



**TINAJAS
AND THEIR ROLE IN THE
CHILEAN
VITICULTURAL HERITAGE**

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Image of Viña La Montaña, Comuna de Paine, Chile.



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A “tinaja” is a clay or baked mud container, whose profile is normally oval becoming narrower at the mouth and on the bottom. Commonly it does not have handles and its size depends on the use it will have.

The name came from the Latin word *tinacula*, and from there it was added to old Castilian Spanish, but with some variations like *tenaxa*, *tanaia*, *tenalla*, *tinaia* and finally *tinaja*.

The origin of tinajas dates back to the Ancient World, towards the end of the Bronze Age, approximately 6,000 BC; when the first historic records of agriculture appear. These containers also had other names, for example, some people called them *amphoras* in Ancient Greece, *pithos* in the Minoan civilization of Crete and *dolium* by the Roman Latin world.

Some archeologists estimate that the first uses of these containers are found on the Black Sea coast, specifically on the coasts of the modern Caucasus countries. Thus, the origin of tinajas would be intimately related with viticulture because this also originated in that region during the same period.

Tinajas were used intensively by cultures of the Old World not only for wine carrying, but also as a generic container and international measure in trade on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

These particular containers were a usual element of the cultural landscape of Greeks, Romans and Phoenicians. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire (5th century AD), tinajas were a useful element in the new nations of the emerging Medieval Europe. In Spain, they represented an icon of the rural world, and today they are still an emblematic symbol of some regions in the center and north of the country, such as La Mancha and Catalunya; and Malaga and Granada where the Arabic influence was very strong.

Later, they were taken to America by the first Spaniards and Portuguese conquistadors, and they began to be used in Chile for transporting goods, storing liquids, olive oil and grains. Their construction was entrusted to indigenous people who were under the encomienda system, meaning, under the spiritual and economic tutelage of the Spaniards. In the 17th century, there were special centers located near clay pits where tinajas were made, mainly in the valleys that crossed through Atacama and Coquimbo as well as in the central valleys of Aconcagua, Maipo and the dry lands of Maule and Biobío.

From an anthropological point of view, tinajas are a powerful symbol of the miscegenation between two worlds, the Hispanic and Pre-Colombian indigenous worlds.



This process happened not only because during the production of tinajas Indians and Spaniards worked together, but also because the nature of the artisanal work, whose origins date back to the ancient agro-ceramic traditions of the indigenous inhabitants of America.

The technique used to make tinajas, which was baked clay or ceramic, was not the only one that experienced the crossover process between the Indigenous Americans and the European, but also from the American land that came into contact with the wine, producing a mix of represented flavors of a new culture that started to settle and expand in the New World.

In this sense, American tinajas are almost an icon of the foundation of the Latin-American culture, where European and indigenous contributions converged, inspired by the elementary need of having a container used to hold a resource like wine, whose role was so important that it even represented the blood of Christ for Christians.

These containers are still being used as a symbol of the rural life in some Hispanic America countries as a means of production and storage, or, as a simple decorative element in gardens. The traditional use, however, has been a part of our history for more than five hundred years since the discovery of America by the Europeans.

Currently, it is still possible to find some tinajas in Chile, which are over two hundred years old. The strength

and resistance of these containers show us the detail that the manufacturing process involved, although history tells us that in most cases, tinajas were made by indigenous slaves.



In different parts of the country, Franciscan and Jesuit evangelizers specialized in the design and manufacture of these types of containers, which were ever more necessary in a country that started to produce wine on a large scale.

In the “Norte Chico”, for example, they were used from the 17th century and not only for the production of a wine known as “Chacolí del Huasco”, but also for the fermentation of musts obtained from sun-dried grapes, characteristics of the traditional sun-dried, mercenary and fortified wine, later known as Pajarete.

In the Central Zone, they were used profusely both for grape fermentation and for storage, depending on their size. There are several stories, engravings and drawings that demonstrate the use of these containers during the Colonial period, for the production of homemade fermented beverages such as *chicha*, fresh wines or musts, mulled or “parboil” wines, “seasoned” wines, fortified wines and aged wines.







