

## Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth



From Argentina to Chile, via France  
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Claudia Gómez is energetic and vibrant. She talks fast and exudes passion. So it's probably no surprise that she made the trek over the Andes from Argentina to Chile, along with stops in Burgundy and the Loire sandwiched in between.

Gómez, 44, is a big part of the team at Viña Garcés Silva, which produces wines under the Amayna label. She handles PR and the commercial side, while also working on the winemaking itself (along with fellow winemaker Francisco Ponce). That's a lot of hats to wear, but considering her energy level, it comes as no surprise. (And in what may be a first for me, the native-Spanish speaking Gómez elects to converse in French with me rather than trust her English, which of course, is much better than she thinks.)

Gómez, 44, was born in Argentina. Her parents owned vineyards and sold their grapes during the 1970s, well before Argentina's qualitative wine renaissance. After her father became ill, the family sold off its vineyards and Gómez made her way to Chile, earning a degree in agriculture with an eye on entering the wine business. From there she took a detour to France, studying the chemistry of winemaking in Bordeaux before taking an internship at the domaine of Jean-Marc Boillot in Pommard. No surprise that she fell in love with Pinot Noir (and to a lesser extent, Chardonnay) while there.

While working in France, Gómez met Alphonse Mellot (the son of Sancerre vigneron Alphonse Mellot), whom she eventually married, living in the Loire for seven years. Not surprisingly, she fell in love with Sauvignon Blanc while there. The couple eventually went their separate ways, and Gómez returned on her own to Chile, where she connected with the Garcés Silva family, joining the nascent winery just after it bottled its first vintage in 2003. Today, the winery specializes in Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay—Gómez's favorites—along with Syrah. That's a pretty disparate mix of varieties to produce under one roof.

The Garcés Silva family was among the first to plant vineyards in the Leyda valley of Chile, a markedly dry and cool coastal area that has emerged in recent years as a source of high-quality grapes. They now have several hundred hectares of vines from which they sell off the majority of their production (Viña Montes is one of the prominent buyers for their Leyda designated bottlings). Viña Garcés Silva keeps just 33 hectares of Sauvignon Blanc, along with Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and a drop of Syrah for the Amayna production. Starting this year, an additional 10 hectares of Syrah is to be planted. Total production is just 13,000 cases, with a maximum potential of 20,000 (currently, just 2,000 cases come to the U.S.).

I tasted through some barrel samples of the winery's latest wines (though I tasted the wine after Gómez left the samples with me, they were not tasted blind). Both reds are destemmed entirely and fermented in stainless steel, with a 10-day cold soak before fermentation. There's a little punching down, no pumping over, and they're moved to barrel (about one-third new) just before the primary fermentation ends for their ensuing malolactic and *élevage*, which typically last about 14 months.

"We ferment the Syrah the same way as the Pinot because we want to keep the tannins elegant," said Gómez, combining her Burgundian and Loire-based experiences. "We're looking for elegance always."

Both of the 2008 reds are potentially outstanding. The 2008 Syrah San Antonio Amayna is fresh and racy in style, with white pepper, violet and black cherry fruit. It has a nice sappy finish with a lingering note of crushed Damson plum and there's judicious toast throughout. The 2008 Pinot Noir Leyda Valley Amayna is silky, with briar, crushed cherry and incense flavors. It shows nice bright acidity with a lingering note of sweet earth on the finish.

Gómez makes no bones about her first love though—Sauvignon Blanc. When I tell her I see more long-term potential in Chilean Syrah than Sauvignon, Gómez laughs.

"It's a bet then," she said. "I will make the best Sauvignon Blanc in Chile and prove you wrong."

The winery makes two versions, one fermented in tank and another in barrel. In previous vintages I've preferred the barrel-fermented version for its extra dimensions of flavor, richness and length. The 2009 Sauvignon Blanc Leyda Valley Amayna Barrel Fermented just completed its ferment a couple of weeks ago, and the sample I tasted was still noticeably cloudy. But it shows lots of floral, *mâche* and white asparagus notes with good weight. It's still reticent but has fresh underlying acidity and excellent length. Along with the Sauvignon Blanc bottlings from *Viña Casa Marin*, it has become one of the best Sauvignon Blancs in Chile after just a few vintages, though I'm still willing to wager Syrah comes out on top in the long run.

It's been a long road for Gómez, but she's managed to pull her love for a few disparate varieties together after finding a new home on the cool, coastal frontier of Chile's wine industry. *Viña Garcés Silva* may still be low profile here in the U.S., but that probably won't last for long.