

Swiss wine is often underestimated : an unknown gem

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completely international phenomenon. This is not so much a contradiction as an enormous element of strength. There is no other country in the world in which so many and such diverse influences have worked on its cuisine and the customs of its valleys as Switzerland. The Basle gastronomic authority, Hanns U. Christen, concludes that until recently it was practically impossible to eat badly in any Swiss restaurant.

The same ingredients

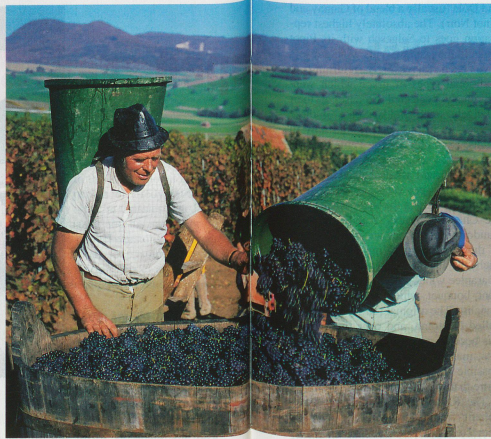
The food tastes good perhaps because the recipes have developed in a country which was once impoverished. All the sparse and meagre food had to be used in order to survive – with only the bare minimum thrown away as rubbish: potatoes again and again, fresh and dried fruit, milk, cheese, chestnuts, barley and innards (in the famous "küttelsuppe" or tripe soup). The "räbebappe" (a parsnip mash), either with or without bacon, was until comparatively recently the nightmare of the children seated round the family table.

In eating, poverty was the mother of invention. The most had to be made of the little you possessed in order to

create at least some variety. This concept pervades many Swiss cookbooks. They are less interested in maintaining the gastronomic heritage and original specialities than in providing instructions for keeping house in a prudent, thrifty and careful manner. The main features of Swiss cuisine are not specific dishes and blends but are defined by adjectives such as homely, durable, reasonable and healthy.

Identity through cheese

The few really national dishes first arose from a latter-day necessity: the fact that surpluses from an over-efficient agricultural industry had to be exploited. As the cheese mountain grew, marketing strategists made the Neuchâtel speciality, fondue, a staple for the Swiss of all cantons. Following a highly successful advertising campaign, there is now a fondue pot and warmer in practically every household. The slogan was typically Swiss: "Figuggel – fondue is good and brings good cheer". ■



Grape-pickers at work: "Wümmet" (vintage) in Klettgau. (Photo: Max Baumann)

Swiss wine is often underestimated

An unknown gem

As if it were not enough that overseas Switzerland and Sweden are often confused, our wines are also largely unknown. And quite wrongly.

The first extensive book on Swiss viticulture, "The Surprising Wines of Switzerland" by Canadian diplomat John C. Sloan, was published in 1996. This work – available only in English – carries the appropriate subtitle "Switzerland's Best Kept Secret".

It is true that with 15,000 hectares of vineyards (as against 900,000 in France) and an export ratio of about 1%, Swiss wine has a very low profile internationally. The fact that the Chasselas grape, widely disregarded as neutral in flavour, takes up 40% of Swiss vineyards contributes to the general underestimation of Switzerland's potential to produce quality wine.

Even the indigenous population seem to be unaware of the many-sided facets of their own wine production. Although for decades the Swiss remained true to the elegant Valais white wines, the spicy Dôle from Valais and the fruity Blauburgunder from eastern Switzerland, in the last few years consumption of domestic wines has been falling steadily. This is certainly unjustified,

Stefan Zenklusen*

since the emphasis on quality on the part of Swiss wine-growers (at the expense of higher yield) is now well-known.

But the wine lakes of the 1970s and 1980s are still present in the minds of consumers, and the memory frequently results in a conviction that Italian or Australian products give you more for your money.

*Stefan Zenklusen is an editor with the international wine magazine "Vinum".

A recipe from German-speaking Switzerland

"Chnöiblätzle": Carnival biscuits, Moospinte, Münchenbuchsee

400 g flour
3 eggs
20 g sugar
60 g clarified butter
13 g kirsch
20 g cream
Icing sugar to dust
Makes about 16 biscuits

In a bowl, shape flour into a well. Mix the remaining ingredients thoroughly and place them in the middle of the well. Mix the whole into a smooth dough, pack into a plastic wrap and let rest for about an hour in the refrigerator. Then mould the dough into a sausage-shaped roll 3 cm thick and cut into about 16 equal lengths. Roll these out into very thin rounds (0.75 mm). Deep-fry them in oil (e.g. peanut oil) at 170°. Drain them onto kitchen paper. Dust them with icing sugar.



