

País in Chile

For centuries it was written off as a variety destined only for rustic wines, but today País is enjoying a new lease of life in southern Chile. And some much-needed TLC from a few key winemakers is revealing its full potential

STORY DARREN SMITH

The story of País is a classic Cinderella tale. It started life as Listán Prieto, probably in the Gredos mountains of Castilla-La Mancha, central Spain. Via the conquistadores, with their missionary entourages carrying knowledge and tools for viticulture and winemaking, it travelled along the Columbian trade route, first to the Canary Islands, then the Americas.

For more than four centuries, País was a secret treasure. In homesteads throughout Chile's southern countryside it was used to make wines known as pipeños – rustic country wines fermented in rauli pipas (open wooden lagares).

As Chile's wine industry developed further north, País from the south was largely dismissed as a peasant variety unfit for 'proper' wine – too light in colour or too 'rustic' in character. It took a young Frenchman to set in motion a renewed appreciation of País and a revival of the south's winemaking heritage.

THE SOUTHERN REVIVAL

Burgundian winemaker Louis-Antoine Luyt (*pictured top right*) arrived in Chile in 1998, and over two decades showed that high-quality, terroir-focused País could be made with a 'natural' philosophy. Having studied oenology in Beaune with Mathieu Lapierre, son of Beaujolais natural wine pioneer Marcel Lapierre, the wines he made in the semi-carbonic style drew ready comparisons to those of Lapierre, Guy Breton and other newly fashionable winemakers in the Beaujolais region.

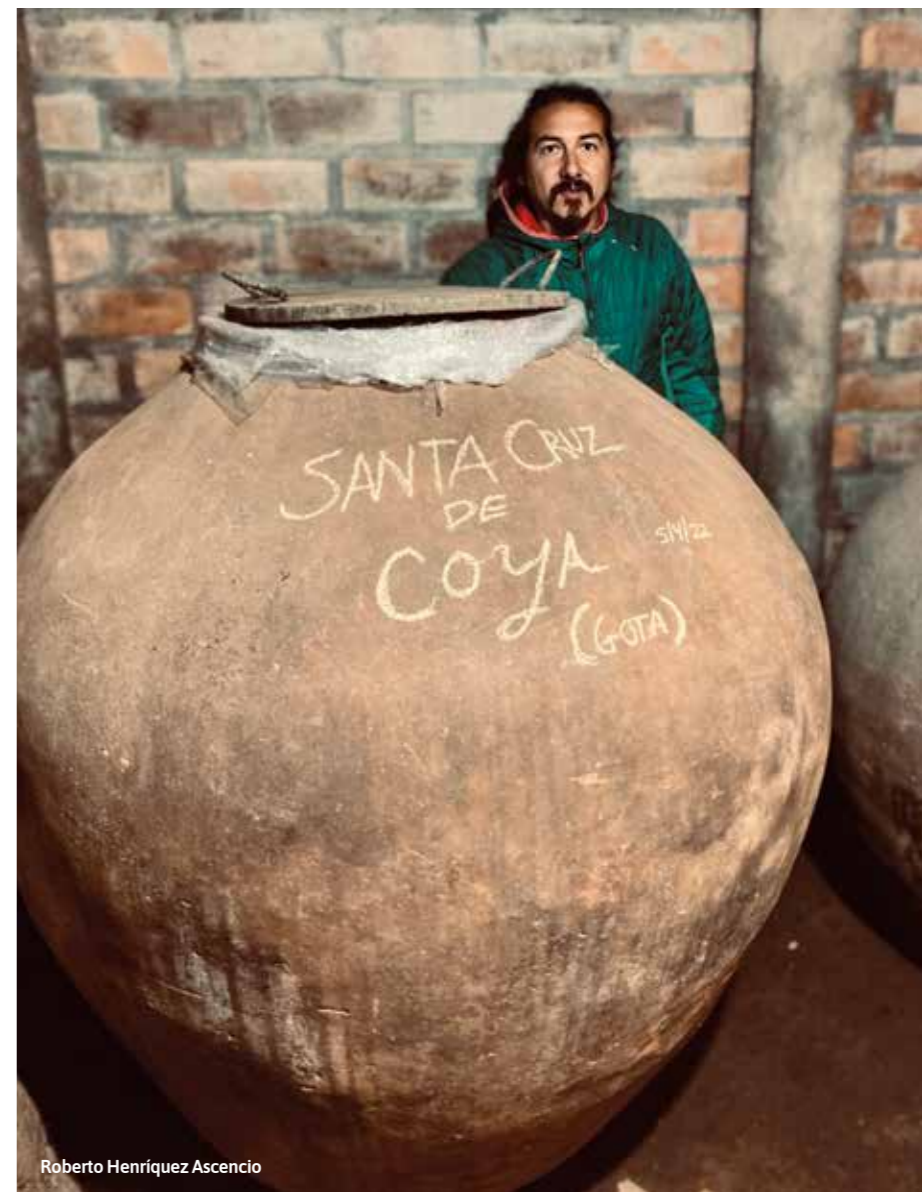
The next link in the story is Roberto Henríquez Ascencio (*pictured right*). A native of Bío Bío, Henríquez worked with Luyt before going solo as a winemaker in 2013. Previously he had been a government-paid agronomy consultant to farmers throughout Bío Bío and Itata – a job that gave him privileged access to the best growers and the otherwise hidden vinous treasures of what he calls 'virgin wine territory'.

