

PEDRO PARRA'S UNLIKELY PATH TO TERROIR

photos by Sergio Pérez Ramírez

by Patricio Tapia

Lee Morgan was a great trumpet player. And a womanizer. Which is why, close to dawn one morning in 1972, while on stage playing in some jazz club in New York's East Village, his wife shot him in the heart. He died instantly. I learned that from Pedro Parra, who once had dreamed of being a professional musician. Instead, he became a professional terroirist and is, today, a revolutionary figure in South American wine.

In fact, long before he started digging holes in the ground to analyze soils for grape vines, he played alto and tenor saxophone "respectively well," as he himself says. We're tasting malbec at Altos Las Hormigas in Mendoza, Lee Morgan's trumpet snarling over the speakers while Parra speaks of that murder, as enthusiastic about the music as he is about the rocks in the surrounding vineyard.

At 42, Parra is one of those people who gesticulates all the time. They say in Italy, if you cut off a Sicilian's hands, he would be silent. That goes for Parra as well, though he is not from Sicily, but from Concepción, about 300 miles south of Santiago, where Chile's deep south begins.

Parra didn't study enology, viticulture or anything remotely related to it in school. He didn't drink. He worked toward a degree in forestry in 1996, which is how he met Marcelo Retamal, one of the most influential winemakers in Chile today. At the time, Retamal was studying agronomy, and was more interested in dairy farming than vineyards, Parra recalls.

Nor was it on his agenda when he gained a scholarship to study in Montpellier, funded by the French government. Parra had applied

to the School of Agronomy at Montpellier, to earn a master's degree in agricultural land use, but his main reason for heading to the south of France was to get an in at the Michel Petrucciani Jazz School. Which, in fact, he did—and it's where he learned there is a big difference between a good saxophone player and a professional. In the end, he spent his time in France focused on agriculture.

Even in Montpellier, his work had nothing to do with wine. When it came time to write his master's thesis, his professor recommended three cities in France. He chose Paris—"because that meant living in Paris!" he says, raising his voice.

Parra found himself at the *Institut National Agronomique Paris-Grignon*—"Something like Harvard for farmers," he says. "I had no clue. All I wanted was to live in Paris." The price he paid for living in the City of Lights was a thesis on "the impact of a type of insect in forests," he adds with a wave of his hands, as if dismissing the entire project.

While Parra studied insects, his Swedish office mate was studying the terroir of the Rhône Valley, using satellite imagery. "I had no idea that there were wines from the Rhône

and had never heard of a grape called syrah, but she kept running into problems with her computer work, so I helped her out." In return, she invited Parra to some wine tastings and that's when he began to realize that he might enjoy wine and, even, perhaps, the idea of studying something related to it.

When he came home to Chile in 2000 he was already committed to the idea of returning to France and specializing in his office mate's work. At the time, no one in Chile seemed interested in Parra's idea, so once again, he appealed to the French government. This time, the French gave him a scholarship for a doctorate. All he needed was a topic.

He set out to find a sponsor, an institution or company that would say, "Yes, this investigation is important to us." After several useless meetings, he happened to talk with Enrique Tirado, Concha y Toro's winemaker for Don Melchor. "I arrived one day at Concha y Toro and was received by this tall, skinny, quiet guy. It was Enrique Tirado," he says, putting emphasis on the name. At the time, Parra didn't know who he was or that Don Melchor was one of the most important Chilean wines. "All I wanted was to get to France and come back with a Ph.D., which would allow me to earn much more money and get married."

At the time, Tirado was researching the terroir of Tocornal, where he grew the grapes for Don Melchor, and he thought Parra's work might be a good addition to his project. According to Tirado, "When we had our first conversations, I could tell he was someone with a lot of enthusiasm and he was involved in the same work I was doing. I liked how he'd