

The *Decanter* interview

# The Morandé family

The name Morandé is synonymous with the Casablanca Valley in Chile, where pioneering winemaker Pablo Morandé has joined forces with his son, Pablo Jr, to recreate, reinvent and rediscover wines from the country's past.

Amanda Barnes meets them

PABLO MORANDE IS a man with an acute sense of time. 'I was 20 years too early,' he explains, thumbing his straw hat as we sit in his Casablanca home under the shade of a cork tree. 'It's not always good to be the first.' We're talking about how Morandé pioneered Chile's first coastal vineyard in 1982 – almost a decade before anyone else came to the party. His belief that viticulture could be successful in Casablanca turned out to be right, and it has since become one of the New World's most respected wine regions.

However, in the early 1980s, Morandé's visionary attitude wasn't entirely welcome.

## One step ahead

Morandé began his career in the early 1970s, as Chile headed into the Pinochet era, working for Concha y Toro. The winery was producing 500,000 cases of wine a year (a mere fraction of its 33 million today) and needed a white wine to compete with California on the export market. 'I knew white wines needed a cooler climate, and the coolest that I had was Maipo,' Morandé laughs about the region renowned for its hearty reds. 'So I spent two years looking for potential sites.'

He considered the historic, southern wine region of Bío Bío and the virgin coastal territories of San Antonio, Limarí and Casablanca. The latter three zones were strictly cattle territory and had never been imagined for viticulture, nor did any climate data exist. But with the help of a professor at his former university, Morandé plotted out a series of triangles that linked climate data from major cities in the region and made estimations on the climate of the rural land between the pinpointed cities. The two surmised that Casablanca would be mild enough for grape growing.

'Everyone said it was impossible, that we were too close to the sea and that our triangle was wrong,' Morandé explains with a glint in his eye – evidently still energised by the challenge. The board

said no, and plans for a new white wine vineyard were scrapped. After the meeting though, the president of Concha y Toro at the time, Eduardo Guisla, took Morandé aside and said that even though he didn't believe in his triangle, he believed in young Morandé and would privately invest in a vineyard in Casablanca.

In 1982, Morandé planted a 20ha site with Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Vert. Not only was the location radical, but the viticulture was too (high density with wires 20cm above the norm), and there was only enough water for irrigation once a month. 'Everyone was laughing at me,' he remembers. 'Especially after the first year when frost obliterated the vineyard.'

Not easily defeated, Morandé replanted and by 1985 he had his first sample of Chardonnay, which he made secretly in demijohns at the Maipo winery.

He used that wine, and subsequent vintages, to convince winemakers to buy his grapes in Casablanca and convince others to plant there.

'Pablo showed Chile that the wines of Casablanca were very different – really aromatic, and reflecting what

the world expected from those varieties,' says winemaker Felipe de Solminihac, president of Chile's winemaker association at the time. 'Pablo helped develop Casablanca into a world-renowned wine region.'

Within 10 years Casablanca was flourishing and had grown to more than 1,500ha of vineyards; today it stands at 5,750ha. Morandé's experiment also led to the boom of other coastal wine regions in Chile – including San Antonio and Limarí, originally earmarked in Morandé's triangles.

'Pablo's contribution to the industry was enormous,' comments winemaker Ignacio Recabarren, a key ally in developing Casablanca wines by purchasing Morandé's grapes for Santa Rita in the 1990s. 'Pablo is more than a great winemaker though, he is a man of great humanity.'

Morandé commands a lot of respect from his

*'Pablo helped develop Casablanca into a world-renowned wine region'*

Felipe de Solminihac

Pablo Morandé (left) with daughter Piedad and son Pablo Jr

## Two Pablo Morandés, at a glance

### PABLO MORANDE

**Born** 1950, Santiago

#### Education

University of Chile, graduated 1972

**Career** 1972 worked at INIA; 1974

vineyard consultant in Curicó; 1976

Concha y Toro; 1996

Viña Morandé;

2011 Bodegas RE

**Children** Macarena (43), Pilar (42), Piedad (36), Pablo (34)

### PABLO MORANDE JR

**Born** 1985, Santiago

#### Education

INACAP, 2009

**Career** 2008 Viña Morandé; 2011

Bodegas RE

**Children** Pablo (2), Margarita (1)

often brilliant vision, but also for his inspirational persona. Pioneering Chile's coastal regions isn't an isolated case of Morandé being ahead of his time – he was also the first to market a late harvest wine (1988), single variety wines (1982), and to make Argentinian wine as a Chilean investor (1997).

Not all of his hard-fought adventures were successful, but when they were, they changed the landscape of Chilean wine.

### New generation

It is perhaps now that Morandé's winemaking influence is most vivid, as he sees his own children step into the arena. It is the youngest – and his only son – Pablo Morandé Jr, who is taking up the mantle of continuing the Morandé legacy. Ten years ago, however, it might not have seemed so obvious.

