



A brief history of Carmenère

December 15, 2006, New York - In the time of pre-phylloxera Europe—the first half of the 18th century—in Bordeaux, the epicenter of the world wine trade, there were six so-called noble grape varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot, and Carmenère. After the root louse phylloxera destroyed the vineyards of Europe, and once replanting on resistant American rootstock began in the latter part of the 18th century, the Bordelaise vignerons had great difficulty cultivating the finicky, late-ripening grape. Even though it previously added a much-desired color, complexity, and intensity to their blends, they failed to successfully resurrect it.

Meanwhile, in Chile, an emerging wine industry based on the Bordeaux model was taking root. The Chileans imported rootstocks of all the noble varieties, intending to create great Bordeaux-style wines. Vineyards were planted and wines were made with these grapes for over a century, but trade was restricted within the borders of their country. A decade or so ago, as Chilean Merlot was exported, wine lovers were struck with its unique qualities. The wines offered more color and structure than commonly seen in Merlot, with an earthiness and complexity in the aroma and flavor profile.

Perhaps it was the fact that Chilean vines were never subjected to phylloxera and remained planted on their own rootstocks. Maybe it was the soil, the climate, the clones, or the Andes. The topic was well debated until 1994, when the French viticulturist Jean-Michel Boursiquet determined through DNA testing exactly what made Chilean Merlot so different. Much of what everybody thought was Merlot was genetically identical to Carmenère, interplanted, cultivated, co-fermented, bottled, and labeled as Merlot. Oops.

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