

THE CULINARY ISSUE
TRAVEL +
LEISURE

The rich, volcanic soil of central Chile has nourished a food and wine legacy that bridges cultures, from Indigenous cooks to globe-trotting vintners.

By Jeff Chu

Photographs by Cristóbal Palma

D R I N K I N G I T A L L I N

*The infinity pool
at the Hotel Val de Chile,
in the Maipo Valley.*



T H E Mapuche, Chile's largest Indigenous group, have a word that defies concise translation. In English, *peumayen* is often rendered "place of dreams," but that underplays the importance of dreaming to the Mapuche. To them, a dream can be a wish, a hope, or a prophecy. It can be an idyll visited in slumber, or a fantasyland that stirs the imagination. Sometimes, you don't even know a *peumayen* until you're in it.

As I stepped into the forecourt of the Vik winery, in a fertile valley that the Mapuche call a "golden place," I found myself in a sweeping, water-filled plaza. Boulders and rocks gathered by the Chilean sculptor Marcela Correa and her architect husband, Smiljan Radić, had been scattered across the shallow pool. The installation, *water mirror*, serves as both a subtle nod to terroir and a grand welcome. It's also a feat of sustainable engineering: as water flows across the plaza, it cools the wine cellar beneath.

The winery building, designed by Radić, is no less remarkable. It looks as if a glowing spaceship had landed on the fertile soil. A translucent-white canopy bathes the interior in natural light. Glass façades offer clear views through the whole structure, to the vineyards and Andes mountains beyond. The winery complex telegraphs modernity, while the surrounding foothills testify to the passage of time.

On this ancient land that has fed countless generations, and which now gives rise to modern architecture and new wine, I glimpsed the Chile I was seeking: *peumayen*.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The stark, modern architecture of the Vik winery; a dish of pork and celery root at the Pavilion, the Vik's restaurant; Rodolfo Guzmán, the chef at Boragó, in Santiago.



CHILE IS AMONG the richest countries in South America, as measured by per-capita GDP. But this 2,672-mile-long sliver of Pacific coast is wealthy in other ways. In his inaugural address in 2022, Chile's youngest-ever president, Gabriel Boric, then 36, nodded to Chile's history—not just its colonial past but also its gaping inequality—and voiced hope for "a dignified future," while also lauding its magical landscapes and agricultural bounty.

That is the Chile my husband and I hoped to experience—history and modernity, country and city, wine and food. We asked T+L-A-List advisor Jean Sanz to create a nine-day itinerary that would show off the country's heritage and abundance and to book local guides.

It seemed apt to begin at Vik. In 2006, the billionaire investor Alex Vik and his wife, Carrie, who also own hotels in Uruguay and Italy, bought 17 square miles in the Millahue Valley, two hours south of Santiago, where the colluvial sands of the Andes meet the loam of the coastal hills—the perfect terroir, they believed, to produce world-class wine. They planted vines, and eight years later, the winery opened, along with a 22-room hilltop hotel.

Designed by the architect Marcelo Daglio, the hotel could be a Bond villain's aerie, with a shimmering bronzed-titanium roof that echoes the surrounding hills. In 2019, Vik added seven bungalows, which, like the rest

of the hotel, showcase contemporary art from the Viks' collection. Ours was decorated with 10 blown-glass works by Dale Chihuly.

Guests are encouraged to roam the grounds. Well-marked trails wind through the hills, and a guided horseback ride is offered with every stay (rider beware: my mount was aptly named Trampista, Spanish for "trickster"). Tasting grapes off the vine is encouraged (unlike the sweet Carmenère, the tannic Cabernet Sauvignon grapes have a mouth-puckering astringency).

The vines' very presence speaks to change: grapes are not native to this country. "The story of wine in Chile is a story of colonization and evangelization," said Andrea Garcia, our guide at Vik. In the 1540s, the Spanish imported vines—mostly the Pais variety—to make communion wine. Subsequent grapes were introduced, including Carmenère, which was originally mislabeled as Merlot. In the late 1800s, phylloxera, an aphid-like, root-devouring insect, decimated Carmenère throughout Europe. But thanks to Chile's relative geographic isolation, the imported vines endured. It wasn't until the early 1990s that DNA testing confirmed the Chilean grapes' true identity.

After we toured the winery, Garcia led us to an underground tasting room. She had pulled three 2021 vintages to try: Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenère, and Syrah. The Cab was "young but lovely," she said with relief.

"Two weeks ago, we had a sample that was awful." The Syrah was less tannic, much smoother. My favorite was the Carmenère—light and dangerously drinkable.

What we tasted would never be bottled as is: Vik sells only blends. During our stay, the winemakers were still creating the 2021 vintages, some of which would be aged in oak harvested from the property and released in the coming years. "We are trying to find the best expression of what is Chilean," Garcia said.

FROM VIK, we drove north to Santiago. Buildings throughout the capital's historic center still bear the marks of the political protests of recent years—including graffiti about socioeconomic inequality, Indigenous rights, and women's rights. The city may still be struggling, but it's also still dynamic and creative.

That was evident at Boragó, a high-end restaurant in the gracious suburb of Vitacura, where chef Rodolfo Guzmán has won global acclaim for his celebration of Chilean biodiversity and Indigenous heritage. A meal at Boragó is a parade of unusual ingredients and techniques: I laughed when the server filled our glasses with "water from the rainforest." Guzmán later used root of *kollof*, a type of bull kelp, for an umami-rich broth served with sea asparagus and a charred slice of pink tomato native to central Chile.

Even when the dishes sounded familiar, the presentations weren't. Yes, there was a tostada, but it was made of grape leaves that somehow had become crunchy and salty. *Mariscal*, a traditional shellfish soup, was reimaged as a savory crème brûlée with pink clams and a shattering crisp top. The tasting menu shifts with the seasons, but one dish stays: Patagonian lamb, slow-roasted and basted in its own fat for at least 14 hours. Our juicy cuts sat on a daub of tangy fig jam. Next to that was an





WHERE TO STAY

Vik Chile

Its 22 art-filled rooms and seven bungalows have stunning views of the Millahue valley. *Doubles from \$531.*

WHERE TO EAT

The Pavilion

Visitors to the Vik can have lunch at this glass-walled structure, which serves modern Chilean cuisine made from produce grown in the winery's organic garden. *Three-course menus with wine pairings from \$65.*