Don Melchor: 23 vintages from inception to latest release

Launched in the late 1980s, Concha y Toro’s Don Melchor became Chile’s first icon wine. Michael Apstein rates vintages from 2015 back to 1987

Don Melchor stands with the world’s best Cabernet Sauvignon-based wines, Bordeaux and Napa Valley included. This tasting showed that Don Melchor, like all great wines, develops with bottle age, transforming itself from a primary fruit-driven wine to something more savoury, complex and layered.

Enrique Tirado, the winemaker, says that Don Melchor is basically an expression of Cabernet Sauvignon – the blend always contains more than 90% of that grape. Since 1999, he has used a small amount of Cabernet Franc, and in the 2015 vintage, even a small dollop of Petit Verdot. He notes that adding too much Cabernet Franc distracts Cabernet Sauvignon’s signature.

All of the grapes come from a single site – the Los Lingues vineyard, on gravelly, well-drained, 127A Puente Alto vineyard in the Maipo Valley, just south of Santiago. The selection is several. Tiradío uses only 50%-70% of the fruit from that vineyard for Don Melchor. Annual production averages about 150,000 bottles.

For the tasting, Concha y Toro supplied 10 vintages. The remaining 13 came either from a friend’s cellar or from my own. The style of Don Melchor has changed over the years, from one that emulated Napa Valley wines of the 1980s, to a more ‘international’ profile. Tiradío attributes the change to better vineyard management – dividing the land into parcels, harvested and vinified separately – to capture what he calls, the ‘distinctive expression’ of Cabernet Sauvignon from each.

Like any top-flight red Bordeaux, Don Melchor takes two decades to reach its peak. But those who prefer youthful richness can love it now. But I’d leave it for another five years.

Michael Apstein is an awarded wine writer and educator, based in the US. Alc. 14.3%