

THE ORIGIN OF TORRONTÉS

By Pablo Lacoste

The studies conducted by Agüero (2003) have revealed that Torrontes, Argentina's emblematic white wine grape variety, originated from the combination of Muscat of Alexandria and Criolla Chica. The Criolla Chica is none other than the formerly called "uva negra" in Cuyo and Chile, and "mission" in California or "negra corriente" in Peru. Early in the twentieth century, it started to be called "criolla chica" in Argentina and "uva país" in Chile. The presence of this grape variety in Argentina and Chile dates back to the first days of the Spanish conquest in the mid-sixteenth century and this is a fact that is not often contested. On the other hand, little is known about the earliest appearance of Muscat of Alexandria in the region. This study aims to explore the origins of Muscat of Alexandria in Argentina and Chile, in order to find out when the conditions for the development of Torrontes were in place.

From the colonial period to the mid-nineteenth century, this variety was called "uva de Italia", or so it appears on documents from both sides of the Andes Mountains and on the first ampelographic studies. Later the name "Muscat of Alexandria" became more widely spread (Alcalde, 1989). In official documents issued in Chile and the European Union at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "Muscat of Alexandria" and "blanca Italia" are taken as synonyms (*Wine Agreement*, 2003: 25).

The first description of the Italia grape variety dates back to 1787, and was made on the basis of the comparison with moscatel blanca. If compared to the latter, Italia grapes could be said to have "less tight clusters and much bigger berries, which are not so perfectly spherical in shape" (Jesuit, 1787: 49). A century later, this vine variety became the center of attention once again and was described as follows: "The Italia negra and Italia blanca varieties ripen earlier than the others and are used to produce Muscat wine, which is widely popular in the country: consumers prefer this variety to any other" (Gay, 1855: 175). Back to Mendoza, the third ampelography also highlighted the importance of Muscat of Alexandria: "the so-called 'uva de Italia' has a large cluster with a good number of berries, which are tightly packed together, white in color and spherical in shape, smaller than black grapes and extremely sweet" (Hudson, 1867: 8).

Clearly, ampelographic descriptions of Muscat of Alexandria differed greatly from one another; or else, some external characteristics of the plant may have changed in the course of time. However, there was broad consensus on this variety's potential. To the expelled Jesuit missionary "if this variety, usually known as 'uva de Italia', were to multiply and expand, as it should be expected due to its excellent quality, it could be exploited to good profit in the cities of San Juan and Mendoza, which have already gained plenty of experience in its use, as this plant has been grown extensively in these areas" (Jesuit missionary, 1787: 49). Muscat of Alexandria wines were also highly regarded, especially in Chile. There is evidence of this in Juan and Ulloa's chronicles: "Most wines are red, but a Muscat wine, whose flavor is better than that of anything in its kind in Spain, is also produced" (Juan and Ulloa, 1748: 239). This piece of data seemed plausible to other chroniclers such as Abbot Molina, who gave credit to it and included it in his own writings

(Molina, 1810: 198). Soon afterwards, Claudio Gay consulted these records to complete the concept of “Muscat: this is the most preferred and highest regarded dessert wine. It gained its privileged status due to its excellent taste and other qualities which have been long acknowledged and highly appreciated by foreigners, by priest Feuillée, Don Jorge Juan and Don Antonio Ulloa, and by every modern traveler who has happened to taste it. It is white, rosy, very sweet, highly alcoholic, and has a very pleasant flavor. It is made with Italia blanca, which is mostly consumed as fruit, for which reason wine of this variety is only produced in small quantities. In 1840 I was told that the largest production ever had barely amounted to 6,000 *arrobas* [a unit of liquid measure of between 12 and 16 liters]; an *arropa* cost three pesos” (Gay, 1855: 1994).