'The soldiers who settled after the [Arauco] war with the Mapuche were the first to establish private property in the south,' he explains. 'But they only did this on a small scale, and in fragmented areas – so the properties that exist all over Itata and Bío Bío are very atomised. In Itata, for example, there are about 4,000 producers, and 3,000 of these are only 1ha-3ha. It lends itself to négociant winemaking.'

Following Luyt and Henríquez – and also Argentinian Leonardo Erazo of A Los Viñateros Bravos (*see p55*), who first arrived in the region in 2011 – more local winemakers and growers were encouraged to bottle their own País wines. Among them were Mauricio González Carreño (Estación Yumbel), Renán Cancino Abarza (Huaso de Sauzal), José Luis Bastías (González ▶



Leo Erazo, A Los Viñateros Bravos (see p55)



Roberto Henríquez Ascencio

Bastías, *pictured*, p56) and Manuel Moraga Gutiérrez (Cacique Maravilla).

Other important players were Thomas Parayre and Macarena del Río of Macatho. Inspired by Luyt, they brought an intense focus on organic and biodynamic vineyard practices to reveal the under-appreciated terroir potential of País.

‘I think País is one of the most resistant and strongest varieties that we have observed,’ says del Río. ‘It copes well with a lack of water [in spring and summer, this part of southern Chile often sees no significant rainfall for five months or more], extreme sun, fungal diseases such as powdery mildew, a lack of nutrients...

‘Because of these qualities we have plants that are more than 200 years old in the territory. But when you cultivate these plants and give them the necessary care, the grapes they give you are even more noble.’

STYLES OF PAÍS

As a drinker trying to understand the many expressions of País, the appellations of Maule, Itata and Bío Bío will bring only limited help. Yes, Maule, with its warmer [more northerly] climate, produces País with a riper fruit profile; while from Bío Bío it is spicier and more herbal. But one must look to the individual winemakers and specific terroirs to identify discrete wine styles.

Chilean sommelier Héctor Riquelme (*pictured*), a tireless advocate of País and the winemaking heritage of Chile’s south, believes the most distinctive wines are made by the most traditional winemaking methods – in particular, fermentation in open lagares made from rauli wood. ‘For me, what happens in the open tank is magical. It gives an extra flavour to the wine, an extra typicity,’ says Riquelme.

‘You can then age in stainless steel tank, concrete or tinajas – or whatever you want to use – but when you get the fruit of these old vines, from the right place, and then ferment in open rauli lagares, this gives you electricity.’

Well-travelled Argentina-born winemaker Leo Erazo has done more than most to bring the nuances of south Chilean terroir to light (it would be remiss not to also mention Concepción-born geologist-turned-winemaker Pedro Parra, who is also making terroir-focused País in Itata and Bío Bío). A soil and geology obsessive with a decade of experience working in diverse regions and terroirs of the world, Erazo has been bottling País from Itata’s two principal types of mother rock – granitic and volcanic – since 2014.

