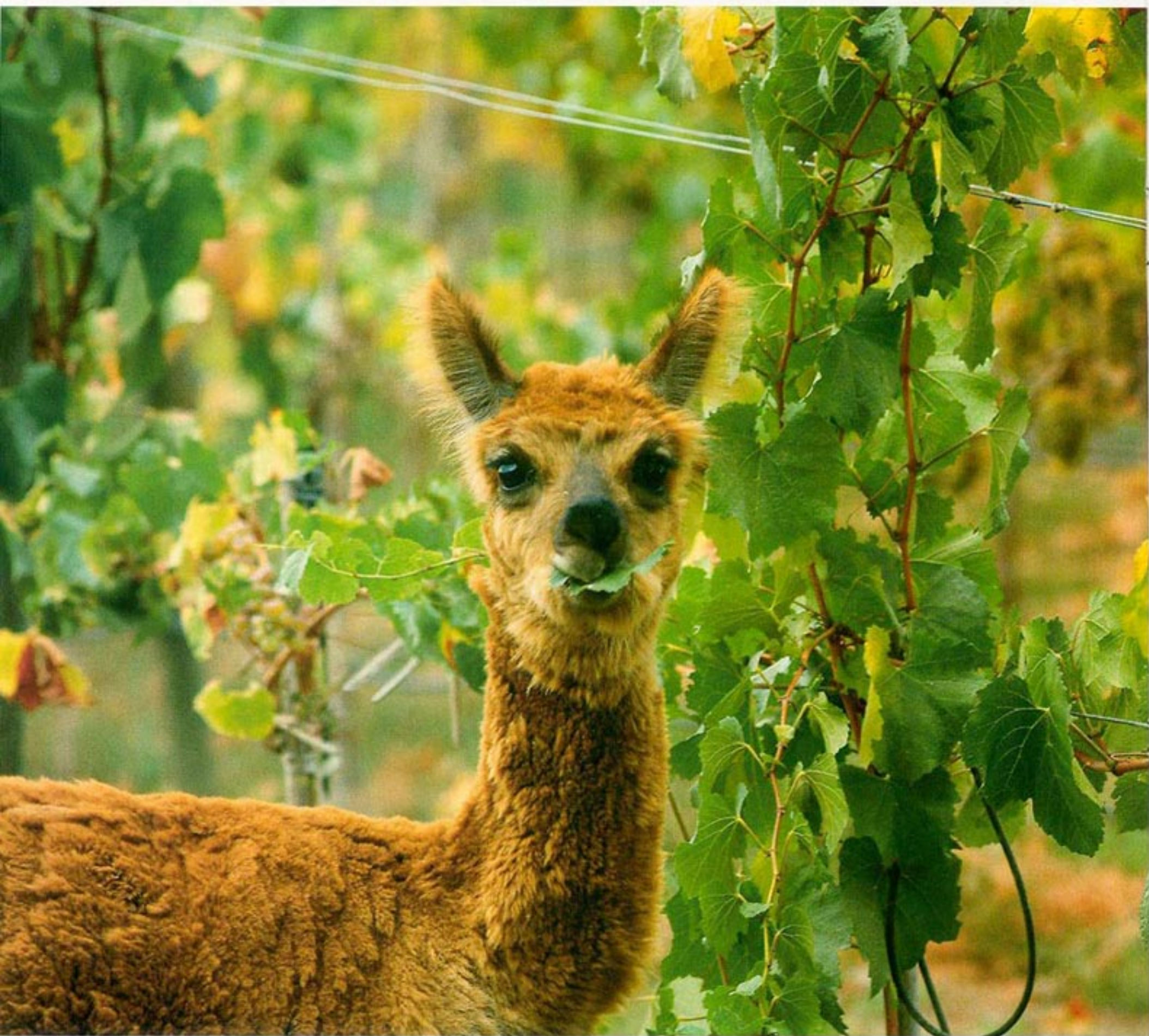


# CHILE 2006

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# CHILE? ALPACA SUITCASE

As more wineries add luxury rooms and gourmet restaurants to their tour-and-tastings, Chile is establishing itself as a major wine tourist destination. FIONA SIMS pays a visit