It was Morandé's eldest daughter, Macarena, who was first lauded as his protégée when she started working with her father in Viña Morandé 18 years ago. While his sister flourished as a winemaker, Pablo Jr decided to study tourism at university. But two years in, he faltered.

'Some part of me always knew I was wrong to study tourism,' reflects Pablo Jr, as his father leaves for a walk around the garden to tend his

roses. 'Perhaps it was me being stubborn, saying I didn't want to do the same as my family. But deep inside, I knew winemaking was my calling.'

Pablo Jr quit his tourism course and went to study winemaking. Sharing his father's name, anonymity wasn't an option. 'On my first day, the teacher asked me in front of everyone: "Why are you here – you must know everything already." I responded that obviously I didn't, otherwise I wouldn't have been there... but it was hard being Pablo Morandé's son learning winemaking.'

In the winery with his sister and father though, he felt completely at home. 'I realised winemaking was part of me and our family.'

### Double vision

In 2011, the family started a new venture together, Bodegas RE, which united father and son in the cellar. The concept was radical and the first vintage was a baptism of fire for Pablo Jr. 'During the first vintage in the winery, which was still under construction, I had 10,000kg of grapes arriving by truck each day without a press,' he recalls. 'On the brink of exhaustion, a voice in my head (I had many voices going on in my head that vintage!)

**Below: old Carignan vines at Viña Morandé**





asked me if we were just going to make the same wines as others before, or if it was time to shine and add something.'

Shine Bodegas RE did. Its unorthodox blends and wines that were aged in amphorae and under a veil of flor broke the status quo and ignited conversation.

'The first harvest was a revelation,' remembers Chilean wine critic Patricio Tapia. 'Although there were other projects in Chile already trying to give a twist to the Chilean scene, it was gratifying to see how the

*'You can't make wines of the future without looking at the past'* **Pablo Morandé**

**Above: Viña Morandé's Romeral estate vineyards, Maipo Valley**

**Below: Pablo Morandé Jr at Bodegas RE**

Morandé family, a name so traditional in Chilean wine, could be so liberated.'

Working with his father to create something new was also a liberation for Pablo Jr. 'Over time, being Pablo Morandé's son changed from being a pressure to being something very beautiful,' he smiles, as his father returns on his bicycle, followed by his grandchildren, including Pablo Jr's own son, Pablo Jr Jr.

As we taste through some of Bodega RE's latest releases, it's evident that father and son each has his own opinion about the direction RE's wines should take, but both share an innovative flair and ultimate desire to make balanced, salubrious wines. Two minds, or two Morandés in this case, are greater than one; and within a short space of time, Bodegas RE has become one of the most exciting and distinctive producers in South America.

### Coming full circle

If developing Casablanca was the past and Bodegas RE is the present, what is the future for the Morandé family? It is here that we return to the question of time.

'You can't make wines of the future without looking at the past,' says Morandé, while his son nods in agreement.



Photographs: Warudo; Tim Atkin

Morandé's own past was to be born into the fifth generation of a grape-growing family in Maule. During his lifespan Chile's wine industry morphed from rudimentary winemaking concentrated in Maule to highly technological winemaking spread across the country. Rapid modernisation, however, has come at great expense according to Morandé.

'I also wanted change and modernisation, but now I realise I was confused,' he laments, describing how price-driven, mass-production wines have dismantled small-grower viticulture in the south and disconnected traditional winemaking. 'Supermarket wine has suffocated artisanal wine.'

Despite Morandé's wanderlust intellect and being best known for his work in Casablanca, returning value to the south has been his basal mission – albeit one that's taken longer to realise.

Throughout the 1980s he pushed for a commercial release of old-vine wines from Maule, but it wasn't until he had his own winery – Viña Morandé in 1996 – that he could. 'I made Carignan, Cinsault, Semillon, Malbec, Romano... but no one wanted to try adventurous wines yet. The only one willing to was Steve Daniel from Oddbins, who bought the whole line but couldn't sell any of it!'

By the late 1990s, Morandé formed a club of Carignan-loving winemakers that transformed into the Vigno association in 2010. 'My father's head is in Casablanca,' Pablo Jr adds, 'but his heart has always been in Maule.'

He doesn't hesitate in saying that his own heart is in Casablanca. It makes sense: while his father's generation grew up with the bestowal of Maule, he grew up with that of Casablanca. The mission of his generation is to value both: 'We need to take notice of what we already have here in Chile,' says Pablo Jr, 'and have the humility to value old traditions and make progress with existing regions.'

It is in this combination that Bodegas RE has its strength and its vision, shared by father and son, to offer a rebirth of wines from their ancestors by recreating and reinventing traditions and techniques from the past and combining them with current knowledge of viticulture and oenology. I can't imagine a family more suited to the task, nor a time when it has been more necessary. **D**



Based in Mendoza since 2009, Amanda Barnes is editor of travel and wine guide [www.southamericawineguide.com](http://www.southamericawineguide.com)



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