



The Maipo Valley 2005 Harvest: LATE BUT WELL WORTH THE WAIT

“It was an agonizing, slow to ripen and late to mature vintage, but 2005 has shaped up to be an excellent year here in Chile.” The key this year for the Maipo Valley,” continued Arturo Cousino, President of Cousino-Macul, “was the dry, mild harvest weather that stayed with us until the end of April when the last Cabernet Sauvignon cluster was picked.”

With the Merlots and Cabernets safely fermenting, the winemaker team at Cousino-Macul is thrilled by the quality. According to Matias Rivera, Head Winemaker, “The cool and prolonged growing season gave us white varieties with freshness, true character and underlying minerality. The typically low pH’s of the fruit provide brightness and backbone.” The average Brix at harvest for Cousino-Macul’s Chardonnay was 24%, and the pH was 3.35. Rivera added, “This year gave us the finest Chardonnay in my experience. The components for our Antiguas Reservas Chardonnay which are in barrel are spectacular.”

As for Maipo Valley reds, Rivera points to the slow, incremental development of the fruit as the reason behind the excellent balance between sugar content and phenolic maturity. From the Maipo Valley where Cabernet Sauvignon dominates, the consumer can look forward to exciting Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. The low yields (down by at least 10%) contributed concentrated Cabernet flavours which bode well for intense yet elegantly structured red wines.

It began as a normal year in the Maipo Valley. The winter was typical with rainfall levels of 367 mm at Macul and 453 mm at Buin. Budbreak was on schedule and conditions remained favourable during bloom and fruit set for the white varieties and also for Merlot. However, it began to rain just when Cabernet Sauvignon was entering bloom. As a result, the Cabernet vines set a small, but healthy crop.

The growing season began with a slightly cool spring with no frost problems and it continued into a mild summer. The fruit maturity lagged behind until the last two weeks of February brought timely warm temperatures. This warm weather prevailed over the next two weeks allowing the white varieties, Sauvignon and Chardonnay, to get back on track and eventually reach full maturity.

Overall, 2005 was a late and slow to ripen vintage for every variety. The two Sauvignons grown at Cousino-Macul, Blanc and Gris, and Chardonnay were picked 10-14 days late. Merlot and Cabernet came in at least one week behind normal. Fortunately, all varieties ripened in their normal sequence allowing the harvesting to be conducted at a normal pace.

The harvest weather can be dicey if the harvest stretches out. But luckily, there was only one day of moderate rainfall on March 11th. All of the Chardonnay and most whites had been harvested before that rain. Afterwards, the weather pattern was warm with breezy days and cool nights. Cabernet Sauvignon was the last to ripen, but once maturity kicked in, the weather remained favourable and the fruit ripened evenly. The harvest crew moved fast and finished the last of the Cabernet on April 26.

Throughout the rest of Chile

Based on preliminary reports in late May from around the country, Cousino provided an overview of the vintage in other parts of the country:

“Throughout Chile the growing season was late. In the coolest regions, there was some frost damage reported in the spring. Chardonnay was harvested one to two weeks late and Sauvignon Blanc maturity ran from two to four weeks behind normal. Post-harvest reports indicate that the white wines are showing fruity character, and are fresh with bright fruit. Overall, the new plantings coming on line countered losses from botrytis that occurred when white varieties were not harvested before the rain of March 11th. The overall quantity of Chardonnay increased by 5% and Sauvignon had increases in the 5-10% range.

The finished red wines have been described as ranging from very good to even extraordinary quality. They have good color, good body, depth, and bright fruity character from all regions. The slow maturation, under warm summer temperatures, resulted in grapes with a very good and balanced acidity/sugar ratio, resulting in red wines with consistent fruit and with excellent phenolic maturity.

Another key factor to the overall quality of the reds was the climatic conditions that allowed the harvest to be delayed resulted in greater concentration and balance. Quantities vary, but some regions report Merlot was down by 10-20%, and Carmenere, which generally experienced a poor set and is a late ripening variety, was off by as much as 30%. Some Carmenere and heavily cropped Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards suffered damage from the May 4th and May 9 rains. However, all told, Cabernet Sauvignon and other red varieties came in at normal yields.”

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