticulture and winemaking.”

Cousiño’s Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot vines are direct descendants from cuttings imported in 1863 from Bordeaux before phylloxera. Chardonnay cuttings were imported from Burgundy a few years later. Established in Maipo Valley for over a century, these vines which grow on their own root systems have adapted to the Maipo climate and soil. This heritage which has been preserved through massal selection makes Cousiño-Macul wines truly distinctive with a character all their own.

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