

Have Swiss Wines Finally Arrived?

Change has come glacially, but now is the time to explore these Alpine imports.



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

At first glance, Switzerland's four official languages, six primary wine regions, 26 political cantons, and 62 appellations take some work to wrap your mind around. But the important things to know are fairly straightforward: the Valais and Vaud — mostly French-speaking and in country's sunny southeast — produce glorious pinot noir and refreshing chasselas that represent almost all of what we see of Swiss wine in the U.S. These are followed by a smattering of whites and reds from the Three Lakes district just above that and then the many little denominations of the north-easternmost region, known plainly as German-speaking Switzerland. There is also Ticino, extending into the Italian boot, ably if curiously meeting this part of the country's thirst for merlot.

What makes grape-growing throughout Switzerland so special is the startling confluence of Alpine and Mediterranean climates. If you've ever been to the Italian lake district, you can imagine Ticino's thriving palms and lush gardens. Been lucky enough to ski Courchavel or St. Mortiz? Just picture yourself looking up from the valleys you've shot towards and you have an idea of the imposing vineyards in Graubünden or Lavaux. If you're already familiar with the lit-from-within reds of Valtellina or the Savoie, the gamey sauvage of Cornas, or the brisk, penetrating whites of Chablis, you'll have a glimmer of what's in store for you with Swiss wine.

Because of its peaceful, protected profile, we don't automatically think of Switzerland when we think "heart of Europe." But there is no getting around its centrality — and its exceptionalism — particularly with regard to wine. It contains the headwaters of both the Rhine and Rhone rivers, along with a good measure of the elegance of Burgundy, mountain quirkiness of France's Jura, sunbaked ripeness of Alsace, and cool purity of Germany's Ahr Valley.

The world gets but the thinnest slice of this alluring output and the U.S. an almost translucent sliver of that. Moreover, most Swiss wines are pricey, making them a tricky target for would-be U.S. importers. However, this is changing as curiosity and interest from the English-speaking world — critics, [authors](#), [sommeliers](#), and even a dauntless [New York City wine bar owner](#) — coincides with a new openness among Swiss producers to seeing their wines enjoyed outside the country.

Swiss wines — like Swiss army knives — reveal myriad well-honed marvels you never suspected could emerge from such a tiny package. The size of Switzerland's entire wine growing terrain, 15,000 hectares, is no more than that of Alsace. The Swiss, famous for their love of homegrown juice (as well as high-end Burgundy and German riesling), have traditionally kept 99 percent of their mostly painstakingly grown and made wines to themselves. What has made it out has typically gone to Germany, and for a high price.



"Swiss" wine culture predates Roman settlement by several centuries. In the Middle Ages, the Swiss Confederation's founding roughly coincided with Cistercian monks taking a firm hand in wine grape cultivation in the region. The late-19th through mid-20th centuries dealt a series of cruel blows to the small growers who risked all to farm their precipitous slopes. Vineyard area shrank 60 percent. Although spared the ravages of World War II, Swiss wine suffered in other ways, mostly from a lingering postwar perception that Swiss neutrality extended even to the wines.

In much more recent history, talented, ambitious Swiss producers have upped their games with high-level education and international training. But the wines remained behind a barrier of market protections that did not begin to fall away until the late 1990s. When they did, competition from abroad forced producers to redouble their commitment to quality.

Crucially, says winemaker and former head of [Swiss Wines Promotion](#) Gilles Besse, growers who already had plantings of Swiss stock-in-trade varieties such as pinot noir, gamay, and the unofficial national grape, chasselas (aka fendant) zeroed in on improving farming and vinification, while others doubled down on Switzerland's extensive catalog of ancient native varieties, putting the country way out ahead when the rest of the world decided all things autochthonous were cool.

Importers gradually took note. Wisconsin-based [Swiss Cellars](#) importer Laurent Crolla took receipt of his first shipment in 2003: "Virtually nobody in the industry knew about Switzerland as a wine-producing nation," he says. "The clichés of mountains, banks, and chocolate are well ingrained but wine was a curious idea, never mind that two of Europe's great rivers take their source here, and their valleys are home to a large portion of Swiss vineyards."

Famed importer Neal Rosenthal came along five years later, sniffing out wines that spoke of Switzerland’s “intriguing” terrain. Based on Rosenthal’s reputation, his interest alone deemed Swiss wine worth looking at. These are wines that, Rosenthal says, “argue for recognition within the elite part of the wine market.”

Kevin Pike of Schatzi Wines started adding Swiss wines to his portfolio in 2017. He says, “Switzerland is the crossroads of Germanic and Romance Europe, and the wines combine precision and nuance with soulfulness and gravitas.” He sees parallels between the Swiss wine scene now what it was like to import Austrian wines in the late 1990s: “The majority of the wines are consumed within the country, nearly all the best wineries are available for representation, and the top wines are on the pricey side.”



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

The wines have been gaining traction — albeit at an appropriately glacial pace — in the U.S. market ever since. Eric Asimov [first wrote about them](#) in the *New York Times* in 2009. A decade later, Jason Wilson pursued them in rickety gondolas and on sunny Swiss terraces, finding the varieties and expressions marvelous, yet still the “[height of obscurity](#).”

Those who follow the Swiss wine scene closely point to the work of [Stephan Reinhardt](#) of *Robert Parker’s Wine Advocate* as perhaps the biggest factor in driving increasing international awareness of these wines. When he added the region to his beat six years ago, he brought scrupulous attention to the diverse strengths of Swiss wine, as few others writing in English had.