**T**HE CHANGES IN Chile are obvious the moment you land in Santiago. The airport has had a slick makeover, as has the road into the capital. Gone are the potholes and lefthand turns on the fast lane (I kid you not). In their place are newly tarmacked roads and clear signage, leading the way to a city in which restaurants, hotels and boutiques are opening seemingly every day.

Chile is revelling in its strong, growing economy and new, female president. The country has become a benchmark for other South American countries (I clocked dozens of Brazilian tourists on a recent visit) and the wine industry is playing a big part.

For starters, we're drinking more Chilean wine than ever before. Couple that with our desire to visit the country and it's no surprise that wine tourism is taking off – albeit in the early stages.

To get a handle on Chile's diversity and explosion of vineyard activity, make El Mundo del Vino in Santiago your first stop. Owned by Chile's most famous sommelier Héctor Vergara (Av. Isidora Goyenechea 2931, Las Condes, Santiago), it's Latin America's largest wine shop, with wines from almost every Chilean producer – about 1,600 in all – organised, rather helpfully, by grape variety.

We cruise his Bolivian cedar shelves stopping by his favourites – Falernia's Alta Tierra Syrah, Antiyal, a biodynamic Cabernet-based blend, and Aquitania Pinot Noir. 'I'm very excited about Pinot Noir in Chile,' he declares.

## MAIPO

An hour from Santiago, the Maipo Valley plays host to much of Chile's winemaking modernisation, and it makes some of the country's best reds. Cabernet Sauvignon makes up more than 60% of the 10,000ha (hectares) of vineyards that sprawl throughout the valley, from the Andean Piedmont to the western slopes of the Coastal Mountains.

If you would rather not schlep out daily from Santiago, then the Santa Rita winery and hotel makes a smart base. It was founded in 1880 by a politician, Don Domingo Fernández, and is now one of the country's biggest. There's a slick tour (beware the coaches), and a busy restaurant, but once you head through the manicured parkland to the 16-room

winery hotel, a sense of calm pervades.

The imposing Casa Real was once the Don's home and opened as a hotel 10 years ago. With its armoires, tapestries and English billiard table, this is a wine country retreat with knobs on.

## ACONCAGUA

Farming is big in Aconcagua and the snow-peaked mountain itself – the highest in the Americas – rears up in the distance. Before the wine grapes came fruits such as lúcuma and avocado. But as the likes of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah began to show promise, with their concentrated fruit and balanced acidity, planting has continued. There are now more than 1,000ha extending throughout the valley, roughly a two-hour drive north of Santiago.

There's not much in the way of places to stay in Aconcagua – except for a swanky new hotel and spa called Termas de Jahuel ([www.jahuel.cl](http://www.jahuel.cl)), with 40 rooms, from US\$300 per person, per night. Nor is there anything in the way of decent dining beyond humitas (think Mexican tamales) at rustic La Ruca ([www.laruca.cl](http://www.laruca.cl)), 20 minutes away.

But it's here that you'll find Viña Errázuriz, gearing up for many more tourists with its educational vineyard tour and dedicated tasting area with accompanying local nibbles. The wines range from a single vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (made from grapes grown in Casablanca) to the heavyweight Maximiano Founders Reserve.