According to state-of-the-art research on the subject, it can be said that Muscat of Alexandria was mainly grown in Mendoza. By the early eighteenth century, the Jesuits were already interested in this variety. On their expense record book (*Libro de Gasto*) of October 1701, the Jesuits of Mendoza entered “two jars with wine and another jar with *lagrimilla* from Italy [unfermented grape juice] and everything necessary for the House harvest.”¹ The Jesuits valued Muscat of Alexandria highly and endeavored to expand the cultivation of this variety. In an evaluation of the vineyard improvements introduced between October 1701 and January 1703, the book reads: “the old vineyard is cultivated and has several new fences; a new parcel was implanted with 1,300 plants of Italia.”² This variety accounted for 10% of the Jesuits’ vineyards in that district at least.

Before long, this variety spread to secular vineyards. In fact, as of the second third of the eighteenth century, this variety began to appear in the records of laymen’s vineyards in Cuyo. In San Juan, the brave Juana Carrizo cultivated the Italia variety (1731).³ Don Simón de Videla Pardo – as he declared in his will (1733)⁴ – cultivated 1,500 Italia plants in his wife’s land dowry. And José Ríos (1868) cultivated “a parcel of six vines of Italia grapes very well supported with hurdles, for \$5 and three young vines of the same variety for 12 cents each.”⁵ The Jesuits firmly persevered in the development of this variety. They believed it had great enologic potential, not only for their own use but also for the development of viticulture in the whole area. This is what the expelled Jesuit explained in the natural description of Cuyo written in Italy (1787).

Once Muscat of Alexandria gained a firm foothold in Mendoza and San Juan, it was taken across the Andes Mountains and adapted to Chilean conditions. In Chile, the oldest records of this variety were found in San Fernando. A high trellis with two Italia plants was cultivated at the Santa Gertrudis estate. This vine parcel was inventoried twice within a period of 17 years (in 1767 and

¹ Jesuits’ expense record book, Mendoza, October 1701. Historical Archives of Mendoza (AHM), Colonial Ecclesiastical Records, 279:1, Folio 70.

² Jesuits’ expense record book, Mendoza, January 1703. AHM, Colonial Ecclesiastical Records, 279:1, Folio 76.

³ Will of Juana Carrizo, San Juan, 1 September 1733. General Archive of the Province of San Juan (AGPSJ), Court Records, Box 3, Folder 18, Document 8, reverse of Folio 1.

⁴ Will of Simón de Videla Pardo, Mendoza, 3 November 1733. AHM, Notarial Record Book 4, Folio 44.

⁵ Estate appraisal report of José Ríos, Mendoza, 15 April 1868. AHM, Folder 49, Document 18, Folio 3 – 3 reverse.

1784).⁶ Soon afterwards (in 1790), the Paniagua estate had a group of “137 Italia plants which had taken root, in addition to other 6,366 plants grown in the vineyard.”⁷ Only a few years later, when the Malaspina expedition (1794) was journeying the central valley between Curico and San Fernando, numerous vineyards cultivated with blanca, negra, Italia and Muscat were recorded (Neé, 1794: 862).

La Serena was an important area for the development Muscat of Alexandria. The oldest records found correspond to the hacienda of the Society of Jesus in Valle del Elqui (1767), where 80 Italia plants were cultivated.⁸ Soon after that, 57 plants were recorded to have been cultivated by Javier Rojas (1775).⁹ Later, it was recorded that 300 more Italia plants were cultivated by Fernando Varas (1819) in a parcel next to his 10,000-plant vineyard.¹⁰ On the other hand, the San Guillermo hacienda (1827) had three vine arbors cultivated with Italia, valued at 4 *reales* each.¹¹ The San José hacienda (1828) also had Italia vine arbors.¹² Don Francisco Bascuñan (1836) carefully cultivated a vine arbor with 16 Italia plants.¹³ And at Don Andres Callejas’ residence (1841) “85 plants of Italia, fruit, supported with trellises” were cultivated.¹⁴