He believes his low-intervention techniques – and use of concrete – help to retain the subtle terroir differences of his Granítico and Volcánico País. The elegant structure of his wines also



‘What happens in the open tank is magical. It gives the wine an extra flavour, an extra typicity’

— Héctor Riquelme (*above, judging for the Chile panel at the Decanter Worlds Wine Awards*)

refutes the idea that all País is rustic in character. ‘Everybody talks about País having rough tannins,’ Erazo says, ‘but these rough tannins actually come from stressed vineyards. When País is in vineyards that are treated with herbicides and go into water stress by the end of the season, the natural response of the vine is to produce phenolic compounds, including tannins.’

For further proof that País can be elegant, taste the wines of Ignacio Pino Román. Based in Guarilhue, he is one of the most promising winemakers to emerge in southern Chile in recent years. His filigree, aromatic País is a world away from the rustic wines with which the region has long been associated. For Pino Román, the grape’s potential for finesse has always been there, it has simply been obscured from sight.

‘For a long time the wine industry in Chile made País invisible,’ he says. ‘The stubborn idea of making Bordeaux-type wines from “finer” French varieties hid its oenological potential. Today, Chile is recovering its winemaking identity, and this has attracted many talented professionals to



Old-vine País at Cacique Maravilla, Bío Bío

Maule, Itata and Bío Bío to lead its rebirth by producing high-quality wines.'

THE FUTURE IS FARMING

With their relative wealth of dry-farmed, centenarian vines – thanks to their location and favourable soil types, unaffected by the phylloxera infestations that impacted most of the world's vineyards – Chile's southern valleys are blessed with some of the most precious vine material in the world. But that has not been enough to save them from economic pressures.

Since the 1960s, even in these relatively undeveloped regions, glyphosate (weedkiller) has come to dominate vineyard farming. And though organic farming and viticulture persists, the economic reality is that Secano Interior [a dry inland sector within Maule and beyond] is plantation country. Huge areas of what was once rich native forest have been replaced by endless hectares of pine and eucalyptus. According to Macatho's Macarena del Río, before a government decree in the 1970s that inaugurated an era of state subsidies for forestry companies, there were more than 100,000ha of País in Chile. Today, no more than 15,000ha remain.

One radical wine project provides an example of how to restore soil health and biodiversity to land continually under threat from big agribusiness. Mingaco, run by Pablo Pedreros and his wife Daniela de Pablo, is a regenerative farm with vineyards close to the Itata river. Organic for the best part of a decade (and latterly also no-till), it is a model of how putting nature first can yield



José Luis Gómez Bastías (see p53) and Daniela Lorenzo, González Bastías

the most extraordinary grapes and, by turn, the most extraordinary wines.

'Five years ago, we were the black sheep of the region,' says de Pablo. 'Now, we are still perceived as radical, but people are moving towards this way of working. It's slowly growing, but I wish more landowners or local people would be persuaded to work this way.'

Slow it may be, but growth is there. New vineyard-focused producers – both local and from overseas – are coming together to form a loose community in the region. Some work with their own vineyards, others buy in grapes; some work traditionally with open lagares, others using barrels or steel tanks. But they all share a common understanding that – though the textbook narrative still focuses on the valleys further north – the soul of Chilean wine is in the south. And there is one grape variety that defines that soul more than any other: País.

'For a long time the wine industry in Chile made País invisible'

————— Ignacio Pino Román (see p55)



Get a País of the action: Smith's 10 to try

① Ignacio Pino Román, Itata 2020 93

£28 *The Finest Wines Available to Humanity*
A País from 150-year-old vines on decomposed granite soil. Aged in steel tank, which gives greater fruit purity and linearity. Impressive concentration, even with its gossamer frame. Sweet, softly spiced, red cherry and blackberry fruits, with a fine mineral core and refreshing acidity. One of the most elegant expressions of País that money can buy. **Drink** 2022-2027 **Alcohol** 11.5%

② Roberto Henríquez, País Franco, Bío Bío/Itata 2020 93

£24.70 *161 Food & Drink*
Beautiful pomegranate colour. Shows the wonderful balsamic herb expression of 200-year-old País on Henríquez's Santa Juana property in Bío Bío. It has almost Pinot Noir-like fruit, with dried herbs and hints of Negroni spice. Vibrant and juicy, strawberry and cranberry fruit on the palate, and a deliciously tangy mineral finish. **Drink** 2022-2027 **Alc** 12%

