

January 30, 2015 3:29 pm

## Swiss wines



Jancis Robinson

‘It had been some time since I had tasted many Swiss wines, and I was truly excited by much of what I saw’

Gilles Besse is a handsome jazz saxophonist-turned-wine-producer and TV pundit. He is also president of Swiss Wine Promotion, and his belief is that Swiss wine is not celebrated enough abroad. When I last saw him, in November, he talked about how difficult his job was and how hard it is to manage the Swiss confederation with its three languages and three wine cultures.

Since the recent liberation of the Swiss franc, the price of Swiss wines in export markets will have soared. Swiss wines have long seemed relatively expensive and even before the national bank ended the euro cap, Switzerland managed to export only 1.8 per cent of its wine.

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My co-author of *Wine Grapes*, Swiss grape geneticist José Vouillamoz, is a human promotional aid for Besse, living in the middle of some of the Valais canton’s most stunning vineyards and lecturing energetically about the virtues of Swiss wine on the international wine circuit. His argument is that most of Switzerland’s vineyards are so steep and difficult to tend to that each hectare requires 2,000 hours of work each year. Taking that into account, he says, “Swiss wine should cost between three and five times the price of Bordeaux”.

When I last saw him in action, Vouillamoz was presenting a dozen Swiss wines to hundreds of international wine bloggers at their last annual get-together. It was in Montreux, Besse having seen the promotional possibilities of offering to host them in Switzerland. Few of the bloggers had tasted much Swiss wine before and most were impressed, not least with the assembly of 40 top producers who showed a range of their wares after Vouillamoz’s presentation.

It had been some time since I had tasted many Swiss wines, and I was truly excited by much of what I saw. Nowadays, rather to my surprise, Switzerland produces more red wine than white, with Pinot Noir, Gamay and Merlot being three of the four most-planted grape varieties. Pinot, which thrives all over the country apart from in Italian Switzerland in the south, has overtaken the country’s signature white wine grape, Chasselas, also sometimes called Fendant.

Wine drinkers in French Switzerland worship this grape, revelling in tiny differences between the produce of handkerchief-sized vineyards, many of them climbing steep terraces buttressed by painstakingly built dry stone walls. I was told by someone who had recuperated an old vineyard that these terraces cost about SFr600 (£460) per square metre to rebuild. Switzerland is the only country I have come across where yields are measured not in tonnes per acre or hectolitres per hectare, but in kilos per square metre. Everything is small scale. One village, Saillon in Valais, is proud of being home to the smallest vineyard in the world, with precisely three vines that apparently belong to the Dalai Lama. Much is ridiculously scenic. The vineyards of Vaud that cling to the north shore of Lake Geneva, Chasselas country par excellence, are deemed a Unesco World Heritage site.



Outside Switzerland, Chasselas is regarded as a rather ordinary grape, more for eating than vinifying. To non-Swiss palates the relatively bland, soft style of even the finest examples takes some getting used to. I always get a shock, when taking my first mouthful, at how low in acidity it seems. But the best do have an attractive raciness and, sometimes, a certain saltiness. It is still common to encourage the second softening malolactic fermentation of Chasselas but I wonder whether it is wise.

In Montreux, there was discussion of how well Swiss Chasselas can age. I was agnostic on this topic but then had a chance, back in London, to try a selection of mature examples from some of the most celebrated Chasselas villages from vintages spanning 2008 to 1976. I loved the labels — they are unlike any others and hugely varied, although some are the kind of Victorian period pieces that a modern marketing company might seek to emulate. I also tried to love the wines but succeeded in enthusing, considerably, about only one — Luc Massy's 1984 Chemin de Fer from Dézaley, which had a fascinatingly rich cocktail of aromas. The rest seemed just a bit too muted or old for my taste.

The vineyards of Valais, in the upper Rhône valley to the east of Lake Geneva, were looking almost absurdly beautiful on the sunny autumn day I visited them after the bloggers' conference. We passed an oenothèque by the road, a country wine bar where locals were sitting in the sun, sipping wine and nibbling snacks. The vineyards were a neat patchwork of gold, amber and orange. The snow-covered Alps glistened above them. The vineyards literally seemed to be sunbathing, lying back at an angle with eyes closed. Some vineyards were covered with nets, the grapes left after the main harvest to shrivel on the vine to produce sweetish wines from grapes described as flétris. Valais vineyards luxuriate in 2,500 hours of sunshine in an average year (Burgundy has less than 2,000). Irrigation is essential, and expensive.

This is the hotspot (literally) for the Valais' admirably well-curated collection of indigenous grape varieties. This is the one region in the world that was ahead of the curve, researching and rescuing nearly extinct local vines way back in the early 1990s. So the Valais village of Fully is famous for (Petite) Arvine, the attractively grapefruity grape that is the most planted of Switzerland's 20-odd native and varied vine varieties. The village of Leytron is famous for its Humagne Rouge, while Vétroz is the kingdom of the heady Amigne grape. All very neat and Swiss.

Switzerland's real wine treasures are its indigenous grapes, including Completer and the super-rare Rèze for white wines (there are a total seven acres of Rèze in the world) and Cornalin and Petit Robert/Robez for reds. Païen/Heida are Swiss names for a relative of Gewürztraminer.

Specialist importers of Swiss wine such as alpinewines.co.uk in the UK and Neal Rosenthal in the US don't have an easy job, but they should not be ignored by curious wine lovers.

*Tasting notes on JancisRobinson.com*

*Illustration by Ingram Pinn*

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#### **Jancis's picks**

All these wines are world class. I have italicised the grapes to help make sense of the names.

#### **Whites**

- Domaine Grand'Cour, Grand Cour Blanc (*Sauvignon/Kerner*) 2013 Geneva
- Bolle, Collection Chandra Kurt, Yvorne Grand Cru *Chasselas* 2011 Vaud
- Domaine La Colombe, Brez *Chasselas* 2013 Vaud
- Blaise Duboux, Haut de Pierre Dézaley *Chasselas* 2013 Vaud
- Pierre-Luc Leyvraz, Dézaley Grand Cru *Chasselas* 2013 Vaud
- L'Orpailleur, Chablais *Petite Arvine* 2013 Vaud
- Marie-Thérèse Chappaz, (dry) *Petite Arvine* 2013 Valais
- Didier Joris, *Arvine* 2013 and *Païen* 2011 Valais
- Domaine des Muses, Tradition Heida 2013 Valais
- Domaines Rouvinez, Ch Lichten *Petite Arvine* 2002 Valais

- Weinbau Schwarzenbach, R3 *Räuschling* 2013 Zurichsee
- Weingut Donatsch *Completer* 2012 Graubünden

### Reds

- Domaine Grand’Cour *Merlot* 2011 Geneva
- Blaise Duboux, Epesses *Plant Robez* 2013 Vaud
- Domaine Mermetus *Plant Robert* 2013 Vaud
- Clos de Tsampéhro, Rouge Edition I *Cornalin* and others 2011 Valais
- Jean-René Germanier *Cornalin* 2012 Valais
- Histoire d’Enfer, Valais (amazing range of *Pinot Noirs* and *Humagne* of both colours)
- Cantina Kopp von der Crone Visini, Balin *Merlot* 2009 Ticino
- Peter Wegelin, Malanser *Blauburgunder Reserva* 2011 Graubünden



A rare sighting of a Swiss wine on a retail shelf. This Petite Arvine Reserve, a Swiss treasure, from Histoire d’Enfer is £37 from Huntsworth Wine of London W8 (0207 229 1602)

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/47fb17fc-a743-11e4-8a71-00144feab7de.html>

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