

Don Melchor: 23 vintages from inception to latest release

Launched in the late 1980s, Concha y Toro's Don Melchor became Chile's first icon wine. Michael Apstein rates vintages from 2015 back to 1987

BEFORE THERE WAS Almaviva, Clos Apalta, Seña or Viñedo Chadwick, there was Don Melchor, standing alone and apart from every other Chilean wine. Named after the founder of Concha y Toro, it was the country's first 'Super-Chilean' wine. After recently tasting 23 vintages, going back to its first, the 1987, it's clear to me that Concha y Toro's vision for producing a world-class wine was correct. Don Melchor stands with the world's best Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines, Bordeaux and Napa Valley included. This tasting showed that Don Melchor, like all great wines, develops with bottle age, transforming itself from a primary fruit-driven wine to something more savoury, complex and layered.

Enrique Tirado, the winemaker, says that Don Melchor is basically an expression of Cabernet Sauvignon – the blend always contains more than 90% of that grape. Since 1999, he has used a small amount of Cabernet Franc, and in the 2015 vintage, even a small dollop of Petit Verdot. He notes that adding too much Cabernet Franc distorts Cabernet Sauvignon's signature.

All of the grapes come from a single site – the highly acclaimed gravelly, well-drained, 127ha Puente Alto vineyard in the Maipo Valley, just south of Santiago. The selection is severe. Tirado uses only 50%-70% of the fruit from that vineyard for Don Melchor. Annual production averages about 150,000 bottles.

For the tasting, Concha y Toro supplied 10 vintages. The remaining 13 came either from a friend's cellar or from my own. The style of Don Melchor has changed over the years, from one that emulated Napa Valley wines of the 1980s, to a more 'international' profile. Tirado attributes the change to better vineyard management – dividing the land into parcels, harvested and vinified separately – to capture what he calls, the 'distinctive expression' of Cabernet Sauvignon from each.

Like any top-flight red Bordeaux, Don Melchor takes two decades to reach its peak. But those who prefer youthful richness can enjoy it younger because, as the late Louis-Paul Latour advised me: 'Great wine always tastes great.' Don Melchor fits that dictum.



Above: Don Melchor 2012 is 'a tremendously engaging young wine'

Don Melchor 2015 96
92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Cabernet Franc, 1% Petit Verdot. The current release is a stunning wine. The familiar mineral and dark fruit bouquet leaps from the glass and those notes follow on the palate. Even with the Petit Verdot in the blend, the volume is lower so you hear the notes better. Similar to the 2014, but 2015 exhibits more elegance and poise. **Drink 2025-2040 Alcohol 14.3%**

Don Melchor 2014 94
92% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc. A baby, to be sure, with an explosive combination of dark fruit and minerals on the nose. On the palate, the concentrated fruit dominates, but exotic notes on the finish suggest great things will emerge over time. Refined tannins and brilliant freshness ensure balance. **Drink 2025-2040 Alc 14.5%**

Don Melchor 2012 93
£60 **Lay & Wheeler**
93% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Cabernet Franc. Another more muscular Don Melchor compared to those from a decade earlier. Its fruit-driven profile is complemented with minerals and earthiness, making for a tremendously engaging young wine. Long, fresh and refined, it should evolve well over the next decade or two. **Drink 2025-2040 Alc 14.5%**

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Don Melchor 2010 87
97% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc. The push towards a more robust style continued with the 2010. At this stage the abundant fruit swamps the minerality. **Drink 2025-2035 Alc 14.6%**

Don Melchor 2007 96
£51.54 **Castang Wines**
98% Cabernet Sauvignon, 2% Cabernet Franc. A return to elegance, with a suaveness to the concentrated flavours. Though not yet showing mature notes, the balance of dark fruit and minerals with a hint of bitterness makes it engaging. **Drink 2020-2040 Alc 14.5%**

Don Melchor 2006 87
96% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Cabernet Franc. Heat on the finish detracts from this hefty, youthful wine. Many will embrace it now for its exuberance, but at this stage it lacks complexity and elegance. **Drink 2020-2030 Alc 14%**

Don Melchor 2005 96
97% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Cabernet Franc. Tirado fine-tuned the riper style of Don Melchor even more. Youthful and powerful, for better or worse, the mintiness is gone, replaced by hints of cedar, tobacco and minerals. Long and precise, it's a very pretty, but tight, youthful wine. **Drink 2020-2035 Alc 14.5%**

Don Melchor 2003 94
95% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Cabernet Franc. Dark and powerful, like a tightly coiled spring. A dazzling array of minerals, tar and dark fruit; invigorating freshness, with refined tannins. Should evolve beautifully. **Drink 2020-2035 Alc 14.5%**

