

THE “ALTO-MAIPO” AND “THE ANDES EFFECT”

Like the Medoc and the Napa Valley, the Maipo Valley occupies a special place in the minds of wine lovers. Like these renowned growing region, it too is home to a number of unique micro-climates and sub-regions. In the future, consumers will also become familiar with such micro-climates as the “Alto-Maipo”, as well as village appellations in and around Pirque and Buin.

Chile’s most important Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards have been planted on the eastern edge of the Maipo Valley which is closest to the Andes Mountains. This sub-region is referred to as the “Alto-Maipo”. This long but narrow sector of the Maipo Valley is protected from frost in the springtime and is fed by the first and freshest part of the Andes Mountain runoff referred to as “Aguas Primaras” or “first waters.” The water which nourishes the Alto Maipo vineyards is rich in calcium, one of the most desirable components in the soil composition of many world-famous vineyards.

The most advantageous feature of the Alto-Maipo is the climate. Being cradled between the omnipresent and tempering Andes and the undulating Coastal Range to the west, the Alto-Maipo enjoys cool mountain air which makes its way down from the high peaks during the evening and the early morning hours to refresh the vines.

The unique geographic consequences of the close proximity to the Andes are referred to as the “Andes Effect”. The Andes Effect determines the climate, water, and soil of the Alto-Maipo. Some of the finest wines produced in Chile come from vineyards in this microclimate and deserve to be distinguished in a class of their own.

THE CLIMATE

Daily temperatures during the Alto-Maipo’s growing season enjoy typical highs around 85-95F with evening readings dropping to 50-55 degrees. This wide swing in daily temperature is ideal for ripening classic wine varieties. The cool evenings allow the vine to slow down and recover which encourages incremental fruit maturation. Cool evenings also enable grapes to retain high natural fruit acid levels right up to the harvest.

WATER AND SOIL

The geography of the Maipo Valley has been created and defined over centuries by the activities of the Maipo River. The waters of the Maipo River and its tributaries originate in the Andes heights and progress east to west as they meander toward the Pacific Ocean.

The commonly used division of the Maipo Valley into Alto, Medio and Bajo was adopted to describe the different points where the water from the river Maipo is drawn and channelled towards the different parts of the valley. Generally one large watershed area, the Maipo Valley’s terrain slopes gently with a few knolls and hillsides scattered throughout the area.

Sites closer to the river in the Alto-Maipo have extremely rocky, well-drained soils which are relatively infertile. Infertile soil forces each vine to develop a strong root system to obtain nutrients. Vines on well-drained rocky soils will also be forced to struggle and work hard in the summer months to obtain water from far below the surface. The combination of infertile and well-drained soils contributes to vine stress which curtails vine vigour. In Chile where there is ample sunshine during the season to promote vine growth, stressing the vines

prevents them from over-producing and encourages smaller berries and clusters which translates into more concentrated flavour components.

In the Spring as the snow melts in the Andes, the Maipo River fills and makes its way over rocks and gypsum becoming rich in calcium. This calcium-rich water that eventually feeds the vineyards is ideal for growing high quality wine grapes. Calcium is the mineral found in the soils of most the world's finest vineyard regions, such as the Medoc, Burgundy, and Champagne.

THE WINES

Cousiño-Macul has always been known for its fine, classically structured Cabernet Sauvignon. And historically, the Alto-Maipo Valley has been singled out as the prime region for Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon. The climate of the Alto-Maipo encourages slow, incremental sugar development which contributes to colour intensity, aroma profiles, excellent retention of natural fruit acidity and ripe tannin. This variety develops deep ruby-magenta colour and displays a distinct character. Critics describe this special character of Cabernet Sauvignon as amiable and complex. The aromas are a mélange of ripe black fruits-- blackberry, black cherry black currants-- and spice-laden fragrances.

Similarly, Alto-Maipo Merlot benefits from the Alto-Maipo Climate and soil and offers aromas of red cherry, plum, and spice along with its smooth, voluptuous texture.

For the white wines, the daily high and low temperature swings of the Alto-Maipo mean that grapes preserve unusually crisp acidity when fully mature. The climate and calcium-rich water that feeds the vineyards is ideal for Chardonnay and Sauvignons which are naturally full-flavoured, complex, and structurally balanced. The cooling effect of the Andes is also perfect for Cousiño's Riesling as the grapes can ripen and still retain the bright and zesty flavours of this variety.

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