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Quality in the quest for renown

BY PIERRE THOMAS

Fendant and Dôle: most Swiss at home and abroad reduce the Swiss wine scene to these two names. But with today's trend towards globalisation, diversity is a must. The main characteristic of Swiss wines is their rarity: fifty types of vine are grown on only 15 000 hectares.



Photos: Ursula Battaglia

Even the vines themselves invite one to linger and enjoy.

THE SWISS WINE market is relatively introspective. Of the 300 million litres of wine consumed, 175 million are from abroad (mainly red wines) and 125 million

from domestic production (mainly white wines). Less than 1 percent of wines produced in Switzerland is exported. Swiss wines would undoubtedly sell better

abroad if they were better known. In recent years wine producers have been presenting their best vintages at international wine competitions in order to raise awareness abroad as well as to establish a certain reputation at home. And lo and behold, they have been receiving awards and acclaim far in excess of their volume – cultivated as they are on a surface area six times smaller than Bordelais.

Fewer white wines

Only rarely do such awards mention Chasselas. This white wine primarily made from grapes grown in Western Switzerland (which accounts for 36 percent of Swiss wine-growing land), is part of a Swiss "art de vivre": the tradition of the mid-day and/or evening aperitif. While this tradition is on the decline in cities and among the younger generation, it survives in part due to this white wine, a veritable thirst-quencher.

Because the Chasselas grape has adapted to the climate and produces high yields, it guarantees vintners a comfortable income. Although the grape is grown in some parts of the Alsace and in Germany, it remains a true Swiss speciality. And even if its taste notes do not immediately delight the palate,

it is worth getting to know better. The Chasselas mirrors its territory. A connoisseur can easily distinguish between a Fendant from the Valais, a Dézaley from Vaud, and a Neuchâtel wine.

White wine is currently losing ground in Switzerland – even in Northern Switzerland, which specialises in Müller-Thurgau (5 percent of cultivation). Vines such as Petite Arvine, Amigne and Humagne blanc are enjoying a renaissance in the Valais. The regional climate also favours a late harvest of Pinot gris, Marsannes and Sylvaner, which produce liqueur wines of remarkable concentration.

Reds have the edge

The Chasselas grape is also being forced out by red wines. Following a half-century of yield-driven production, Swiss vintners have learned to limit their harvest volumes, cultivate old types of vines, refine the assembly or age the liquid in casks.

The Pinot noir, originally from Burgundy, is present virtually everywhere (30 percent of cultivation). In the lower Rhine valley and the canton of Grisons, thanks to a microclimate warmed by the Föhn wind, this grape produces one of its most aromatic variants which received an award at the Pinot noir World Championships in Sierre in September. With 5000 hectares of vineyards the Valais is the largest wine-growing canton in Switzerland. Here, where Pinot noir conjoins with Gamay to flow into Dôle, one can indulge in local grapes such as Cornalin and Humagne which have been adapted to contemporary tastes and are related to Syrah, the magnificent Rhone grape.

Ticino Merlot

While autochthonous vines such as the promising Gamaret and Garanoir allow Swiss wines to be positioned as original and unique, the example of the canton of Ticino proves that great wines can also be pro-→

Carrying on the tradition

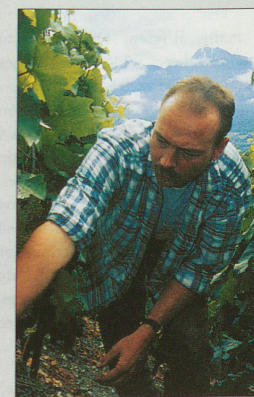
Since 1953 Jules Duc and his wife Monique have been cultivating their forefathers' vineyard on the sunny slopes of the village of Ollon. From the River Rhone down in the valley, a narrow road flanked by stone vineyard walls leads through the village and on to Crans-Montana. With a voice that is

simultaneously soft and rasping and characterised by a light, rolling "R", Jules tells of how he built his five hectares of vineyards on stone terraces laid by hand.

