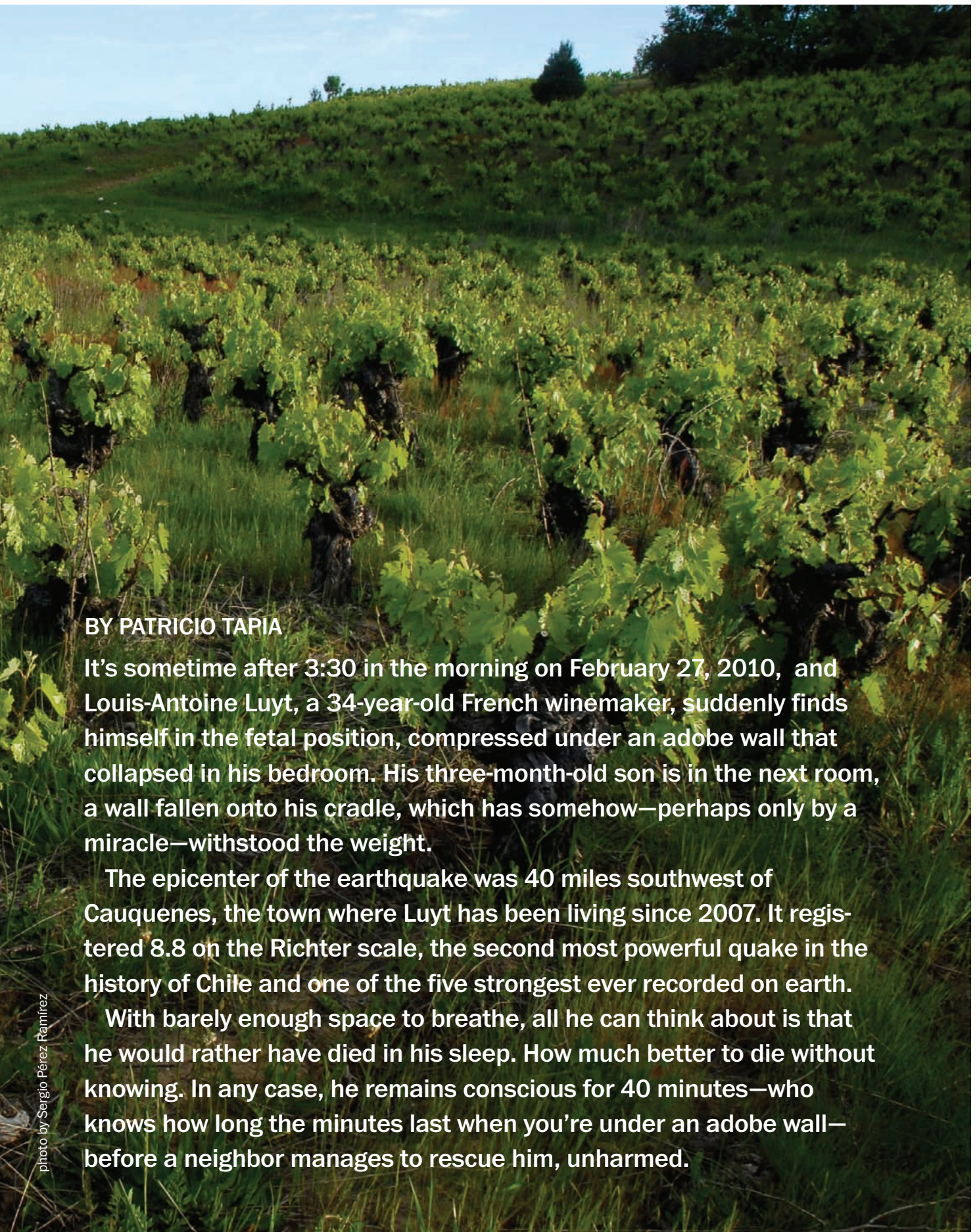




NEW
PARTISANS
FOR THE
OLDEST
VINES
OF CHILE

PAÍS

UNDER THE RUBBLE



BY PATRICIO TAPIA

It's sometime after 3:30 in the morning on February 27, 2010, and Louis-Antoine Luyt, a 34-year-old French winemaker, suddenly finds himself in the fetal position, compressed under an adobe wall that collapsed in his bedroom. His three-month-old son is in the next room, a wall fallen onto his cradle, which has somehow—perhaps only by a miracle—withstood the weight.

The epicenter of the earthquake was 40 miles southwest of Cauquenes, the town where Luyt has been living since 2007. It registered 8.8 on the Richter scale, the second most powerful quake in the history of Chile and one of the five strongest ever recorded on earth.

