

All what you should know about Swiss wines

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ALL WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SWISS WINES

Give me a bowl of wine.

In this I bury all unkindness.

SHAKESPEARE

Switzerland has won recognition as a vacation land, as a producer of watches, machinery, textiles and other internationally famous products. Little is known, however, about her wines, an important branch of her agricultural activities.

There are regions in Switzerland where the vine is cultivated extensively, and where the production of wine has become an essential local industry: along the shores of Lakes Geneva and Neuchâtel, for example, in the low-lying Upper Rhône Valley, in the Ticino. In Eastern and Central Switzerland, although this cultivation is not so important nationally, it is still a factor of regional trade and agriculture.

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The characteristic of Swiss wines is their extreme diversity of bouquet and savour. There is a tremendous difference between, say, a *Dézaley* (a vintage produced to the east of Lausanne) and the *Vispertermin* wines, which, incidentally, are produced from the highest vineyards in Europe, at 3,600 feet above sea-level.



(Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office)

"The Wine-grower's year is a hard one."

The largest producers of wines are the Cantons of Vaud, Valais and Neuchâtel; their vintages are sold throughout the country and exported. The produce of the Ticino, Geneva, and Eastern and Central Swiss vineyards are mostly consumed locally.

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It must be remembered that the Swiss way of life resembles that of other Continental countries in that wine is served at the two principal meals of the day in the majority of households. White wines are drunk as a refreshing and companionable beverage at the café. On all occasions where an Englishman would drink beer, or an American a "Coke and rum", the Swiss prefers two "décis" of white wine.

In the wine-producing Cantons, this cultivation has coloured local life and lent it the charm of ancient customs. The wine-grower's year is a hard one. He is a land-worker, but one even more subject than his fellows to the vagaries of the weather. Too much sun or too little, hail storms, mists are all his enemies; the yield of a year's toil can be ruined overnight.

As in all branches of agriculture in Switzerland, the vine-grower cultivates his land on a small scale. Terraces and "clos" have been handed down to the present owners by generations of sturdy husbandmen. Larger producers own their own equipment — presses, vinification and bottling plant. Others press their harvest in the communal presses and store the vintage in age-old vats in the family vaults.

The sale of the year's vintages takes place in November. Merchants and hoteliers come from all parts to bid for this or that wine. Bulk buying is frequent and bidding runs high or low according to the quality of the "year".

Connoisseurs appreciate the fine individual bouquet of Swiss wines, and travellers in Switzerland are learning to ask for open wines or fine local vintages which proudly bear the label of a famous "Clos".

The Vaud Vintages

The Canton de Vaud is the major producer of Swiss wines. The vineyards extend all along the sunny, south-facing shores of Lake Geneva, to the east and west of Lausanne. A smaller wine producing area lies around the southern end of Lake Neuchâtel, around the town of Yverdon.

Vaud vintages are classed in two major groups: *Lavaux* (from the vineyards east of Lausanne) and *La Côte* (west of that city). Most picturesque in the Lavaux district, with its steeply terraced hillside rising almost sheer from the Lake.

The stock cultivated is mostly Chasselas, of Burgundian origin, and the produce from this region is, generally speaking, white wine. The Chasselas has been found to adapt itself most favourably to the conditions prevailing in

Switzerland, although by the alchemy of local soil and climate, it has acquired qualities very different from the original. Within the two groups of *Lavaux* and *La Côte* wines, there are many subdivisions. A connoisseur can easily distinguish between, say, a *Cully* and an *Yvorne* vintage. The *Vaudois Chablais* white wines are produced in the region of Aigle, in the foothills of the Alps: *Bex*, *Ollon*, *Aigle*, *Yvorne* and *Villeneuve* are strong, smooth wines, rather heady.

Dézaley, *St. Saphorin*, *Rivaz*, *Epesses*, *Rieux*, *Villette*, *Lutry* are wines which take their names from the small villages in the *Lavaux* proper, a ten-mile stretch of shore between Lausanne and Montreux. The city of Lausanne itself owns the famous "Clos des Abbayes" and "Clos des Moines", the produce of which is not placed on the market but reserved for official receptions by the Municipality.

At Pully, originally a village of wine producers, now practically a suburb of Lausanne, the *Lavaux* comes to an end. The vineyards of *La Côte* begin to the west of Lausanne at Morges. Cultivation is easier in this district, for the Lake-shore rises more gently. Here we find the well-known vintages of *Féchy*, *Bougy*, *Luins*, *Begnins*, *Mont-sur-Rolle*, and others too numerous to enumerate.

From the northern part of Vaud, around the southern end of Lake Neuchâtel, come the white and red wines of *Orbe*, *Grandson*, *Bonvillars*, *Concise* and *Vully*.