Oskar Marti, also known as "Chrüter Oski", with his carnival biscuits and the sweet white wine he recommends: Grain de Malice, Provens Valais. (Photo: Jean-Jacques Ruchti)

Oskar Marti's "Chnöiblätzle" recipe suits the time of year, as do all the menus in his restaurant. Visitors to the "Moospinte" in Münchenbuchsee in the Berne countryside get to know a cuisine which combines the fresh vegetables, fruit and herbs available on the day. Driven by fantasy and curiosity, the 50-year old host and head chef creates such crazy dishes as carrot and orange soup with gingerbread spices, monkfish ragout in aniseed sauce and apricots in basil. So he is simply known as "Chrüter Oski" (Herb Oski), in spite of his many honours, publications and TV programmes.

A recipe from Ticino

Braised beef with Ticino Merlot, La Palma au Lac, Locarno

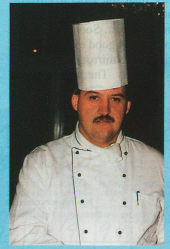
Ingredients for 10 servings

2.5 kg shoulder of beef, larded
0.5 dl peanut oil
250 g blanched celery stalk
250 g leeks
250 g onions
600 g carrots
120 g tomato purée
1 litre Ticino Merlot wine
1.5 litres water
gravy
20 g dried boletus mushrooms
80 g beef bouillon cubes
Salt, pepper, a little paprika

Spice the meat with the salt, pepper and paprika, and brown it thoroughly in the peanut oil. Remove it from the pan and lightly brown the chopped vegetables in the same pan (do the leeks

last since they burn easily and may become bitter). Add the tomato purée. The vegetables will take on the beautiful dark colour of the sauce and at the same time absorb both sweet and sour the purée. Be careful not to let the vegetables burn as they will then taste bitter. Next, add the red wine and, together with the water and the gravy, cook until the mixture thickens. Add the bouil-

lon cubes. Put in the meat and the mushrooms, and cover. Braise slowly for two to three hours. When the meat is cooked, remove, then purée the vegetables in a mixer. To test whether the meat is ready, stick a long fork into it, lift it and shake it lightly. If the meat falls easily from the fork, it is done. If the sauce is too thin, continue cooking it



Chef F. Müller. (Photos: zvg)

to the desired consistency. Caution: first test whether the sauce is too salty, and if it is bind it with cornflour. This dish is best served with polenta or mashed potatoes and a Merlot from the Delea vineyard in Losone.

It is certain that in international comparison production of Swiss wines is very expensive. In Canton Zurich, for example, the financial expenditure per hectare amounts to an average of almost Sfr. 40,000. On some steep slopes near Sierre in Valais, this figure can climb to as high as Sfr. 55,000. As a comparison, costs per hectare at an average classified chateau in the Bordeaux vineyards may be estimated at about Sfr. 10,000.

Such a comparison shows that in future Switzerland will have to rely ever more on the quality of its wine production. For with litre-wise sales Swiss wine will simply not survive in competition with cheap-wage countries when all the import barriers finally come down.

Wide variety in smallest possible area

This is no doubt a thorny road. But an important and certainly correct beginning has been made. The cantons of Valais, Vaud, Geneva and Neuchâtel have now equipped themselves with binding regulations (the AOC provisions) defining origin, highest yield and category. A particularly welcome development is that some points of these regulations have been laid down even more strictly than the federal government recommended – this in the wine growers' own interest. Soon other cantons will follow this good example.

Swiss wines are a mirror of the legendary Swiss diversity. The highest repu-



Pinot Noir – a typical Swiss grape.
(Photo: Max Baumann)

tation goes to four wine producing areas: Valais, Vaud, the Rhine valley in Grisons and Ticino. But this does not mean in any way that bad wine is produced in the other regions. Undoubtedly the acceptance level is closely connected to availability and distribution channels.

Sometimes sparkling, sometimes sweet

Canton Valais alone possesses a third of Swiss vineyards. Its most popular wines are Fendant (from the Chasselas grape)

and Dôle (usually a blend of Gamay and Pinot Noir). The absolutely highest reputation goes to Salgesch with its Pinot wine. In the last few years wine growers have been increasingly returning to traditional types of grape which were previously neglected because of their relatively small yields. Some of these species are in fact to be found only in Valais: examples are the Petite Arvine, the Amigne and the Cornalin in lower Valais, and the Lafnetscha and the Himbertscha in upper Valais.

Canton Vaud is the real homeland of the Chasselas grape. Traditionally the Vaudois white wines are the favourites of the German-speaking Swiss. Names such as Féchy, Aigle and Dézaley guarantee wines with a flowery and elegant bouquet which encourages conviviality. The original red Ticino wine is called Nostrano, and over the years it has become a rarity. But the pure Merlots, many of which reach the highest possible international standards, are more than worthy successors.

The Rhine valley in Grisons draws benefit from ideal soil and climatic characteristics. The föhn wind (sometimes known as "the wine cook") is a frequent and welcome guest. There are some years in which it ensures absolutely top class Blauburgunders. ■

"The Surprising Wines of Switzerland", Bergli-Books, Basle, 1996, CHF 44.60 (plus postage) may be obtained from the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 16. Available only in English.

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