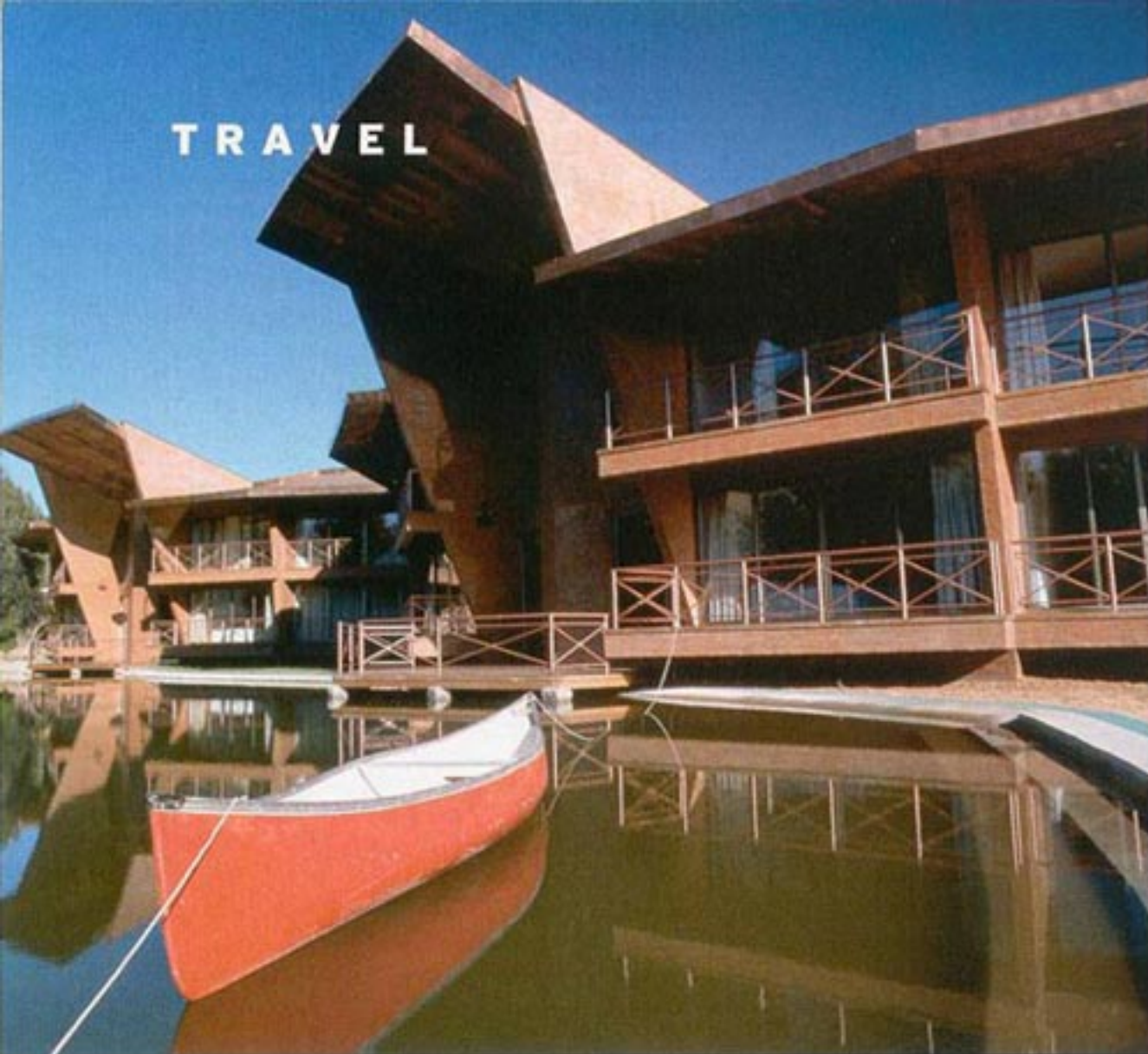
On the eastern edge of the Aconcagua Valley, Viña San Esteban goes one step further, boasting perfectly preserved petroglyphs, which are littered over the rocky hillside planted with quince, peach and lemon trees on its Paidahuén estate. Established in 1974 by José Vicente, and now run by his son Horacio, San Esteban offers a smart tasting room where you can try its In Situ range, and then tour the vineyards (and petroglyphs, if you ask nicely).