Reinhardt sees several factors at work in catalyzing a new moment for Swiss wines abroad. First, Swiss wine has simply “become better and better over the past 10 to 20 years.” A new global perspective among producers also plays a role, with some who are “iconic” only within Switzerland starting to look outward, just as a group of “new kids on the block” — he mentions [Tom Litwan](#) in the Aargau and [Christian Obrecht](#) in Graubünden as two examples — “produce outstanding wines for international freaks rather than national wine lovers.”

Reinhardt credits attention from outside critics for having made Swiss producers “more and more curious to check for acceptance beyond Switzerland or the German-speaking countries.” Legendary Graubünden producer Martin Donatsch, for example, told Reinhardt two and a half years ago that he likes his wines to be consumed in Switzerland. “Last week,” says Reinhardt, “he shipped his first pallet to California. The interest has become too much to ignore it.”

Beyond this, the critic credits a surge of interest in Alpine terroirs among wine lovers excited by “authenticity, local traditions, and a refined, refreshing and elegant style” as playing right into Swiss wines’ hands. He calls Switzerland “the jackpot” of climatic confluence.

Rosenthal adds that his interest in Swiss wines also “relates to the fact that most Swiss wines are generally high-altitude wines that defend well against the impact of climate change.”

Another secret? Swiss producers find themselves with a slight surplus. Reinhardt points out that the Swiss themselves drink less and less wine and with “cellars stocked up, especially after the generous 2018 vintage, Swiss wine in general has to open up to other markets.” A look at the statistics confirms a big vintage-on-vintage bump for 2018 against a gradual multi-year slide in domestic wine consumption.

Accordingly, Rosenthal says he detects “a more outward-looking curiosity in the air” among Swiss producers. Reinhardt notes that there are “so many” excellent but unknown Swiss winemakers. “Unfortunately,” he says, “they often wait to be discovered.”

Zürich-based writer and consultant [Chandra Kurt](#) says the challenge for Swiss producers now is “to reveal the diversity of the Swiss wine culture.” She notes that efforts have been hampered by the difficulty of “finding a common definition since four national languages mark the country and each of these languages and their cultural heritages lead automatically to a different interpretation when it comes to enjoying and producing wine.”

Natural wines have taken root here, and, according to Kurt, are “very important for the domestic market.” But aside from Valais stars [Mythopia](#) and [Domaine de Beudon](#), minimalist Swiss producers largely have yet to find their champions in the U.S.

From classic to off-piste, Reinhardt characterizes Swiss wines as being well suited to “ambitious connoisseurs” but notes that “no one need fear them” based on price. The recently deceased author of a 2019 guide entitled [Landscape of Swiss Wine](#), Sue Style, noted “when excellent Swiss wines are compared with wines of similar



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

from other countries, many look very fairly priced.” Crolla half jokes that the U.S. imposition of 25 percent tariffs on many European — but not Swiss — wines, “finally made them affordable on an international comparison.”

Pike notes that Swiss wines “will need to find a different path to American consumers, one rooted in quality, tradition, and a willingness to accept the esoteric.”

Style’s book importantly acquaints readers with much that is still so unfamiliar about Swiss wines. Readers will find detailed coverage of several of the producers whose wines are now available in the U.S. and many more to whet the appetite — each charmingly paired with a local hiking recommendation.

This month, an all-Swiss wine bar called [The Lavaux](#) was set to open in Manhattan’s West Village, featuring wines from the northern shores of Lake Geneva (a project that has obviously been put on “pause” for now). But Benoit Amsler, the young entrepreneur behind the project, exudes full confidence that the bar will open. Given the ruinous situation most bars and restaurants in the city find themselves in, this could prove a welcome little haven while the city gets back on its feet.

Nothing connotes stability, security, and quality like Switzerland. And none of us is going anywhere any time soon, making this the perfect opportunity to explore Swiss wines on the page and in the glass. As Crolla says, “the market for Swiss wines develops one bottle at a time!”

Five bottles to try:

Mythopia Pi-No *Arbaz, Valais*. Pinot noir grown and made by the visionary Hans Peter-Schmidt, who claims his wines are “made from grapes and air, nothing more.” Radiant purity and intensity. Biodynamic farming, zero/zero. Jenny & Francois

Gantenbein Pinot Noir *Fläsch, Graubünden*. A cult name in Swiss pinot and chardonnay, noted for its generous, elegant, crystalline pinots especially. Loosen Bros USA

Domaine la Colombe Petit Clos *Féchy, Vaud*. Chasselas, a grape native to Vaud and first mentioned in 1596, from Switzerland’s first biodynamic producer, now [Demeter certified](#). Striking muscat-like aromatics, broad and textural with notes of honeysuckle and herbs at deceptively slender alcohol levels. Schatzi Wines*

Cave Caloz Petite Arvine La Mourzière *Miège, Valais*. Winningly described by Sue Style as exuding “citrus notes with rhubarb hints and the typical signature salinity of the grape.” Rosenthal Wine Merchant

St. Jodernkellerei Heida Visperterminen *Visperterminen, Valais*. From a well-regarded coop with vineyards up to 1,150 meters above sea level and some prephylloxera plantings. This bottling of the local native heida grape is a forthright expression, well suited as a brisk, slightly off-dry aperitif. Swiss Cellars

*The author contributes producer profiles to the Schatzi Wines website.