

The vineyards and wines of Switzerland

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THE VINEYARDS AND WINES OF SWITZERLAND.

Autumn! An ideal time for a tour through the winegrowing districts in Switzerland, for all those whose minds and tastes are attuned to a different melody than that of the Jazz of Lidos and smart hotels. For those holiday-makers seeking rest and refreshment for the mind and body, nothing could be more delightful than two or three weeks spent on the banks of the beautiful lakes of Geneva, Neuchâtel, Bienne, Zurich, Lugano, Maggiore, the river Rhine, or in the wild, picturesque loveliness of the Grisons. It is here that the vine grows and flourishes and yields a harvest approximating in value some 55 million francs per annum.

Autumn!... The country is ablaze with colour. There is not a farm-house or chalet without its garden or windows a riot with the vivid scarlets, yellows and purples of geraniums, sun-flowers, dahlias and asters. Nowhere is Nature more lavish with her paint-brush than in those localities where the vineyards cluster on the sunny slopes, which appear to run down straight from the azure of the heavens to the cool, sapphire depths of lakes or rivers.

The scenery in the different Cantons is most varied, and the traveller gains impressions so diverse, that during a journey of barely a few hours, it is as if he had visited a number of foreign countries. Thus, the Canton of Vaud bears in its gentle beauty the charm of a Florentine landscape; the wild, rich loveliness of the Vallais is typically Spanish in character: the shores of the Lakes of Neuchâtel, Bienne and Morat remind one by their gracious, happy aspect of certain provinces of sunny France; the Tessin, with its luxuriant vegetation, its Italianesque architecture and laughing, carefree population might well be a favoured spot in Sicily. There are certain places on the Lake of Geneva which possess a Burgundian beauty; sunny slopes on the Lake of Zürich which might be mistaken for Lake Garda. In the Grisons and the St. Gall Rheintal the vineyards form the first links of the famous chain along the Rhine.

The whole countryside lies smiling and serene. It would seem as if even the anticipation of the delights to be derived from the future golden and ruby liquids radiates a feeling of content and cheerfulness which is so characteristic of the entire winegrowing population in Switzerland. They are a gay, tenacious, optimistic race, laborious and plucky. They stake their "all" on the delicate, perishable plant, facing the dangers of frost, hail or insect pests — in other words ruin — with a magnificent courage. The Swiss are justly proud of their wines, which, if they do not equal the famous vintages of France and Germany have attained a high degree of excellency and have formed the subject of praise in song and verse of many a foreign poet and "connoisseur." Much has been done by the State to improve the quality of Swiss wines by means of subventions to wine-growers and special training centres.

The vintage is a very important event, looked forward to with impatience and joy by all. It is the crowning of a laborious and anxious period. In many districts the young people give themselves up to two days of whole-hearted enjoyment at a Kermess when the vines are flowering. Here, also the old custom prevails that the vineyards be closed and no work therein whilst the grapes are ripening, this being a solemn, holy moment, when God's blessing is poured on to the fruits of the earth. This is the time when the night watchman goes armed to the teeth, with the right of shooting on sight any marauders in the vineyards, and the elders of the village congregate in solemn conclave to decide upon the best moment for the vintage to start.

Through the thick morning mist the merry throng of vintagers wends its way at dawn, towards the vineyards, preceded by men with wooden receptacles or "brantards," pulling and pushing the heavy press. Merry laughter and gay call ring through the opalescent haze which envelopes the vintagers until King Sol shakes aside his mysterious veils and appears in all his splendour, flooding the whole country with his warm golden rays. Whilst the girls in their bright coloured head-kerchiefs are engaged in gathering the grapes into baskets, the "brantards" go to and from the press, carrying the picked fruit. The village swains keep a sharp look out to see if the pickers have overlooked any bunch on the vine, as by virtue of an age-long custom, the brantard has the right to claim a kiss as forfeit for such negligence. What a Heaven-sent opportunity for a love-sick youth, as no maiden dare refuse to conform to this custom; sometimes, she may even — if she lends an ear to Dan Cupid's insidious whisper-consciously overlook a bunch, if the brantard be to her liking.