With barely enough space to breathe, all he can think about is that he would rather have died in his sleep. How much better to die without knowing. In any case, he remains conscious for 40 minutes—who knows how long the minutes last when you're under an adobe wall—before a neighbor manages to rescue him, unharmed.



photo by Sergio Pérez Ramírez

In 2007, he introduced his first red made from país, Uva Huasa (imported to the United States by Louis/Dressner in New York). Luyt loved the wine, but when he showed it to others they were not encouraging. “Nobody understood why I spent my time with that grape.”

If you ask Chilean enologists about país, they acknowledge its capacity to adapt—it’s not for nothing that a plant has survived in Chile for five centuries. But when they describe the wines they can make with it, more often than not their first word is “rustic.” Chilean enology students are taught that país doesn’t have color and possesses excessively astringent tannins, with aromas and flavors that are vegetal and hardly fruity. They see no place for it in fine wines.

And that’s what they told Luyt when they

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Today, almost one year after the quake, you can still see the magnitude of the devastation in Cauquenes. The place feels lost in the hills of the Maule Valley, 200 miles south of Santiago, where 40,000 residents live in a town made of mud. There’s rubble everywhere. Many of the houses are held together by improvised wooden walls, veils that barely hide the interior rooms.

Antoine, Luyt’s son, tries his first steps on the patio in front of his family’s half-collapsed house. His eyes have the intensity of his father’s, his gaze attentive, as if blinking meant missing something that happened on the other side of his eyelids. And he also seems to have inherited his father’s hyperkinetic energy.

Luyt himself is a slight man, delicate in build. He was born in the port of St-Malo, Brittany; studied economics at university in Paris; and at the age of 24 decided to test his luck in Chile. He knew little about the country, though he’d heard things here and there—like sailors’ songs about another port, Valparaíso, a legend that had built in his imagination through adolescence.

In Chile he worked as a telephone salesman, then as a waiter in a restaurant, which led to his interest in wine. He took sommelier courses in Santiago and happened to discover país, the original variety Spanish conquistadors brought to the New World. He had visited Limarí, where he saw país vineyards that

were virtually abandoned, and later in Maule, where he became enchanted by those ancient, twisted vines in the coastal hills. Luyt describes that moment like falling in love—like when you realize that the unknown woman in front of you will be the one to bring you happiness.

Until the middle of the 19th century, the future great love of Luyt was the principal source of red wines in Chile. Later, with the first imports of French varieties and the progress of modern enology, país was relegated to bulk wines. It was served in sketchy bars in the deep Chilean south; in wine terms, it was the stray dog, numb with cold, that curls up outside the bar, waiting for another drunk to kick it. For contemporary Chilean enologists, país doesn’t exist. But it does for Luyt. He not only pet the dog, he adopted it and made it part of his life.

“What stood out to me was that nobody paid attention to that grape,” says Luyt. “Nobody wanted to take advantage of the inheritance of old vines that had succeeded in adapting themselves and, especially, surviving.” In 2006, Luyt and one of his cousins started Clos Ouvert, a small project without its own winery or vineyards. Their intention was to make natural wines—like the ones Luyt had offered to his customers while working at a bar in Paris during one of his many comings and goings between France and Chile.

tasted his 2007 Uva Huasa. They left him wondering if his attempt to rescue país really was crazy—until he talked with Marcel Lapierre, the famed Beaujolais producer.

Luyt had met Lapierre’s son, Mathieu, at an enology course in Beaune, Burgundy, around 2005, and they became friends. That same year, the Lapierre family invited him to work the harvest with them at their estate in Morgon, something that Luyt has continued to do, like a ritual, every year since. He spoke to Marcel Lapierre about the old-vine país in Cauquenes. He told him about how neglected the vines were and shared his belief in their potential. By 2008, Luyt had convinced him to visit Chile with his wife.

That summer, they explored the país vineyards in Cauquenes, a region with more than 3,000 acres of the variety—almost one third of the país in Chile. “Lapierre was enchanted by what he saw, with the potential of the variety, with the people, with the old vines,” Luyt tells me as we arrive in Quenehuao, a 50-acre país vineyard owned by Luis Gardeweg, a farmer in the region.

Gardeweg also suffered from the earthquake. Though his huge adobe house, built in the middle of the 19th century, fell to pieces, he had the good fortune to escape from the rubble. He greets us, smiling, from behind a small grill, where he’s roasting goat for our lunch. He’s closing in on 60, the outlines of his mouth marked by the furrows of wrinkles

common to people who smile often.

Gardeweg calculates that his país vineyard, planted before his house was built, must be at least 150 years old. The vines aren't irrigated, and don't require it, as there is sufficient rain. Gardeweg says he farms organically, that his agricultural treatments are minimal because país takes care of itself.