There was interest in this cultivar in Chile’s central area as well. In Santiago, the president of the Royal Hearing, Don Francisco Sánchez, became interested in this variety. After he and his wife died, a vineyard with “13 Italia rootstocks” was found in their estate inventory.¹⁵ Then a vineyard with eight Italia plants was recorded in 1780.¹⁶ At the Macul farm, located in Ñuñoa, “52 Italia and negra rootstocks at 4 *reales*” were recorded after Don Nicolás de Gandarilla’s death (1805).¹⁷ Don Jerónimo de Ugarte (1821) planted four Italia vines.¹⁸ Doña Josefa Coral (1831) had 8,700 fruit vines and a separate small parcel with 83 Italia plants at 4 *reales*.¹⁹ By 1841, at the Doña Micaela Frías’ hacienda, a parcel with Italia negra vines was recorded with six forked props, valued at \$8; there were also a parcel with three Italia negra rootstocks with 20 forked props at \$12, and another area with 8 Italia and comun rootstocks, hurdled with 12 forked props, six made up of hawthorn wood and six of palo blanco wood, valued at \$10.2 reales.

⁶ Partition of estate belonging to Don Ignacio Chacón. San Fernando, 3 November 1767. National Archive of Santiago de Chile (AN), Judicial Records of San Fernando (FJSFO), File 11, Exhibit 22, Folio 10. Estate inventory of Petronila Miranda, 20 April 1784. AN, FJSFO, File 21, Exhibit 7, Folio 4.

⁷ Inventory and partition of estate of Fernando Mardones, 12 March 1790. AN, FJSFO, File 49, Exhibit 6, Folio 24.

⁸ Inventory, appraisal and general report on vineyard and land estate in Valle del Elqui belonging to the Jesuits. La Serena, October 1767. AN, Records of the Jesuits of Chile (FJCH), Volume 5, Exhibit 4, Folio 247.

⁹ Estate inventory of Javier Rojas. La Serena, 25 September 1775. AN, La Serena Notarial Instruments Section (FNLS), Volume 10, reverse of Folio 386.

¹⁰ Estate inventory of Fernando Varas, La Serena, 16 January 1819. AN, FNLS, Volume 68, Folios 6 (reverse) – 7.

¹¹ Estate appraisal of Juan Villalobos, La Serena, 28 May 1827. AN, FNLS, Volume 73 Folio 120.

¹² Lease agreement. Coquimbo, 18 August 1828. AN, FNLS, Volume 74, reverse of Folio 246.

¹³ Estate appraisal of Francisco Bascuñan y Ovalle, La Serena, 12 March 1836. AN, FNLS, Volume 86, reverse of Folio 411.

¹⁴ Estate inventory of Andrés Callejas, Los Diaguítas, 27 October 1841. AN, FNLS, Volume 91, Folio 366.

¹⁵ Estate inventory of Isabel de Espinosa, widow of doctor Don Francisco Sánchez de la Barrera, president of the Royal Hearing. Santiago, 21 April 1773. AN, Judicial Records of Santiago (FJS), Volume 339, Exhibit 5, Folio 95.

¹⁶ Estate embargo and appraisal. Santiago, 1 July 1780. AN, FJS, File 105, Exhibit 1, Folio 52.

¹⁷ Estate inventory of deceased Don Nicolás de Gandarilla, farm in Macul, district of Ñuñoa, Santiago, 14 October 1805. AN, FJS, Volume 407, Exhibit 1, Folio 18.

¹⁸ Reappraisal of estate of Don Juan Jerónimo de Ugarte, Santiago, 12 January 1821. AN, FJSt, File 15, Exhibit 9, reverse of Folio 11.

¹⁹ Inventory of estate of Doña Josefa Coral, Santiago, 20 July 1831. AN, FJS, File 266, Exhibit 5, Folio 15.

