



Producer profile

Vik

Started from scratch less than a decade ago in a remote valley to the south of the Chilean capital, this ultra-modern estate was born of the vision of an entrepreneur from Norway. Michael Apstein charts the development of its singular wine, a blend that brings together Bordeaux know-how with essential Chilean character

DOES THE WORLD need another £65 bottle of Chilean wine? Your initial reaction is probably no, but it's possible you haven't tasted the 2011 vintage from Viña Vik. This is an extraordinary wine, made by an extraordinary team, led by Patrick Valette who, though clearly pleased with the result, takes little credit for it. He explains that it's the two years of searching for a site that lies behind this wine's combination of elegance and power.

The story behind Viña Vik is, first and foremost, a focus on place. In the 1990s, Carrie and Alexander Vik were, like so many people at that time, becoming infatuated with wine. They took trips to wine regions and attended wine dinners. On a trip to St-Emilion in 1997 Alex, a marathoner, was running through vineyards and noting the subtle differences among them – slightly different

Vik at a glance

Established 2006

Location Millahue Valley, Chile, 160km south of Santiago

Vineyards 400ha

Production 30,000 bottles (2011) of one wine – a blend of red Bordeaux varieties plus Syrah

Owners Carrie and Alexander Vik
CEO and winemaker Patrick Valette

Above: the winery buildings at Viña Vik were designed by Chilean architect Smiljan Radić

exposures, soils, even temperatures. It reinforced in his mind the critical importance of terroir – the driving force for the Viks in their challenge to make a great wine.

There are only two ways to obtain a special site: you either buy into well-established areas such as Burgundy, Bordeaux, Napa or Barolo; or you can hope to find an undiscovered one.

For the Viks, the search was on. Even if land had been available in established appellations, that was out of the financial question for a start-up. So in 2004 they assembled a team of geologists, climatologists and oenologists and started looking elsewhere for an undiscovered, unique terroir. They were familiar with South America – both were fluent in Spanish and



Photograph: Fernanda Claro

'Valette was struck by the presence of daily cooling breezes, the maritime influences reminiscent of Bordeaux, and the proximity to the Andes mountains'

The commercial director of the Viña Vik team, Gonzague de Lambert, also has Bordeaux in his blood: his father is owner of high-quality Pomerol estate Château de Sales.

Virgin territory

Valette's Chilean experience – he made wine and consulted for some of the leaders in the Chilean wine industry, including Viña Neyen de Apalta, Viña Santa Rita, Viña Quebrada de Macul, TerraMater and Viñedos J Bouchon – was invaluable, giving him an intimate knowledge of Chilean wine topography.

After searching for two years, the Vik team found an unplanted wilderness tract of 4,500ha (hectares) in Millahue Valley, about 160km south of Santiago, close to the Apalta Valley winegrowing area. With no roads on the property, they were forced to tour it on horseback. Valette was particularly impressed by the balance of vegetation they found there, and the Vik team then drilled 4,000 test holes to analyse the soil. They came away convinced that a horseshoe-shaped piece of land with a lake in the centre, 65km east of the ocean and an equal distance from the Andes, with its multiple exposures, was ideal for vines.

For his part, Valette was struck by the presence of daily cooling breezes – the maritime influences reminiscent of Bordeaux – and the proximity to the Andes mountains, which keeps night-time temperatures low, allows grapes to retain acidity and imparts vibrancy and freshness to the wine.

Despite working in what must be one of the most dramatic and beautiful wineries in the world, Valette barely makes mention of it. Instead, he waxes lyrical about the vineyards and viticulture: how they planted in a way designed to prevent the berries from being burned by the sun, and how he preferred grafted vines, even though Chile is one of the few places in the world to be free of phylloxera – he thinks they help in terms of water management. And how they match the vines – Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenere, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Syrah – to the multitude ➤

Above: Patrick Valette has previously made wine in Bordeaux and for other major producers in Chile

Left: a lake sits at the heart of the horseshoe-shaped parcel of land on which Viña Vik's vineyards are planted



they already owned properties in Uruguay – so off they went to Chile, Argentina and Uruguay.

They recruited Patrick Valette, a Frenchman from a renowned winemaking family, to help find a site. Valette was a perfect fit; in addition to having worked in Bordeaux, he was born in Chile and grew to know its viticultural landscape well. His introduction to wine came from his grandfather, Alexandre, who had been a major négociant buying Bordeaux wines since the early 20th century. When premier grand cru classé property Château Pavie in St-Emilion came up for sale in 1943, Alexandre snapped it up. It wasn't an ideal time to be buying property in France, but since he had been buying Pavie's wine for decades as a négociant, he knew its quality and couldn't resist.

