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THE WINES OF THE CANTON OF ZURICH

By FRIEDRICH GALLER

The Canton of Zurich has quite a few special features. For one thing, it has the largest population of any Swiss Canton. For another, it has the city of Zurich, not only the biggest Swiss city, but also the country's leading business and tourist centre.

In Zurich the liberal and puritanical outlooks vie with each other for public favour. Preference for the livelier, gayer way of life is not confined to visitors from abroad. This is also the choice of an increasing number of Zurich people. Whether in trade, commerce, industry or agriculture, they are hardworking people, but at the same time they have a traditional cheerfulness. In addition, they appreciate the value of wine, that gift of nature which has helped to form the character of every community.

Wine is one of the less obvious treasures of the Canton of Zurich, since not many people know the full extent and variety of the wine-growing carried on there, nor its historical and present-day importance. Even at a cursory glance, the picture is surprising; a wine-growing Canton where ancient tradition is linked with technical progress, and where all those engaged in cultivating the vines take pride in their job.

After being given its beginnings by the Romans and Burgundians, viniculture in the Canton of Zurich was really created by the peasants, who over the centuries have followed the annual cycle from first growth to vintage, using experience, know-how and manual skill to best advantage. They are engaged in more than one kind of battle, not only to protect the vine from pests and diseases, but also for their very land, which is especially seriously threatened in times of economic prosperity and increased building activity. For instance, in the five years from 1958 to 1963, the area of vine cultivation in Zurich went down from 435.09 hectares to 396.36 hectares, the land affected being for the most part slopes affording good views and producing good quality wine.

Today, the vine is still cultivated in 94 communes, spread throughout the Canton. There are, however, three big production areas, including the Lake of Zurich. These areas are sub-divided into districts, which are themselves made up of communes. Thus, wine-growing is carried on in the Limmat, Furt, Wehn, Glatt and Töss Valleys, in the Thur Valley with the District of Andelfingen, the Kohlfirst Region and, of course, on the slopes round the Lake of Zurich. A striking feature is the way the vine follows the water-courses which have etched themselves deeply into the countryside, the result being steep slopes on which the grapes ripen best.

The biggest wine-growing commune in the Canton of Zurich is Stäfa on the Lake of Zurich, with Weiningen in the Limmat Valley taking second place. Then come Freienstein-Teufen (Bülach District), Meilen on the Lake of Zurich, Kleinandelfingen, Rafz and Trüllikon (Andelfingen District).

The wine yield varies greatly from year to year. For example, in 1956 it was only 321,800 litres, while in 1959 it was 2,848,500 litres. 1963's yield, 1,568,000 litres, can therefore be regarded as a moderately average one. The main reason why the results vary so much is frost, which can be described without exaggeration as the enemy number one of the Zurich wine growers. There are also other climatic influences which either hinder or help the growth of the grapes, and in addition, there are a number of diseases. All in all, the big variations in the annual yield are understandable, although ever greater protective

measures are being taken. The vineyards are heated in winter and spring when the cold threatens to freeze the young buds. The vines are sprayed to ward off pests and diseases, and the vineyards are watered in dry weather. Despite all this, it has not yet proved possible to produce a yield which is constant in both quality and quantity.

(The results for 1964 have just been published. It was the best year since 1951 with 2,957,100 litres. Ed.)

The juice of the freshly-pressed grapes is measured according to its sugar content. This is done by means of the so-called Oechsle scale, which shows by how many grammes one litre of grape juice is heavier than one litre of water. The heavier it is, the greater is the grape-sugar content, which is converted into alcohol at a ratio of approximately 8 to 1 after fermentation. Thus 80 degrees Oechsle give about 10 degrees of alcohol.

The two principal types of vine cultivated in the Canton are the Purple Burgundy (Pinot Noir) for red wines, and the Riesling-Sylvaner. In addition there are the Räuschling and the Tokay as well as smaller quantities of direct bearers, which are used mainly in the production of non-alcoholic grape juice. The lesser quality Elbling grape has been completely superseded.

It is worth pointing out that great efforts have always been made in the Canton of Zurich to improve quality. Very early on, the producers adapted themselves to the needs of the consumers, by carrying out a large-scale changeover to red wines, and as far as white wines are concerned, by giving more and more preference to the smooth, palatable varieties.

And now a word about how the City of Zurich fits into this picture. Once upon a time, a great deal of wine was produced within the city, and in fact it still is, although in reduced quantity. The City Records reveal that in particular the Hottingen, Riesbach, Höngg, Fluntern and Enge quarters were important wine-growing districts. At the "Weingüllen", near the present-day Ilgen Schools, there were extensive vineyards, part of which was bequeathed to the Commune in 1727 by Heinrich Zimmermann, as a "Communal Drink". At Fluntern, the "Communal Drink" played a possibly even more important role, especially at the New Year, Midsummer and Autumn meetings, the latter being the one at which the grape-harvesting time was fixed.

Riesbach had extensive vineyards on the southern slope of the Stephansburg — as the name Weinegg recalls — and until quite recently below the Neumünster Church. On the Südstrasse, the "Wonneberg" as it is known, vines are still to be found, as they are at various spots in Höngg, Albisrieden, Altstetten and on the Bürglistrasse near Enge Church where a white wine is grown which the late King of the Hellenes liked so much that he promptly put in a sizeable order. Today there are still nine vineyard proprietors within the city boundary, their holdings totalling 3.41 hectares.

In 1962, the total of wine produced was 11,400 litres, of which 10,000 litres were white wine. But in 1963 the total yield was only 5,400 litres. Incidentally there is never and trouble in selling these city wines, because they have a rarity value.

Whether they grow in the Canton or the City, the Zurich wines are an acceptable drink prompting lively conversation as well as aiding meditation. Taken with the speciality dishes of Zurich, they help you to see that life can be fun, and the world a harmonious place. Some examples: Räuschling with Pike à la zurichoise, Riesling

Sylvaner with Geschnetzeltes and Rösti, Clevner from the Lake of Zurich with Mistkratzerli or Tripe, or, say, a fine Beerli from the Purple Burgundy grapes with Zürcher Ratsherrentopf or Leberspiessli.

(By courtesy of "Zurich".)

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