His vineyard is 25 miles from the Pacific, separated from the sea by the low, rounded coastal mountains to the west. While we walk up the hillside of vines, the wind from the coast cuts the heat and Luyt and Gardeweg converse animatedly about their hopes for the new vintage. Despite their difference in age, they seem like old friends enjoying a walk through the countryside, remembering stories from old times.

It was Gardeweg's vineyard that convinced Lapierre about país, and he made some suggestions to Luyt about how to realize its potential. "He told me not to be scared about the astringency," Luyt recalls. "That I should harvest earlier, that I had to take advantage of the freshness of the grapes." Luyt moved up the harvest a couple of weeks, and, as in Beaujolais, fermented the grapes using carbonic maceration.

After the earthquake, Luyt and his cousin decided not to bottle the next vintage of Clos Ouvert; instead, Luyt set out to focus on país, vinifying different vineyards separately. The país from Quenehuao is one of them. Two thousand and nine, the first harvest, is the fruit of Marcel Lapierre's advice (after Lapierre's recent death, Mathieu continued to work with Luyt). It's a wine of intense cherry color, full of fruity aromas as if it were a Morgon; mixed with spice and herb notes, it's the

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The livelihood of the majority of the país growers depends on the market price for the grapes: about ten cents a kilo.

classic *vin de soif* to drink in summer on the terrace, without anyone noticing that the bottle is already empty.

On the trip back to town, we visit the Orellana brothers at Truquilemu, a source for one of Luyt's future single-vineyard bottlings. Waldo, the elder brother, is a man of few words; he tends five acres of old país vines on a granite hillside.

He and his brothers share the ranch, a group of houses that extends to the foot of the país vineyard, the cracked walls covered in plastic. Speaking of the earthquake and its effect on his family, Waldo says, "It was something serious." Then he looks out over the hill, the vines that provide the principal source of income for him and his brothers.

The rescue of país isn't only about wine, says Luyt; it's a social issue as well. The livelihood of the majority of the país growers depends on the market price for the grapes: about ten cents a kilo. One of Luyt's dreams is to find funds to organize a cooperative winery to vinify the grapes and sell them to a market that likes this type of wine—original wines that have little to do with what Chile currently sells abroad.

"And that market, I believe, fits into the niche of natural wines, the people that have already made the trip from industrial wines to wines that are more artisanal," he says.

But for the moment, país doesn't deliver dividends. Back in Cauquenes, Luyt rents winery space at the Instituto de Investigaciones Agropecuarias, a government agricultural entity. We walk into a winery that's around 4,000 square feet, filled with barrels against the cracked adobe walls. "You can't even imagine how all of these barrels ended up after the earthquake," Luyt says. "It was like a salad." He opens a bung and draws off a taste of what will be, if he finds the money to buy bottles, the 2010 El País de Truquilemu.

The wine is much more austere than the país from Quenehuao. He vinified it using carbonic maceration—as Lapierre had convinced him that it's a good method for draw-

ing out the fruitiness from país—but it feels relatively closed. The fruit is in the background, tart red fruit that compels me to drink it and ask, please, for a refill—a delicious wine that smells like cherries, like meat and blood sausage, something that it shares with Quenehuao.

Luyt doesn't like to talk about flavors in his wines. He says that the words don't come to him. He prefers to relate the style of each single-vineyard país to the people who care for the grapes—the friendly personality of Luis Gardeweg in Quenehuao, the brooding reticence of Waldo Orellana in Truquilemu. Who knows—maybe he's right. In Chile, nobody knows anything about país, and maybe we haven't looked at it in the right way. But it does seem to me that Quenehuao is friendly, warm like Don Luis, and Truquilemu tells you little, takes more effort to understand, like Waldo. Or maybe it's only the effect of the place, in the half-light of dusk, the smell of wine mixing with dried earth aromas from the adobe walls.

As recently as ten years ago, growers farmed nearly 40,000 acres of país in Chile; today, that number has fallen to 10,000, while varieties such as cabernet sauvignon and syrah have seen their plantings increase. If Luyt is successful in demonstrating the value of Chile's país (he's already selling his wines in the UK and hopes to start exporting to the US soon), other winemakers may become interested in the old vineyards of Cauquenes, which would help an entire community of small growers that depends on país. It would also mean the restoration of the most authentically Chilean grape variety.

If Luyt is right—and I'm sure he is—the rescue of that survivor grape will be on par with the viticultural discovery of the Casablanca Valley, which opened the door for an entire generation of wines influenced by the cold Pacific Ocean, a new facet of Chilean wine. From under the rubble—literally and metaphorically—Luyt's work with país can be as important as that. ■



Waldo Orellana