The Ducs produce Fendant, Johannisberg, Ermitage, Dôle, Chardonnay and Muscat. Then there are the full-bodied Flétris wines like Arvine and Malvoisie, harvested after the first frost. And reds like Pinot, Cornalin, Syrah and Humagne. Jules Duc was one of the first to re-introduce this time-honoured vine of Roman ancestry. Formerly shunned due to their low yield, these grapes have found new favour due to their high quality. After years of over-production, the Canton of Valais has revived its wine tradition and introduced an AOC.

Now Jules Duc has handed the sceptre on to son Jean-Alexis, who enthuses over his passion: "My favourite is the Arvine. Up to 13,000 aromas have been discovered in this vine, which is unique throughout the world!" His mother Monique prefers the Humagne, "because it's fruity and light. Due to its high iron content, it used to be served to women who had just given birth."

IE



Jean-Alexis Duc tends his vines with passion.

Irma la douce in the Klettgau

When no-one is at home the people of the Klettgau in Schaffhausen use a special phrase: "S'isch alls in Räbe", or "They're all at the vines". Irma Gysel, a vintner in Hallau, spends every working day amidst vines and wine. "Zum Schopf" is the name of her home at the foot of the largest vineyard in Eastern Switzerland, tended by herself and her husband. The 7-hectare estate is stocked with Blauburgunder (Pinot Noir), Riesling-Sylvaner, Chardonnay and Doral, which the Gysels transform into fruity country wines, "late harvest" wines (Spätlese) aged in the cask, and specialties like their straw wine made from pressed, air-dried grapes. Erich Gysel has named one of his mellow sweet whites "Irma la douce" – a "seductive flatterer". Their son Stefan studies oenology at the Wädenswil University of Applied Science



and makes sure "that we don't stand still".

At the moment every spare hand is needed. The first cellars of the 2000 vintage are being filled in the cellar. "A good year", enthuses Irma, "early budding, optimum bloom, hot but never too dry." The result is healthy grapes with a high sugar content. "On 1 November we were still harvesting Blauburgunder with a 101 Oechsle degree."


In the afternoon Irma Gysel removes surplus shoots to reduce the yield. The target is 700 grams of Blauburgunder grapes per square meter.

MB

Vintner Irma Gysel: wine is her world

duced from internationally grown types of vine. It is thanks to the vision of an agricultural engineer in the early 20th century that the Merlot grape was cultivated. Even now, it accounts for under 6 percent of vines cultivated in Switzerland and is grown on only 800 hectares in the Ticino and a few hectares in Geneva.

Experience acquired over the past century, coupled with an innovation introduced twenty years ago in order to inject character into a soulless red wine, has allowed "Merlot del Ticino" to produce a raft of excellent vintages.

The other side of the coin is that these wines, aged for over a year in oak casks, are rare and expensive. The "Super-Ticinos" cost over thirty francs a bottle – a price which only twenty years ago would have been unthinkable. Yet given the competition from New World wine producers, Switzerland has no other choice than to produce top-quality wines – and let the whole world know about them. 

Aiming for uncompromising Swiss quality

INTERVIEW: ALICE BAUMANN

More and more Swiss wine-growers are producing excellent wines. Philipp Schwander, wine dealer and the only Master of Wine in Switzerland, agrees.

Mr Schwander, as a Master of Wine, how do you assess Swiss wines?

Unfortunately, right now they are suffering from a poor image. This is due to the strong political resistance to liberalising white wine imports. The quality has, in fact, improved significantly in recent years: more and more vintners, especially in the Valais and Ticino, are producing excellent wines.

How would you characterise the Swiss wine scene?

Switzerland has lots of small producers, a great many slopes and steep inclines and a large range of different vines (few "international" types with the exception of the Merlot). Chasselas accounts for the largest cultivation area.

How many different territories (soil, climate) are there? Which types of grape are vinified in Switzerland?

