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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Food Perspective

You have to work to find them, but Swiss wines are well worth the chase



The terraced vineyards in the Valais region in Switzerland. (Patricia von Ah/Swiss Wines)

By **Jason Wilson**

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Switzerland is well known for many things: Swiss chocolate, Swiss watches, Swiss cheese, secret Swiss bank accounts. But Swiss wine? Most people don't even realize there is such a thing. The Swiss certainly don't make a whole lot of wine, only about a million hectoliters — a drop in the bucket compared with France's 42 million or Italy's 48 million hectoliters. And Switzerland only exports about 2 percent of its wine. By comparison, Italy and Spain each export about half of the wines they produce.

So according to just about any metric, Swiss wines represent the height of obscurity. And since 40 indigenous grape varieties grow in Switzerland, including whites like petite arvine and amigne to reds like humagne rouge and cornalin — what better place for someone who is obsessed with enigmatic, off-the-beaten-path wines (like me) to explore. But beyond the geeks (like me), Swiss wines should appeal to people who like cool-climate, low-alcohol, Alpine-style wines that have grown in popularity over the past several years.

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“It’s a good time for alternative wine countries like Switzerland. There is a curiosity that I’ve never seen before,” said Gilles Besse, winemaker at Jean-René Germanier in the mountainous Valais region, where grapes grow close to some of the world’s best skiing, often at more than 2,000 feet above sea level.

Switzerland’s most planted and most important grape is chasselas, which some say is the perfect wine for 10 a.m.. Others say chasselas is the perfect wine to drink when you are very thirsty, a classic vin de soif. I’ve found both notions to be true, ordering a glass at a sunny morning cafe table in Zurich or Geneva. I can report that chasselas is the perfect wine to follow an espresso and croissant around 10 a.m., and it goes down dangerously easy. By 10:15, I’d ordered a second glass.



A view of Lake Geneva, Switzerland, from vineyards in Lavaux, a region in Vaud. (Christoph Kern/Swiss Wine)



Zurich-based wine writer Chandra Kurt, left, and Gilles Besse, winemaker at Jean-René Germanier in the mountainous Valais region of Switzerland. (Philipp Rohner/Swiss Wine)

Chasselas wines are often described by non-Swiss as soft, or neutral, and they’re often demonstrably, even shockingly, low in acidity. The best chasselas offers a unique experience — dry, delicate, a little chalky, a tiny bit salty, a smidgen floral, and sometimes even milky or smoky. Even the Swiss have trouble describing this unique wine. Zurich-based wine writer Chandra Kurt described the acidity of high-quality chasselas as having “just the right amount — and by right, I mean inconspicuous.”

“It’s the opposite of sauvignon blanc,” Besse said.

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“It’s hard to convey just how important chasselas is to Swiss culture,” said José Vouillamoz, a Swiss-based grape geneticist and a co-author of the encyclopedia “[Wine Grapes: A Complete Guide to 1,638 Varieties, Including Their Origins](#)” “You have chasselas at a wedding, at a funeral, to close a business deal, to make a political compromise. At all occasions you have chasselas.” The classic regions for chasselas are Vaud, on Lake Geneva, and Valais, near the town of Sion, where the same grape is called fendant.

Beyond chasselas, we are also beginning to see Swiss gamay and syrah, savagnin (which in Switzerland is called heida) and excellent merlot from Ticino, Switzerland’s Italian-speaking region, as well as even more obscure grapes such as humagne rouge, which may be the platonic ideal of an Alpine red, light-bodied with aromas of mountain wildflowers and evergreen, with fresh fruit and a dark, deep minerality on the palate.

“It was only about two years ago that we could get access to Swiss wines,” said Doug House, owner of Chain Bridge Cellars in McLean, which now stocks humagne rouge and chasselas.

Before that, Swiss wines seen in the U.S. were often prohibitively expensive, something that the Swiss acknowledge. “Swiss wine is not cheap,” Kurt said. It’s all grown in the mountains and handpicked. We don’t really have a low end.” It’s true, you will not see a \$9.99 Swiss wine, but there are plenty in the \$25 range that offer excellent value.

But the major reason we haven’t seen a lot of Swiss wine here is because most of it gets consumed back home in Switzerland. The Swiss are among the world’s biggest consumers of wine, and spend more money than any other country on wine — a mind-boggling \$700 per person on average each year (even the average French or Italian consumer spends less than \$300 annually). In fact, the entire domestic wine production in Switzerland would only satisfy less than half of the country’s annual demand.

Yet Switzerland’s insularity is probably the reason it now has so many unique grapes to offer. While the rest of the world in the late 20th century was ripping out native varieties to plant pinot noir and chardonnay, the Swiss didn’t follow the trend. “Influences from the outside didn’t really interest Swiss winemakers,” Kurt said. “Export was never really a priority or necessity, and so they just produced what they always produced.”

That stubbornness is why we’re now finally able to taste such unique wines.

Here are some Swiss wines to try:

Château d’Auvernier Neuchâtel Blanc

Neuchâtel, Switzerland, \$28

Made with 100 percent chasselas, this is fresh and lively, with bright aromas of lime zest and wildflowers, and an attractive swirl of chalk and white pepper from midpalate to finish. Alcohol by volume: 11.5 percent.

Imported by Dreyfus, Ashby & Co. and distributed by Prestige-Ledroit.

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Maison Gilliard Fendant Sion Les Murettes

Valais, Switzerland, \$35

In Valais, chasselas is called fendant. The nose here is full of mountain flowers and fleshy fruit, and in the mouth it's viognier-like, apricot juice mixed with spring snow, yet balanced by a long intense salty, stony finish. ABV: 12.7 percent.

Imported by Dreyfus, Ashby & Co. and distributed by Prestige- Ledroit.

Renaissance Cuvée Barry Heida 2017

Valais, \$29

Sales of this wine support the Barry Foundation's work with the famed Saint Bernard dogs. And this is a charming, big-dog white, with aromas of melon, gaudy flowers and Meyer lemon. Round on the palate at first, with flavors of honeydew and underripe strawberry, then finishing with stony minerality. ABV: 13.5 percent.

Imported and distributed by Siema Wines.

Renaissance Humagne Rouge 2017

Valais, \$29

An ideal Alpine red. Light-bodied and fresh, with dark plum, currant and blackberry notes, balanced by a savory, peppery element. There's an attractive bitter note on the finish, almost like a cool Italian amaro. ABV: 13 percent.

Imported and distributed by Siema Wines.

Jean-René Germanier Petite Arvine 2017

Valais, \$35

An exciting, sexy white with a nose of tropical fruit, wildflowers and even a hint of campfire. Flavors of mango and grilled pineapple, balanced by great freshness and a salty, flinty finish. A serious wine that holds its own next to German riesling or white Burgundy, and offers high-end value. ABV: 14 percent.

Imported by Schatzi Wines and distributed by Bacchus.

La Colombe Féchy 2017

Lake Geneva, Switzerland, \$22

Made with chasselas, this gulpable wine has aromas of lime zest, pear and honeysuckle, and is like vibrant rainwater in the mouth, with notes of apple peel and smooth stones. ABV: 12.5 percent.

Imported by Schatzi Wines and distributed locally by Bacchus.

Wilson is author of "Godforsaken Grapes: A Slightly Tipsy Journey Through the World of Strange, Obscure, and Underappreciated Wine" (Abrams, 2018), which will be out in paperback this spring, and from which this column was adapted.