③ Louis-Antoine Luyt, El País de Quenehuao, Maule 2019 91

louisantoineluyt.cl
País made in a semi-carbonic style similar to Marcel Lapierre's Morgon. Lapierre helped Louis-Antoine Luyt choose this historic parcel of País because of its similarities with Beaujolais' famous Côte du Py. Medium-bodied, finely structured and fruit-forward, with intense notes of dark cherry and blackcurrant. **Drink** 2022-2026 **Alc** 14%

④ Macatho, Segundo Flores, Maule 2020 91

[@agricolamacatho](https://www.agricolamacatho.com)
A País that expresses the soil and minerality of Pilen Alto in Maule. From a cool vineyard plot higher than 350m, 20km from the ocean. The decomposed granite soils here contain the mineral pyrite (fool's gold), and the wine has a smoky Mezcal-like note to its earthy raspberry and cranberry fruit. **Drink** 2022-2028 **Alc** 14%

⑤ A Los Viñateros Bravos, Granitico, Itata 2021 90

£15.50 *Latitude Wine*
Evokes the underbrush aromas of Itata's wild grass. Subtly smoky with bright red

fruits, a touch of cassis and a pronounced white pepper note. Fine tannins provide an elegant structure and a lingering, mineral finish. **Drink** 2022-2028 **Alc** 11.5%

El Viejo Almacén de Sauzal, Chilena, Maule 2016 90

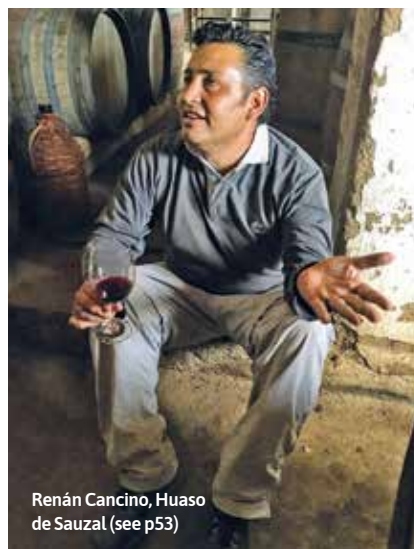
£27.50 *Wine Republic*
A País made the traditional way, in raulí wood casks, by viticulturist-turned-winemaker Renán Cancino. From 300-year-old own-rooted País vines. Earthy, rustic and unique, with smoky forest fruits, and a dried and lively acidity. A wine with surprising ageing potential. **Drink** 2022-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

Roberto Henríquez, Fundo La Unión, Itata 2020 90

£25 *Raw Wine*
From a coastal Itata vineyard, with cooler conditions than the interior, this is a delicate, poised País. Soft and feathery but with concentration that comes from the deep-rooted old vines on granitic soils. Subtly smoky, with herbal red cherry, strawberry bootlace and rosehip fruit, and a sappy dry finish. **Drink** 2022-2027 **Alc** 11%

González Bastías, Matorral, Maule 2019 89

£18.99-£20.95 *Indigo Wine, The Cellar Hand, The Sourcing Table, Thorne Wines*
José Luis Gómez Bastías is the fifth generation to make wine from centenarian vines on the south bank of the Maule river. Fermented in large pipas, this País spends 12 months in old oak, bringing a subtle



Renán Cancino, Huaso de Sauzal (see p53)



spiciness to the grape's classic earthy tones and bright red-black fruits. Concentrated in fruit but easy to drink thanks to its refreshing acidity. **Drink** 2022-2026 **Alc** 13%

Vinos Mingaco, Maule 2020 89

POA Wines Under the Bonnet
Aromatics of a different order – surely down to the natural farming that Mingaco practises and the microflora in the vineyards. Vivid eucalyptus and blackcurrant leaf, then anise-basil herbal and sweet citrus aromas, combined with gem-like red fruits. Constantly evolving. So lively on the palate, with sappy red berry fruit and a refreshing finish. **Drink** 2022-2026 **Alc** 13%

Estación Yumbel, Pipeño, Bío Bío 2021 88

£13.69-£14.95 *North & South Wines, Seven Cellars, Sip Wines*
Based in Yumbel, Bío Bío, Mauricio Gonzalez Carreño is a winemaker with an uncompromising commitment to the traditional farming and winemaking of the south of Chile. He makes this País in the light, quaffable 'pipeño' style. Combines tart red fruits and the grape's characteristic earthiness, with subtle cinnamon-type spice. **Drink** 2022-2024 **Alc** 12%