Although Switzerland has only 15,000 or so hectares of wine-growing land (this is the size of many individual wine regions abroad), we boast seven different types of climate. For example, the Valais is very warm, Eastern Switzerland much cooler. The white Chasselas and Riesling x Sylvaner grapes (the latter is called Müller Thurgau abroad) take up the lion's share, alongside the red Pinot-Noir, Gamay and Merlot grapes.

Merlot grapes ripen in the Ticino sun.



How many estates does Switzerland have and which categories of quality does it recognise?

There are three categories (AOC to designate origin, table wine and others) and 33,000 vineyard owners, not all of whom produce wine. Of these, an estimated 5000 to 6000 produce wine on a full or part-time basis.

How many bottles does Switzerland produce?

Around 125 million litres per year, divided equally between red and white wine.

What is the recipe for success for Swiss vintners?

There is none. I think it's good that the focus is more on producing specialties, rather than planting trendy types such as Chardonnay, of which there is a world-wide glut.

What do you personally like about Swiss wine?

Its individuality based on enduring quality.

Hand on heart: Is the cultural value of

"The fact is that the number of very good Swiss wines is growing," says Philipp Schwander, Master of Wine.

nature, culture, sensuousness, nostalgia and travel.

You are not only a Master of Wine, but also a wine dealer. Our readers live abroad: Could you in all good conscience recommend them to buy in Swiss wines?


For anyone who is nostalgic for Switzerland I would recommend high-quality wines such as Ticino Merlot, Syrah from the Valais, Pinot Noir from the Grisons, as well as a few of the best Chasselas.

If you could play God, what would you change about Swiss wine-growing?

The interviewee



36-year-old Philipp Schwander is a business economist by profession and remains the only Master of Wine in Switzerland. Since early 2000 he has been director of Albert Reichmuth AG, wine dealers in Zurich. For years he has written regularly about wine, for example for the Neue Zürcher Zeitung. **AB**

I wouldn't change the conditions but rather the mentality of some producers. I would instil in some an uncompromising passion for quality. 

Swiss wine greater than its "culinary" worth?

Difficult to say. The fact is that the number of very good Swiss wines is growing.

Put another way: How is Swiss wine positioned quality-wise compared to products from other countries?

Swiss wine is virtually unknown abroad because it is practically never exported. There are no "locomotives" which could lend the international image of Swiss wine more glamour. Also, just when Swiss wine has achieved major improvements, it has regrettably become fashionable to denigrate home-grown wines.

What originally favoured the cultivation of wine: glaciers, rivers?

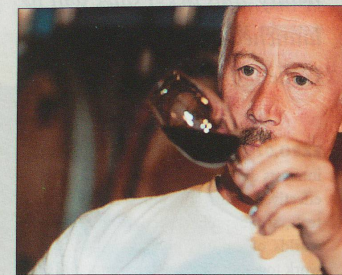
First it was the Romans, later the monasteries, and lastly the topography.

How do you explain the cult surrounding the production and consumption of wine?

Wine has, quite simply, become a trendy product. Formerly associated with field work, wine is perceived by modern desk-bound people as having associations with

From banker to vintner

"The Merlots of the Ticino are among the best in the world," boasts Giancarlo Muschi, an independent wine-grower for almost twenty years. Before this he worked as a banker in Zurich for twenty years. His love of botany has been lavished on his wines. Two of the Merlots produced on his estate – a red and a white – bear the name of a flower: "Le orchidee". Muschi, who likes to call himself a "dabbler", goes for quality – the only way to survive in an increasingly competitive market. His Merlot grapes are typical for the Ticino. This vine "is ideal for our soil but needs lots of tender loving care." The vineyard is responsible for 60 percent of a wine's quality, and the vinification process 40 percent. In this context Muschi muses that "ageing the wine in oak casks lends it that special taste – rounder, bursting with unique aromas. These wines ideally complement any type of meat, and particularly game." