

Drought leaves mark on Chile's wines

May 2 2012, by Miguel SANCHEZ



A worker of the Viu Mament vineyard harvests seedless grapes in Santa Cruz, Chile. Chile's vineyard owners are expecting a slightly different taste and aroma to the wines they produce this year as they harvest grapes during an exceptionally long drought which could enhance the flavor and boost yields.

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Chile is the world's eighth largest wine producer. More than 300

wineries are located in the Andean nation's central valley, a region with distinct seasons and few pests, which gives the grapes a potentially strong aroma.

"Chile is a unique place in the world for wine," said Miguel Torres, who has followed his father and grandfather into the wine making industry.

The Miguel Torres winery, which aims to produce "premium" wines, began its 2012 harvest at the end of March. Other vineyards started in late February and the harvesting season can extend until late May.

After a disappointing 2011 in which yields were down 15 percent on the preceding year, Chile is hoping for a bumper crop from its vital wine making industry this time around.

Last season, the drought altered the flavor, color and aroma of wines from the main vine-growing regions.

"The drought affects mostly the development of the maturity of fruits," Fernando Almeda, chief wine maker at the Miguel Torres winery, told AFP.

"One problem is what we call 'sunburn', when grapes subjected to direct sunlight tend to get a little coffee-colored, a little brown, and this influences the flavor."

"Lack of water will increase the quality and concentration of wine aromas," Almeda said.

The [white wines](#) from Chile, such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewurztraminer, are expected to be produced in larger quantities than last year but "a little less fresh, less total acidity, a higher alcohol content and lower aromatic intensity," Almeda said.

Vineyards that grow grapes for red wines are expected to vary in their production levels.

Grapes watered only with rainwater are likely to report low yields because of the ongoing drought while irrigated vineyards will maintain higher production, Almeda said.

Industry experts predict an increase in Chile's wine exports this year.

"2011 and 2012 had warm conditions, which allowed a perfect ripeness of grapes and a slightly higher production this year," said Massimo Leonori, who oversees the Concha and Toro winery, Chile's largest wine maker.

Chile produces 3.4% of the world's wine from 116,000 acres of grapes and ranks first among what the wine industry calls "new world" producers, which includes Argentina, Australia, the United States and South Africa.

The industry remains dominated by France, Italy and Spain, which control 54% of the world market.

In 2011, Chile exported 664 billion liters of [wine](#) and 473 million bottles, mostly to the United States, Britain and Canada.

Among the exports were the Merlot and Carmenere wines that bear the unique characteristic of being derived from a grape of French origin. An 1867 plant disease destroyed the grapes in European vineyards, meaning they are grown only in Chile now.

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