The Kingdom of the Fendant

The territory of the Canton of Valais, especially that lying along the right bank of the Upper Rhône, seems to offer ideal conditions for the production of wine: a dry climate, hot summers, and long, mellow autumn months. The vineyards are in many places irrigated by canals, locally called "bisses".

The best-known and most popular of Valais wines is *Fendant*, a rather heady white wine of delicious bouquet, produced from Chasselas stock. *Dôle*, the red wine most currently produced in the Valais, is obtained from the famous Burgundian stock, the Black Pinot (Pinot noir), and connoisseurs sometimes consider it the best of Swiss wines.

Valais vintages mostly bear the name, not of their village or origin, but of the stock from which they are produced. A great diversity of "special" wines are the pride of Valais producers: *Johannisberg*, a vintage similar to Rhine wine obtained from green Sylvaner stock: *Riesling* (or *Petit Vin*) from another Rhenish stock. *Hermitage* is an exquisite Valais wine, both red and white. Other famous vintages are *Petite Arvine*, *Amigne*, *Humagne*, having a very delicate and fruity bouquet.

From the Grey Pinot stock, the Valais also produces excellent *Malvoisie*, a fine dessert and appetizer wine. For the production of these vintages, the grapes are not gathered until very late in the season, and when fermented, the bouquet remains extremely sweet.

Another locally famous wine is the *Vin du Glacier*, a rather hard flavoured white wine made in the plain of the Rhône Valley and stocked for years in the vaults of neighbouring High Alpine villages. *Gamay* and *Rouge du Pays* are red wines very popular among local consumers.

Sparkling Wines from Neuchâtel

Neuchâtel wines, which are mostly white, are light and sparkling. The soil in the vineyard region is chalky, and, for over a century Neuchâtel vintners have adopted many of the methods practised by their French colleagues.

The cultivation of the vine flourishes all along the north-easterly shore of Lake Neuchâtel, from Vaumarcus to St. Blaise. A less important district is found around the southern end of the neighbouring Lake of Biennne. Most of these wines are produced from Chasselas stock, a few from the Black Pinot; they are usually sold under the collective name of "Neuchâtel" and only sometimes under that of their village or "clos" of origin.

The criterion of a "good" Neuchâtel vintage is that it forms a star in the glass as it is being poured out. This is due to the method Neuchâtel vintners practise of bottling their wines when they are still young; the second stage of fermentation is operated, not in the vat, but in the bottle, so that a fairly high carbonic acid content is obtained. For this reason too, Neuchâtel wines sparkle in the glass. They are light and refreshing, not intended to be matured over a great number of years, but to be sipped and enjoyed in an atmosphere of light-hearted good fellowship.

Eastern and Central Switzerland

Zurich remains the leading wine-producing region in this part of Switzerland. Climate and geographical conditions are less suitable to this cultivation than the warmer western Cantons. Nevertheless, in recent years, Zurich particularly has greatly improved its production by importing the Black Pinot stock (known here as *Klevner*). The villages along the southern shore of Lake Zurich have given their names to the most popular vintages: for instance, *Herrliberg*, *Meilen*, *Erlenbach*, all of which are rather sweet, red wines. A surprisingly wide variety of vintages is produced in this region ranging from the *Limmat* wines to the *Flaach*, *Wiesendangen* and others.

In the northern Canton of Schaffhausen, the most important wine-producing region is around Stein-am-Rhein, from which come the *Blaurock* and the *Käfersteiner*. An excellent *Malvoisie* also is obtained in the neighbourhood of the town of Schaffhausen, along the right bank of the Rhine.

Other Cantons — Aargau, St. Gallen, Thurgau, the Grisons and Basle — also contribute to the national wine production, but in a smaller way. Their vintages are less well known and, for the most part, consumed locally.

Geneva and Ticino

Geneva wines are perhaps less well known than other Swiss wines. They are, for the most part, light white wines produced from Chasselas stock. They are fresh and sparkling, slightly dry, owing to the method of vinification employed.

The sunny, southernmost Canton of Switzerland, the Italian-speaking Ticino, is a fairly large producer of wines, both red and white, although this cultivation is not highly intensified.

The somewhat harsh native wines of the Ticino are known as "Nostrano" and are obtained from Bondola and other stock. The so-called "American" stock is marketed throughout Switzerland as dessert fruit and for the production of non-alcoholic grape juice.

A very favourable development has occurred of late years in the Ticino's vine cultivation. An increasingly large acreage is being planted with "Merlot" stock imported from the classical vinegrowing region of Bordeaux in France. The vintages produced from this stock are strong, fruity red wines; they are marketed under the official label of "VITI", itself a guarantee of quality.