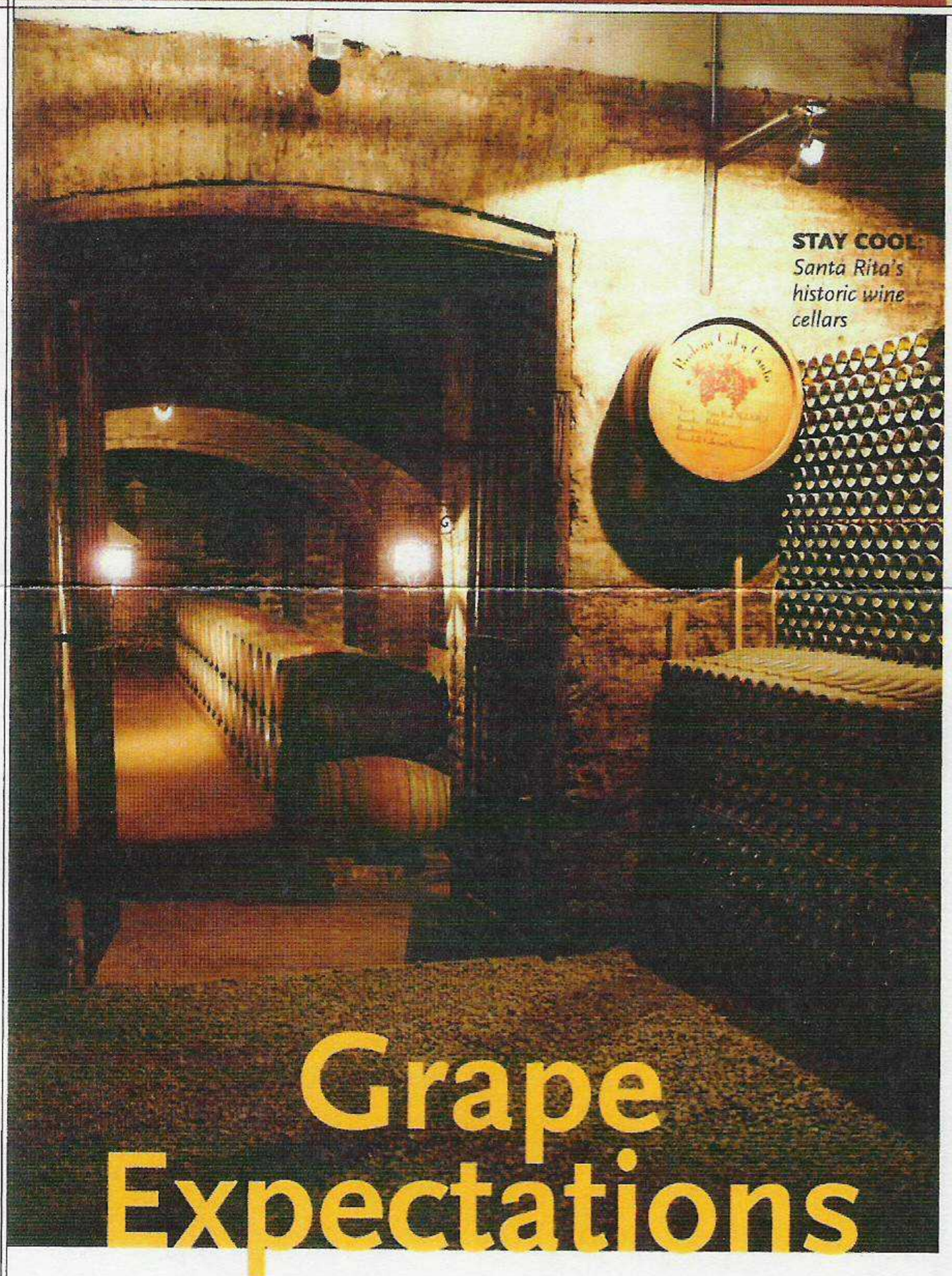


STAY COOL: *Santa Rita's historic wine cellars*

Grape Expectations

World-class vineyards enliven any visit to Chile's capital city. By Lydia Moss

SPANISH CONQUISTADORS ARrived in 16th century Chile and soon planted the first vineyards in the New World. Three centuries later, Chile introduced its first high-end vintages, but only in the past two decades has it earned a reputation as a world-class wine-producing country.

Not long ago, it would have been fruitless to tour Chile's vineyards. By 2004, though, 87 percent of the country's wine — the product of more than 100 vineyards — could be considered quality wine. Now tours and tastings at local wineries — many of which are located just outside the capital city of Santiago — are attracting wine lovers from all over the world. With the snow-capped Andes as a backdrop, it's hard to resist the urge to escape the city and head to the wineries, even if just for a few hours.

Blanketing the foothills of the Andes is the Maipo Valley, one of Chile's many fertile wine valleys, located an hour's drive southeast from the capital. Santa Rita (tel 56 2 362 2594 or 56 2 362 2590; www.santarita.com), one of Chile's oldest wineries, is situated in the village of Buin, where vintners have been producing wine from French stocks since 1880. The climate, enhanced by warm and dry summers, rain-free autumns and mild winters, makes it one of the world's prime grape-growing areas. Interestingly, Santa Rita's historic cellars, built from a mix of limestone, egg white and sand, have never needed any restoration; today they are a national landmark.

It is best to visit during summer (December through March), when the vines are laden with grapes. Picked by hand and machine, the grapes are harvested from the end of February until April. Build in enough time to stroll through the scenic vineyards before the actual tour begins. Afterward, have lunch at Santa Rita's charming restaurant, La Casa de Doña Paula. Be sure to try Chilean specialties such as the spider crab crêpes, accompanied, of course, by the winery's stellar wines — Casa Real or the Medalla Real Cabernet Sauvignon, for example. Reservations must be made for tours and lunch at Santa Rita, offered Tuesday through Sunday. Lunch (tour included) will cost about $30 per person; the tour lasts about 45 minutes and does not include a wine tasting. If your schedule allows time to visit a second vineyard, head to Concha y Toro or Cousiño Macul, both of which are in the same valley as Santa Rita.

Another option is to contact Wine Travel Chile (tel 56 2 236 9761, www.winetravelchile.com), which offers an array of personalized wine tours throughout Chile and Argentina. If you have a full day to spare, plan a visit to the Casablanca Valley. Known for its white wines, the valley is about 1 ½ hours from Santiago. The tour (two-person minimum for private tours) includes lunch in the port city of Valparaiso or in the toney beach resort of Viña del Mar, plus a visit to the home-cum-museum of famed Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

Back in Santiago, the place to bone up further on your Chilean wines is the Ritz-Carlton's Wine 365 (one for each day of the year) bar, where you may request that knowledgeable sommelier Hector Riquelme prepare a tasting.