

Postcard from Zurich: a window into the world of Swiss wines

Most Swiss wine never leaves the country, but an annual event in a former Zurich factory is the ideal place to try it



© Matthew Cook

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One hundred years ago, if you had passed by the Escher Wyss factory in what was then Zurich's gritty, industrial heartland, you might have glimpsed a ship being rolled out through the arched gates of the grand brick edifice known as the Schiffbau.

The building, now a protected monument in what has become the city's super-cool, strictly post-industrial west side, still stands proud, though today it houses a handsome restaurant, a couple of theatres, a jazz bar and an exhibition space. And, as unlikely as it would have seemed to its former boiler-suited workers, the building is also now the ideal portal to the often obscure world of Swiss wine.

While most casual wine drinkers have a vague mental map of Europe's main grape-growing areas, Switzerland remains a blank. Little wonder, since, though the country has been making wine enthusiastically since Roman times, less than 2 per cent of it leaves the country.

I am at the Schiffbau for the Swiss Wine Tasting, now in its 10th year, where the country's top winemakers converge at the end of every summer to present their wines. Most are members of the *Mémoire des Vins Suisses*, an association founded in 2002 to shine a spotlight on Switzerland's best and to promote the wines' capacity to age gracefully.

It is soon apparent this is more than a trade fair for those involved though, the organisation insists "a strong showing by the Swiss wine-growing fraternity both at home and abroad is almost a patriotic duty" (the arrangement of corks on the association's logo forms a cross, as on the country's flag). The annual tasting is their moment for a strong showing. In the space of a day, you

can travel the length and breadth of the country, taste the wines and meet their makers, all helpfully gathered under one roof, all doing their patriotic duty.

Furnished with a tasting glass, my personal polystyrene spittoon and the list of winemakers present, I launch myself into the hall to join the throng of visitors. Early in the day, it is a mix of sommeliers, chefs, importers and visiting wine enthusiasts. Towards the end of the afternoon, numbers are swelled by workers from the offices that surround the Schiffbau.

My first stop is at the table of St Jodern Kellerei, a co-operative in Visperterminen in the canton of Valais. Director Michael Hock introduces me to his range of Heida wines made from the Savagnin grape of the Jura, which has been adopted by this high-achieving Alpine region to make spicy, fleshy whites of great distinction.

Next, I home in on Ticino, close to the Italian border, where Barbara von der Crone acquaints me with her range of elegant Merlots, including an intriguing Merlot-Chardonnay blend created in response to demand for a white wine in a region dominated by (red) Merlot.

There is a happy buzz throughout the day, well lubricated by lovely wines and lively encounters. It is clear that for many of the producers present, the tasting is a busman's holiday, with elements of the county fair thrown in. They take time off from their tables to criss-cross the hall, salute colleagues, taste one another's wines and get up to speed with what's happening in regions other than their own.

Further along, Raymond Paccot of La Colombe in the canton of Vaud extricates himself from a gaggle of admirers to show me some of the legendary Chasselas and Pinot Gris grown in his biodynamic vineyards, which slope gently towards Lake Geneva. I fetch up in the German-speaking region at the adjacent tables of partners Nadine Saxer and Stefan Gysel for a taste of their quaffable Riesling-Sylvaner and elegant, cool-climate Pinot Noir grown in upstate Zurich and Schaffhausen.

As I make my way back down the hall towards the famous arched gates, I reflect that it is not only the Schiffbau that has come a long way. Swiss wines have made huge strides, too — and perhaps, ultimately, it is a boon rather than a bind that you have to come here to try them.

Details

The Swiss Wine Tasting ([swiss-wine-tasting.ch](https://www.swiss-wine-tasting.ch)) is organised annually in Zurich at the end of August by Mémoire des Vins Suisses. Tickets cost SFr20 (£15.60) online or SFr30 at the door, plus a SFr10 deposit on the tasting glass

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