Slowly but surely, Chile has been gaining respect for producing more than just a handful of world-class wines. But based on my tastings for this article, the country is still a ways off from reaching a critical mass of producers who are serious about making truly distinctive wines—as opposed to well-made but essentially anonymous wines that offer solid value. There’s also the challenge of getting diehard Eurocentric wine lovers to open their minds and give the wines a shot, but that’s another topic that will likely be a struggle for some time to come.

The simple fact is that the vast majority of Chilean wines are made by enormous wineries that are often guided as much—perhaps more—by marketing and accounting departments than by vineyard managers and winemakers. This is hardly a problem exclusive to Chile, but no one who has followed the country’s wine fortunes over the years can escape the conclusion that most of the wines, especially those in large production, have been made with a play-it-safe, don’t-rock-the-boat approach as their guiding philosophy.

I wish that more Chilean winemakers, who as a group are well-educated and increasingly well-traveled, as well as fluent in foreign languages, especially English, were allowed greater freedom in winemaking. Most that I have met are highly intelligent, curious and flexible in their winemaking, but they seem to be constrained by the large companies that employ them and are reluctant to challenge an established status quo. More than a few of them have run into issues with their day jobs when their bosses took a dim view of personal side projects where they can be more creative in their winemaking. A few have actually had to leave their “real” jobs because of perceived conflicts,
which can't be encouraging to any of their colleagues who'd like to expand their creative horizons with confidence.

That's a shame given Chile's staggering variety of soils, expositions and climates, factors that allow for the production of numerous varieties in every possible expression, from ultra-cold areas to broiling hot. A number of the larger producers have begun making very good, often outstanding small-production bottlings in recent years, proving that they're capable of competing with the country's smaller boutique wineries, but such wines often carry premium price tags to match their quality. Indeed, some of the very best Chilean wines that I tasted--or at least try to command--prices approaching the most revered European and Napa wines. That's ambitious in the extreme, especially given the ongoing general perception of the country as almost exclusively a source of good wine values. One has to ask: who is the audience for such high-end bottlings?

To this Old World-leaning palate the most exciting trend in Chile right now is the greater number of restrained, low-octane wines that are emerging from the country's cool northern, southern and coastal regions. And the most intriguing wines of all, for me, have been those made from varieties most people don't usually associate with Chile, like syrah, pinot noir and carignan--although the latter variety has been grown there for generations but mostly blended with the more common cabernet sauvignon, merlot and carmenere. There's also a little renewed interest in the native pais variety, which is descended from the mission grape, which helped establish the California wine industry, and also the obscure listan prieto variety, which produces lively, elegant red wines in the Canary Islands. The organic and “natural wine” movements are also gaining traction, which if nothing else adds to the possibility of greater wine diversity, a character shared by all noteworthy wine regions and essential to a country's image as being serious about making wines of real distinction. Chile needs this, and they need it bad.

For this article we chose to focus on wines with suggested retail prices of $15 and higher, which is generally the starting point in Chile for bottles that would be of interest to International Wine Cellar readers. It's also where Chile needs to make greater consumer inroads as it attempts to move beyond the under-$12 segment of the market where most Chilean wines are firmly entrenched. Chile does those wines very well, about as well as any other country in the world outside of Spain, but the best producers are more ambitious than that--and justifiably so based on the number of top-notch wines that I rated at 88 points or higher.

2012 Vina Falernia Sauvignon Blanc Reserva
88 Points
($9) Pale yellow. Pungent herbs, jalapeno and lime on the nose and in the mouth. Assertively dry and racy, with good finishing clarity and lingering anise and sage notes. No fat on these bones.

2011 Vina Falernia Carmenere Reserva
88 Points
($13) Inky ruby. Pungent dark berries, licorice and woodsmoke on the deeply perfumed nose. Lush and open-knit, offering gently sweet blackcurrant and cherry-cola flavors and a touch of palate-numbing pepperiness. Closes smooth and smoky, with supple tannins adding shape. I'd have guessed that this was a syrah.

2010 Vina Falernia Syrah Reserva Elqui Valley
89 Points
($12) Deep ruby. Powerful blackberry liqueur and cola aromas are complicated by notes of olive, black pepper and smoky bacon; this could only be syrah. Smooth and appealingly sweet, offering an array of dark fruit and spice flavors and a hint of candied licorice. Dusty tannins give grip to the impressively focused, persistent finish, which repeats the bacon note.