Patrick lived at Pavie with his brothers and sisters after their father, Jean-Paul, took over the winemaking in 1967. In addition to what he had learned growing up at Pavie, Patrick had first-hand experience in St-Emilion where he was responsible for the giant leap in quality in the wines of Château Berliquet, a previously underperforming grand cru classé property.



of microclimates across their 400ha. Like many top-end Bordeaux properties, Vik has divided its vineyard into scores of different blocks, each of which it vinifies separately in custom-sized vats. This parcelisation allows the winemakers to study what Valette calls 'micro-terroir', to see how the character of the grapes changes over the years as the vines mature, and helps them to tweak the blend.

Valette explained the subtle differences in plots due to composition of soil, its humidity, temperature and even microbial activity, as well as the varying altitudes (from 215m to 300m above sea level), all of which influenced what and where he planted. 'We planted Merlot only where the soil contains at least 25% clay, because it needs the humidity.'

Above: located in the Millahue Valley, close to Apalta, the vineyards at Vik are divided into many individual blocks

Strict selection

For now, Vik produces just a single wine, using red Bordeaux varieties plus Syrah (*see opposite*). Valette believes Cabernet Sauvignon provides the 'iron skeleton', while Carmenere adds structure, but he cautions that using too much can make the wine green. Having grown up in St-Emilion, he is very familiar with Cabernet Franc, but knows that the wrong amount also detracts from elegance because of its potential for 'angular tannins'. He loves the roundness Merlot brings to the wine and looks for the peppery (not meaty) aspect of Syrah as an 'exotic touch'. They opted against Petit Verdot, because Valette believes it can be too powerful, and he wants their wines to be all about elegance. Indeed, the blend has evolved



Above: Alexander Vik (third from right) and his wife Carrie with the rest of the team at Viña Vik

to reflect this focus. The conventional wisdom was that Carmenere was especially well-suited to this area, close to the Apalta Valley. But Valette now believes that their site lends a particular charm and delicacy to the Cabernet Sauvignon, which explains why the 2011 Vik – his third vintage, but the first commercially released wine – contains less than one-third Carmenere, down considerably from two-thirds in the initial vintage, along with a corresponding increase in the proportion of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Valette is especially concerned with the tannins: 'As the tannins ripen and become silky, the grapes lose a bit of fruitiness,' he says. This is a trade-off he happily accepts in Chile's warm climate. He maintains that with careful work in the vineyard they can obtain supple tannins without high sugar levels and the

resulting higher alcohol levels.

Vik produced only 30,000 bottles in 2011 because, as at top-end Bordeaux châteaux, it was subject to a severe selection, with some 70% of its grapes or wine sold off, according to Carrie Vik, and only the best lots kept for itself. As the vines mature, Vik hopes to double production, as long as it can maintain quality.

The 2011 Vik is an extraordinary wine, especially considering the young vines. It has a real Bordeaux sensibility and finesse, yet it is quintessentially Chilean. Is it the inclusion of Syrah; that only the best grapes were used; the Millahue terroir; or is it the combination of all of these? Or maybe it's true that, with careful study, you can locate undiscovered great vineyard areas. Though it's too early to tell, especially based on just one wine, Valette and his team may have done just that. **D**

A taste of Vik



Viña Vik, Cachapoal Valley, Central Valley, Chile 2011 17(90)
POA **Berry Bros & Rudd**

A harmonious blend of Cabernet Sauvignon (55%), Carmenere (29%), Cabernet Franc (7%), Merlot (5%) and Syrah (4%) delivers an engaging impact of red and black fruit aromas. With time in the glass, a plethora of herbs and other savoury notes emerge to join the primary berry fruit. The suave oak – this wine has spent nearly two years in new French barrels – is beautifully integrated. Supple, fine tannins allow immediate enjoyment, but a decade of cellaring will reap rewards. Powerful yet elegant. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p116

Michael Apstein is an awarded US-based wine writer, educator and judge

Vik: a timeline

1984-1998

Patrick Valette is partner/owner at Château Pavie in St-Emilion



Photograph: Mick Rock/Cephas



1996-2007

Valette is winemaker at Château Berliquet in St-Emilion

2000-2007

Valette is consultant to wineries throughout Chile



2004

Carrie and Alexander Vik start searching for land in South America

2006

Viña Vik established

2008

Entire harvest lost to birds in one night

2009

First vintage

2011

First commercial vintage

