

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1983)
Heft: 1802

Artikel: The brotherhoods of Bacchus
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687145>

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The brotherhoods of Bacchus

HEARING vaguely of "confréries vineuses", "confréries bachiques, gastronomiques et artistiques" or, in German, "Weinbruderschaften", the uninitiated often wonder what they stand for. They are in no case associations holding riotous bacchanalia – far from it!

Such brotherhoods exist in all vine-growing countries with the aim of promoting ever better wines. What the public generally hears about are their wine tasting competitions during *chapitres* – extraordinary sessions to which outsiders are invited. These competitions are followed by a banquet during which several local wines are served, each wine harmonising with a different course of the local gastronomic specialities.

Connoisseurs do not gulp wine to quench their thirst. First, they hold up the glass to admire the wine's colour and sparkle. Then they smell its bouquet before taking small sips which they swallow slowly, the better to appreciate the taste.

There exist eight such brotherhoods in French-speaking Switzerland alone beside the several in German and Italian Switzerland. Their motto is to Serve, honour and celebrate wine in general and in particular the wines of the region of the particular brotherhood.

In the Canton of Valais, the *Ordre de la Channe* was founded in the Château de Villa de Sierre on December 1, 1957. The château, built in the 16th and 17th centuries by the family de Platea and later passing into the hands of the family de Preux, has splendid wood-panelled rooms, vaulted hallways and a gothic stairway.

It now belongs to a Foundation whose aim is to provide visitors with a taste of the best Valais wines. On the wall of the spiral stairway an inscription says:

*Maledictus in homine
qui confidit
Benedictus in Deo*

Anyone, lady or gentleman, can apply for membership in the

Ordre de la Channe, but must be presented to the Council by two sponsors who are members of the *ordre*. If accepted, the candidate is knighted during a solemn autumn *chapitre* of the *ordre*.

The *procureur* – highest officer – touches his shoulders, not with a sword, but with a dry vine-stock, after which the ribbon of his rank with the badge of the brotherhood – in the Valais a stylised grape – is hung over his shoulders. The knight then drinks the wine of honour from an ornate silver goblet and, last but not least, receives a diploma.

A brotherhood is composed of knights, officers, councillors, Grand Officers, a commander, or *procureur* in the Valais, who is presiding officer, and a council of dignitaries. All decisions are taken by the council, but have to be approved by the majority of the brotherhood during one of the two yearly ordinary sessions.

After a few years of membership, a knight who has rendered the brotherhood particular services is elected to the rank of officer and may later go on to even higher rank. But the Council can exclude any member who dishonours wine by drunkenness.

Each year, the *Ordre de la Channe* publishes original works dealing with vineyards and wine in a pamphlet called *propos* and holds special sessions to make Valais wines known abroad.

It takes an active interest in national and international efforts in connection with problems relating to producing wine and encourages any initiative to create or develop museums of vines, wines and all the instruments that can be employed to

produce them.

The brotherhood sponsors all forms of art – poems, writings, paintings, songs and craftsmanship – dealing with vineyards and wines, as well as supporting research to improve the quality of wine. Vineyards and wine cellars are regularly inspected for this purpose.

The Swiss Federation of Bacchic, Gastronomic and Artistic Brotherhoods was founded in Neuchâtel on March

21, 1970. It groups not only the brotherhoods of the cantons Geneva, Vaud, Neuchâtel, Valais, but also the Swiss brotherhood La Vaudoise of Quebec (Canada), and the *Ordre des Chevaliers du Bon Pain* (Brotherhood of the Knights of Good Bread) of French-speaking Switzerland. The Swiss Federation is also a member of the International Federation of Wine Brotherhoods.

Lee Eungster

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