



A Toothsome Threesome

Rick Staff
with a remit to sniff, taste,
and spit his way around Nanjing
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM
0-10 A WARNING
11-14 A Feasible Party Prop
15-17 Heartily Recommended
17-19 Exceptionally Good
20 The Apogee Of
WINE EXPRESSION

In its 19th century heyday, Chile's success as a wine grower was largely courtesy of diseases in the shape of phyloxera and downy mildew crippling the rest of the world's crops. Thereafter the great blight, things stagnated for the next 100 years, and it took a return to democracy in the early 1990's to catapult Chile towards the top table through a determination to modernise. a legacy of the golden era though, where the wine industry was owned by just 10 families, is that wine viticulture still resides in the hands of the elite, and

the natives, until very recently, not taking too much interest in their own wine with it being historically targeted for foreign consumption. Domestic apathy, however, has been bypassed in the modern era by an influx of outsiders nosing out the rich pickings, with some even setting up shop en route further catalysing the export outlook, a good chunk of which makes its way out of Chile and into China bearing the marques of Rothschild and the ubiquitous Spanish winemaker, importer, distributor Miguel Torres, among others. Chile still exports at last 70% percent of its wine production.

By far the most important red varietal in Chile is Cabernet Sauvignon, accounting for nearly a third of vines planted, though it is Carmenère which takes the mantle as Chile's "signature" grape. For many years, Carmenère remained hidden, classed as Merlot, another Bordeaux grape which still has a strong presence in Chile but retains a much stronger one in France. Carmenère though, also a French migrant truly lucked in with a passage to Chile, being a late-ripening variety and needing long periods of sunshine and dependably warm summers to thrive. The grape has largely withered in its erstwhile home, but in Chile, at its best, Carme-

nère has the plumpness and affability of Merlot along with the more herbaceous cedary notes of a good Cabernet, though it was only formally identified as distinct from Merlot as recently as 1994. It arrived in Chile like all the best travellers, incognito, and the Chileans are rightfully proud of being its saviour if only through the serendipity of a conducive climate and a bright spark from the Montpellier school of oenology.

Along with other prescient players in the wine game, I have always taken a shine to Chilean wine, finding it invariably to fall within the parameters of good to very good, and, always, great value. On which note, surely as seismic as the recent dreadful earthquake (which miraculously left the wine industry pretty much intact) is the news that supermarket juggernaut Wal Mart has somehow surpassed the value scale, even for Chile, and procured a very drinkable crop from Chile's Valle Central for just ¥39 a pop. The Cabernet hit the shelves some time ago delivering a benign, but no means bland, liquid which meanders pleasingly over the tongue with a trace of blackcurrant; a pepperoni pizza would kick it into even better shape and the recent 2013 tasting shifts it half a point north from previous incarnations (14.5 points). The Cabernet is now joined on the shelf by a Carmenère and a Merlot, both being badged "Special Selection" and both from the 2013 vintage. First up the Carmenère; this is rich, juicy and jammy with a touch of green pepper, which all left me inexplicably in want of a mince pie though, aside from that curious compulsion, the wine could accompany anything from a spaghetti bolognese through to a rare steak, and a real revelation for the price (15.5 points). Then the Merlot announced itself with the soft notes of the much vaunted plum descriptor for the grape, thus wrapping the tongue in warm flecks of supple dark fruit. This is as versatile a food wine as its colleague but could also take in a ripe brie with some panache, the wine being just a little tart at the finish (15 points). The threesome all makes for a very complete evening in for a tad over a tenner. **NW**