## SAN ANTONIO

Wine hacks are understandably excited about San Antonio (and its neighbouring region of Leyda). The three-hour detour from Santiago is worth the effort to experience a minerality and acidity that any European winemaker would be envious of. A Syrah from here (from



Clockwise from top left: an Alpaca tucks into some vines; a truck bearing the Chilean flag; Lake Chungara; Atacama's Moon Valley; Huasos, Chile's answer to gauchos



Clockwise from top left: The guest house at the Gillmore Estate, where there is also a small spa; the terrace at the Santa Rita Hotel and Winery; the restaurant at the Matetic Winery Hotel; the Casa Silva Winery Hotel

Matetic) won Best in Show in the third Annual Wines of Chile Award this year, while much has been written about Maria Luz Marin's ethereal Sauvignon Blanc.

Hang a left in Casablanca Valley, the established route for tourists, where the likes of Veramonte reign supreme. Drive through pine-clad hills and lush countryside fat with cattle and almond trees to the small village of Lo Abarça, whose sole purpose is wine production – thanks to Casa Marin.

Marin was told that she was barking mad to plant vines so close to the sea, which is just 4km away. Damp, foggy mornings drench the vines, which eventually dry out with the midday sun. But she stuck with it and scooped a bunch of trophies for her troubles. Her

tasting room offers the full range. When you're done, ask for directions to El Sauce for the best ribs this side of the Andes.

For sleeping, fine dining and more tasting in San Antonio, head to neighbouring Matetic, about a 20-minute drive from Casa Marin. Open only at the weekends in the peaceful Rosario Valley, the farm is huge, at 10,000ha. When they couldn't make their beef business pay, the Matetics started to look for alternatives. Their first harvest was in 2001. Sauvignon Blanc from the Rosario Valley is very different to Marin's – less aromatic, and riper; while the award-winning Syrah is bursting with violet-scented spice. The stunning two-year-old architect-designed winery received 1,200 visitors

last year and that's set to double this year, claims Jorge Matetic.

As well as five sumptuous bedrooms (from US\$200, including breakfast), there are bikes for hire and horses to ride, plus a new restaurant headed up by Jorge's old school mate, chef Christian Michaeli. Crab cakes are Michaeli's thing and his come baked in a clay pot, made with local crab, eggs, Parmesan, tomatoes, white wine, cream and red peppers.

Before dinner, take a ride through the vineyards with Matetic's twinkly-eyed huaso (horseman) Manuel, who will stop by a cactus for refreshment, peeling the fruit with lightning speed.

## COLCHAGUA

If you like old steam trains, you'll be wanting to travel on Chile's 1913-built Tren del Vino ([www.trendelvinochile.cl](http://www.trendelvinochile.cl)). Hop on at San Fernando (or coach it to San Fernando from Santiago) and it'll take you on a nostalgic rattle through the heart of Colchagua Valley wine country to Santa Cruz. Running every Saturday, the train carries up to 300 people – both Chilean and foreign tourists – who munch on cumin-scented empanadas, sampling a line-up of wines as they go.

The train is a collaboration between a handful of wineries whose main aim is to put Colchagua on the wine tourist's map; each winery takes it in turn to host passengers for lunch, a tour and a

### GETTING THERE

**Getting there:** Lan Airlines flies to Santiago seven times a week from £582 plus taxes. For more information visit [www.lan.com](http://www.lan.com) or call 0800 977 6100.

**Getting about:** Wine Travel Chile will organise your whole itinerary (excluding flights), or just half a day. For more information contact Karen Gilchrist on +56 2 334 8842, or [karen@winetravelchile.com](mailto:karen@winetravelchile.com)

**Further information:** For the lowdown on Chile's wine regions, producers and wine routes, go to [www.winesofchile.org](http://www.winesofchile.org)



tasting. That day it was Viu Manent's turn, one of the oldest in the valley, where New Zealand winemaker Grant Phelps turns out cracking Carmenère.