In the Aconcagua valley, Muscat of Alexandria was also important. In San Felipe (1787) “four new Muscat of Italy plants” were recorded; “each plant was valued at 2 *reales* as they were not appropriately managed.”²⁰ Also, in Curimon, Jerónima Ojeda (1791) had “31 new Italia plants, which she grew in the orchard of her house.”²¹ Soon after that, among the assets of Don Francisco de Borja Fuentecilla (1800) were recorded 55 Italia blanca and Italia negra high trellis vines spanned across the orchard, with their corresponding carob forked props, which are 3.5 *varas* high [vara: unit of length approximately equivalent to one yard]” which Borja de Fuentecilla valued at 160 pesos.²² In 1803, a property with 229 Italia plants was recorded; 150 of them had developed well and had borne fruit; they were supported by forked props made of carob wood and were valued at 6 *reales* per plant; the 79 remaining plants were new, of only two years of age, and had not borne fruit yet, for which reason they were valued at 2 *reales* per plant.

In the south of the Central valley, the presence of Muscat of Alexandria was very scarce. In Cauquenes, Don Sebastián Villalobos, at Margarita estate, kept a vineyard with 16,000 vines, and two Italia plants.²³ This was one of the few records found.

Special care was devoted to Muscat of Alexandria, though there were some exceptions and some cases of inadequate care, such as in the case of Pedro Pérez in San Felipe as quoted above. But usually, this variety was special for growers and received a special treatment. It was the object of much attention. It was frequently allotted the best areas in the property. As it is shown in the documents quoted above, the plants were supported with good forked props and *braceros* (trellises for vine cordons). What is more, the Italia vines were sometimes even graced with landscape ornaments. A good example of this was recorded in Francisco Bascuñán’s house (La Serena, 1836). The notary discovered the existence of “a vine arbor with 16 Italia plants, which bore fruit and are found amid a 46-*varas* long orchard; floors paved with bricks, which serve as stroll paths, and a rest area by the center of said arbor with adobe benches. There are roadside paths with boundary stones at both sides. I valued everything at \$102.04 *reales*.”²⁴

The following description is revealing. The owner of the hacienda had designed a stroll path whose core point was the Muscat of Alexandria arbor vine. As usual, the vines were supported by forked props. But in this particular case, the floor was paved with bricks and there were adobe seats amid the vines. There were also stroll paths on both sides. It was an outstanding aesthetic display.

The expansion of Muscat of Alexandria followed its natural course and remained important until the mid-twentieth century, in spite of the competition arising from French grape varieties by the mid-nineteenth century. The latter expanded extensively across the Central valley, especially

²⁰ Inventory of estate of Pedro Antonio Pérez. San Felipe, 1787. AN, Judicial Records of San Felipe (FJSFpe).

²¹ Inventory of estate of Javier Rojas. Valle de Curimón, Aconcagua district, 9 May 1791. AN, FJSFpe, Civil Court, File 39, Exhibit.

²² Estate appraisal of Don Francisco de Borja de Fuentecilla, Valle de Curimón, jurisdiction of San Felipe el Real, 26 February 1800. AN, FJS, File 374, Exhibit 2, reverse of Folio 54.

²³ Estate appraisal of Estancia Margarita, Cauquenes, 29 April 1804. AN, Fondo Judiciales de Cauquenes (FJCQ), File 24, Exhibit 8, Folio 2.

²⁴ Appraisal of estate of Francisco Bascuñán y Ovalle, La Serena, 12 March 1836. AN, FNLS, Volume 86, reverse of Folio 411.

in the irrigated areas where the large companies were located. In the dry coastal areas, on the other hand, tradition was preserved, as the vineyards were still in the hands of small-scale grape growers. Up until the period prior to the change of paradigm brought about by the military coup of 1973, the Italia grape variety was the most important white grape variety cultivated in the vineyards of the dry coastal area, accounting for 49.6% of the vineyard area (Del Pozo, 1999: 224). Due to its satisfactory adaptation to the geographic conditions of the area and its high yield, Muscat of Alexandria became a good ally to the small and impoverished grape growers living in the peripheral wine growing areas of Chile.

The effortless adaptation and expansion of Muscat of Alexandria in an area dominated by black grape varieties laid the conditions for the emergence of a new variety: Torrontes, the only originally American variety so far with outstanding enologic qualities.

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