We can see that the Tinajas also represent the origin of a significant part of the first unique flavors of Chilean wine, because inside a single product they could bring together the climatic and geographic conditions of the land, which were some of the characteristics found in the grapes, along with the soil represented by the tinajas and the wine conservation methods.

Furthermore, there are testimonies about the production and transportation of wine inside tinajas, delivered by foreign visitors who were passing through Chile at the time. Juan Couyoumdjian, for example, points out, citing several of them, that “in order to avoid leaking, the inside of tinajas were coated with tar or resin, which had an impact on the flavor of the wine during the fermentation process.”¹

However, it was also possible that in the case of old tinajas, the dust that accumulated over the years offset the effect of the seal”. Gay also states that “tinajas were left open and in this way wine lost their aroma.” The same Chilean historian says that the traveler John Miers (1789–1879) tells in his book *Travels in Chile and La Plata* that “after fermenting the wine inside the tinajas, these would be covered with a clay lid that was sealed with a paste made with clay and horse’s guano or tar. Those scents also transferred to the product.”

¹ Juan Couyoumidjian, “Vinos en Chile desde la Independencia hasta el fin de la Belle Epoque”, *Historia*, 39(1) January–June 2006, pg. 23–64.

Finally, Claude Gay, also cited by Couyoumdijan, points out that tinajas used to be sealed with a piece of leather tied with a whip. This French sage added “wine cellars, which is where the tinajas were, also created a problem because they are placed at ground level and the doors were usually left open. So the wine was left exposed to all daily temperature variations, which are very intense in the North and in some central provinces and can also achieve a difference of more than 20°C.”²

During the first half of the 19th century, the use of tinajas started to decline as a result of the incorporation of cooperage and barrelmaking, along with the use of wood into Chilean viticulture.

Around 1820, after the end of the Chilean War of Independence, and in the decades that followed, the main viticulture entrepreneurs of the country started to use barrels made of raulí beech known as “pipas” (which had a capacity for 1,000 liters or more) for the vinification process. When they wanted to age a wine, they used different barrels made generally with wood of North American or French oak.

One of the factors that persuaded national wine producers to replace tinajas or other clay containers, for those made with hardwood, was the many advantages they had. The new material was really useful, for example, when they had to transport them, the wooden

² *Op. cit.*

containers were lighter and more resistant to blows than tinajas. Also, it was easier to repair them because of the mechanical manufacture.

HOME
CHARD





Moreover, during the middle of the 19th century, the “viticultural revolution” or “modernization of Chilean viticulture” occurred due to the incorporation of new vines, technology and knowledge from Europe; which made the birth of a growing number of modern wineries possible. These improved properties were owned by important personalities of the period’s oligarchy.

In addition, those wineries located in the valleys of the Aconcagua, Maipo, Tinguiririca (Colchagua), Maule, Itata and Biobío rivers, started a transformation that allowed them to have an important number of oak barrels for vinification and transporting wines. In the first stage, barrels were imported from the United States and Europe, and later, in the middle of the century, they began to be manufactured in the country.

One of the most important cooperage factories was Tonelería Francesa (French Barrel-making), established in the city of Chillán in 1857. Also, between the 1860s and 1890s, there were small but very efficient cooperages located in the provinces of the Itata and Biobío rivers.

The European need to import wines at affordable prices after the disaster caused by phylloxera; the progressive decrease in the costs of productive factors due to the competitive advantages that Chile had for the production of fine wines; and the wine knowledge, technique and culture, deeply rooted in our Chilean fields,

generated favorable conditions for the consolidation of a new national viticultural industry.

Apart from this, one has to consider the world's economic growth, during the Second Industrial Revolution, which helped strengthen the businesses of those wine-fan-plutocrat entrepreneurs whose fortunes multiplied while the strategy of turning Chile into a primary export country, strengthened. Chile has the advantage of having the mining industry as part of the national economy.

This benefit allowed Chileans to finance their taste for wines, wineries and vineyards; even though this new industry did not represent a profitable business for the period.