There are a few options for sleeping in Colchagua, including the hacienda-style Viña La Playa Winery and Hotel, which boasts its own airstrip (45 minutes flying time from Santiago) – but Casa Silva is the smartest ([www.casasilva.cl](http://www.casasilva.cl)). This winery hotel opened in January 2005 and boasts its own wooden rodeo (a sport with a huge following round these parts). It's well worth attending if a show is scheduled. The Silva family are keen horsemen who kick their spurs at every opportunity.

As well as laying claim to the oldest cellar in Colchagua (stashed with decent Cabernet Sauvignon and Carmenère), Casa Silva's hotel scores points on the design front, thanks to an interiors-savvy member of the Silva family. The restaurant also attracts attention, headed up by female chef Soledad, who also looks after the menu in the bustling wine bar. Her favourite food match is salmon with bacon and cream and Casa Silva's Gran Reserve Carmenère, which works, oddly.

The prize for the best-looking winery goes to the multi-million dollar Montes. There's some serious kit and serious wines here and as well as the usual tour, Montes has created a hiking trail behind the winery (allow two hours) offering great valley views. Afterwards, head to Pan Pan Vino for lunch. A 10-minute drive east of Santa Cruz, it offers the town's most rib-sticking pastel de choclo (a kind of Chilean shepherd's pie).



## MAULE

If you've time, spend four hours bombing south from Santiago to Maule, Chile's largest wine-growing region. It offers the best variety of mesoclimates, with Cabernet Sauvignon ruling the roost, followed by País, Merlot and Carmenère.

En route, you could take in Miguel Torres's smart outfit in Curicó and lunch at his even smarter restaurant where chef Carlos Rojas' Mediterranean fare recently prompted Chilean gastronomes to vote this the top restaurant in the country. Or for the real deal, stop by the equally famous Juan y Medio for the ultimate in rustic Chilean nosh. The charquicán, a hearty stew, will set you up nicely for the some serious Cabernet

Franc – and a puma or two – at your destination, the Gillmore Estate. Owner Francisco Gillmore is a sort of Chilean Gerald Durrell, whose love of animals extends to a collection of miniature horses, alpacas and pumas, which his daughter, Daniella, bravely feeds, while her husband, Andrés, makes the wine.

If you're really keen, you can stay for five days during harvest and learn to make wine (US\$3,000 per person) or just stay in one of the smart rooms (US\$200), familiarising yourself with the grapes growing in educational rows outside your door. And there's a spa of sorts – a nice lady from nearby San Javier will give you a massage with grapeseed oil while Daniella fills your jacuzzi with homemade beauty products made from wine. **D**

### WINERIES TO VISIT

Viña Santa Rita, Maipo [www.santarita.com](http://www.santarita.com)  
 Viña San Esteban, Aconcagua [www.vse.cl](http://www.vse.cl)  
 Casa Marín, San Antonio [www.casamarin.cl](http://www.casamarin.cl)  
 Viña Errázuriz, Aconcagua [www.errazuriz.cl](http://www.errazuriz.cl)  
 Viu Manent, Colchagua [www.viumanent.cl](http://www.viumanent.cl)  
 Casa Silva, Colchagua [www.casasilva.cl](http://www.casasilva.cl)  
 Viñas Montes Colchagua [www.montes.com](http://www.montes.com)  
 Viña Matetic, San Antonio  
[www.mateticvineyards.com](http://www.mateticvineyards.com)  
 Miguel Torres, Curicó [www.migueltorres.cl](http://www.migueltorres.cl)  
 Gillmore Estate, Maule [www.gillmore.cl](http://www.gillmore.cl)  
 Viña La Playa Winery & Hotel, Colchagua  
[www.laplayawine.com](http://www.laplayawine.com)