Don Melchor 2002 96
96% Cabernet Sauvignon, 4% Cabernet Franc. Superb and still youthful, but developing nicely. A Pauillac-like power paired with exquisite elegance. Those who prize fruit and muscle over maturity will love it now. But I'd leave it for another five years. **Drink 2019-2035 Alc 14%**

Don Melchor 2001 88
£108 **Hedonism**
91% Cabernet Sauvignon, 9% Cabernet Franc. The first vintage to weigh in at 14% alcohol, with 25% more oak ageing, this signals another stylistic change. Ripeness has eliminated any trace of mint or herbs,

so the dark fruit dominates. Tannins are supple. **Drink 2019-2030 Alc 14%**

Don Melchor 2000 92
£132 **Hedonism**
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Still vigorous and voluptuous. Retains charm, especially on the nose. It's ripe, yet not jammy thanks to its structure and acidity. An attractive bitterness on the finish keeps it in balance, finely honed tannins adding to its overall elegance. **Drink 2019-2030 Alc 13.6%**

Don Melchor 1999 92
93% Cabernet Sauvignon, 7% Cabernet Franc. The first vintage with Cabernet Franc is far more youthful than the 1997 or 1998. It continues the trend to minimise the mint notes. More robust than earlier vintages, but not out of balance, it delivers dark fruit accented by leafy and mineral elements. **Drink 2019-2030 Alc 13.8%**

Don Melchor 1998 95
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Another outstanding wine, this exhibits discreet minty notes that amplify the black fruit and minerality. Powerful without being brash or overdone, its elegance is striking. Refined tannins and a seemingly never-ending finish make it perfect for drinking now. **Drink 2018-2030 Alc 13.3%**

Don Melchor 1997 97
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Perhaps the result of Tirado taking the reins, the 1997 marks a stylistic turning point. A Pauillac-like tarry minerality replaces mint notes. Powerful but restrained, like a sleek racehorse waiting to sprint. A wonderful mix of tar, earth and dark fruit; polished tannins. **Drink 2018-2030 Alc 13.9%**

Don Melchor 1996 96
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. The 1996 is gorgeous now at 20 years of age. Bright, lively acidity buttresses its richness. Beautifully balanced, everything comes together without a trace of heaviness. The barest hint of eucalyptus adds intrigue. In short, it sings. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 13.3%**

Don Melchor 1995 83
97% Cabernet Sauvignon, 3% Merlot. The only vintage to include Merlot. (The 2016 will also have a tiny amount.) Shows hints of reduction, which dissipate to reveal lovely fruit, but the tannins lack the usual suaveness. **Drink 2018 Alc 13.3%**

Don Melchor 1994 95
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Despite more than two decades of age, the 1994 expands in the glass. Subtle mint and herb notes enhance the dried dark fruit flavours. Suave tannins juxtapose with mature notes and freshness to make this a joy to drink. **Drink 2018-2025 Alc 12.8%**

Don Melchor 1993 85
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Acclaimed on release, this has not developed as well as other vintages and lacks the impeccable balance of Don Melchor. The tannins are a touch green, with intruding chocolate and mint notes. **Drink 2018 Alc 12.2%**

Don Melchor 1991 94
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Fully mature without a hint of decline, this combines a lovely leafy character with berry-like fruitiness and a subtle firmness that belie its age. The wine's New World origins are shown by a touch of minty chocolate. Rich without being overdone, it's a delight to drink. **Drink 2018-2022 Alc 12.7%**

Don Melchor 1990 95
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. A lovely combination of earthy, leafy and fruity notes, both on the nose and palate, this has developed marvellously. Velvety tannins lend support and accents of mint add allure. Long, bright and still vigorous. **Drink 2018-2020 Alc 13%**

Don Melchor 1989 86
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. Similar to the 1987, this has a beguiling nose and delivers subtle eucalyptus notes. It's nevertheless a bit angular and past its prime. **Drink 2018 Alc 13.9%**

Don Melchor 1988 96
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. The second vintage of Don Melchor has developed brilliantly and is thrilling to drink at 30 years of age. Surprisingly vigorous, it delivers harmonious dried fruit and earthy flavours. A hint of mint reflects its Maipo origin. **Drink 2018-2020 Alc 13.5%**

Don Melchor 1987 88
100% Cabernet Sauvignon. The brown tones and gorgeous leafy nose testify to the maturity of this first-ever vintage. The fruit is fading, replaced by caramel notes and nutty nuances. A fading, aristocratic style. **Drink 2018 Alc 12.9%** **D**