These changes allowed consolidating an important cooperage industry in the country, and also the creation of a real viticultural cluster that involved the participation of the Enology School, and the Arts and Trades School of the University of Chile and the National Agriculture Society.

In the industrial field, the consolidation was related to some factories that manufactured materials such as glass bottles, corks and labels, and also foundries that manufactured and adapted agricultural machinery which multiplied in the country towards the end of the century.

In a period of no more than a century, between 1830 and 1930 approximately, the changes experienced by the wine industry caused important transformations in the viticultural outlook inherited from the Colony, which started to show a significant transformation in the way wines were made in Chile.

As the 20th century went by, the use of tinajas for vinification was left behind, preserved in places where colonial viticulture was considered as a kind of “heritage relic”, as occurred in some areas of the Huasco and Limarí river valleys.

In the Central Zone, the use of tinajas has been preserved to a certain extent. Some places where people still preserve the old traditions of wine production are Limache, Curacaví, El Monte, Cauquenes, the valley of the Mataquito river, in Guarilhue, the Itata river valley, in the dry lands of Maule and Biobío found inland, and the coastal dry lands of Tomé, Buchupureo and Cobquecura.

These were old coves where viticultural products were sold, especially during the last third of the Colonial Era and the beginning of the Republican period. This was the blossoming era of maritime trade in the coastal provinces of central Chile, before the construction of the North–South Pan–American Highway and the development of roads and railways inside each region.



*González Bastías Station, Ramal Talca Train to Constitución.
Archive image VINIFERA.*



Traditional plowing system, with horses. Image of Zaranda vineyard.

In some areas of the Maipo and Aconcagua valleys, tinajas are still being used for the chicha production, a beverage made with grape that are fermented at low temperatures inside tinajas, which are buried in the ground and sealed with a mix of mud and lime.³

It is common to see these containers in some rural or periphery districts like San Jose de Maipo, El Monte, Maipo, Batuco and Colina, and on a smaller scale in areas like Curacaví, Quillota and Limache.

Today, however, more and more specialists and amateurs have started to discover (or re-discover) and appreciate the virtues of vinification inside tinajas because of their ancestral use, which represents a heritage value in itself, and they demand their preservation; we must also consider its price, which is significantly lower than French or American oak barrels; the promotion of a traditional task, deeply rooted in the wine culture of Chile and; in enological terms, these new specialists plan an outlook of new ways for vinification, especially micro-vinification, which possess recognized qualities of microoxygenation and temperature controls. They show us a new world to explore for aromas and tastes, with wines made from different vines.

Nowadays, a group of national experts is starting to highlight the importance of rescuing the use of ancient tinajas in Chilean viticulture. Some of them are recog-

³ This type of vinification is considered by the experts as the most ancient way to produce wines. This process is intimately linked with traditions of European communities who inherited this technique from ancient Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans, who learned from Georgians and Armenians, in this way we date back to the origins of universal viticulture (author's note).

nized enologists like Pablo Morandé, Rodrigo Jordán and Marcelo Retamal, agronomists and viticulturists like Pedro Parra who is an expert producer of organic wines; and specialized journalists like Patricio Tapia and Eduardo Brethauer, just to mention the most well-known.

Certainly, the preservation of tinajas and their viticultural use is a way to respect people who have been making wine for as long as they can remember, and a way to continue using this technique, just as their ancestors did; at the same time, it is exploring a new field in order to achieve the differentiation and innovation in the way to produce, consume and think about wines.

What many consider, in the wine industry, as an eccentricity of the group of entrepreneur enologists, could become a trend in the business. The Chilean viticultural industry has expressed many times the need to diversify, innovate and reinvent itself in order to avoid being consumed by its own self complacency, standardization and loss of identity, and also make a difference from the rest of the producing countries of the New World.





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Somos especialistas en el desarrollo de asesorías técnicas en materia vitivinícola, orientados a la investigación y desarrollo de nuevos contenidos para el sector, posicionamiento estratégico, conceptualización y desarrollo de productos vitivinícolas y construcción de marca e identidad corporativa para bodegas de vinos.

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