Following a tradition which dates back to the Roman period the end of the vintage is celebrated by festivities of a distinctly Bacchanalian character. In many places these rejoicings bear a simple local character and consist of songs and dances around the great press to the music of violin or accordion, the drinking of golden must and the eating of chestnuts roasted on glowing braziers. In other district they take on a more important, organised aspect, as in the case of the "Fête des Vignerons" at Vevey, which only recurs every 25 years and is a marvellous spectacle, and the "Fête" at Neuchâtel, which is an annual affair, attracting large numbers of visitors.

These vintage festivals are of the greatest interest, not only to the ordinary tourist but also to the lover and student of folklore and old country customs, who will find himself transported from the humdrum existence of every-day-life into the care-free, picturesque revels which the priests and acolytes of the god of wine have held throughout the centuries. For the vineyards of Neuchâtel were first planted in 998, those in the valley of the Rhine are more than a thousand years old, those of Neuveville date from mediaeval times and there exists a famous cellar 8 metres under the ancient city of Sierre, wherein the huge vats of larch-wood have treasured the golden "Glacier" wines for over 250 years.

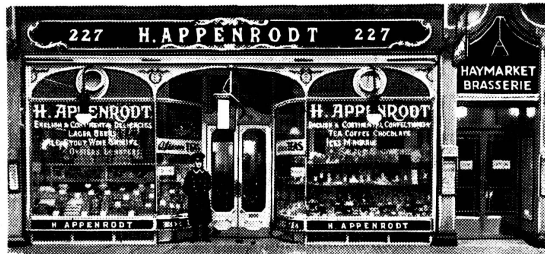
Few English people realize the extent and importance of the Swiss grape cure, which is particularly beneficial to sufferers from gout and other uric acid disorders. This cure lasts about 3 weeks. It is alleged that in order to derive 100% benefit from it, the grapes should be eaten "alive," i.e. straight off the vine, the skin and pips being swallowed together with the pulp. At the same time, it would appear advisable to wash the fruit first so that no sulphate of copper (used against insect pests) remains on the grapes. Usually, the cure begins with the patient having to eat one pound of grapes a day which quantity is gradually increased to 4 or even 5 pounds per diem.

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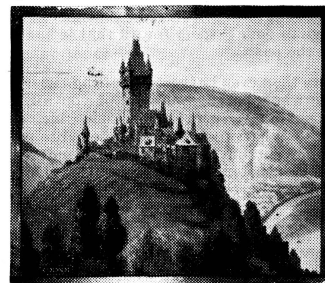
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This is one of the many charming oil paintings, which are characteristic of the decorations at the Haymarket Brasserie.

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The Neuchâtel vineyards stretch in an unbroken line along the lakeside, and produce both light and red wine of excellent quality. The famous Dézaley vineyards belong to the municipality of Lausanne and there is an amusing custom connected with them. At the conclusion of the vintage a day is fixed when the public is invited to come and taste the wine free of charge. Needless to state that there is an enthusiastic response to this invitation. Most of the wines produced in the Cantons of Geneva and Basle are for local consumption, whilst the Aargauer "Schinzacher" proves somewhat of a temptation to visitors to the Spa of Baden, who have been placed on the "water wagon" by their medical advisers. The "nostrano," with its rough, Chianti-like taste, is much beloved by the Tessinois. The Zürich "Sausser" is a very popular light golden wine, whilst Schaffhausen produces an excellent vintage famous for its delicate "bouquet," as does also Thurgau. The Grisons also have fine wines, whilst the Vallais "Dôle" has a widespread renown. It is averred that many of these wines should be drunk at the altitude at which they were vinted in order to be able to enjoy them at their best.

Persis Grooke.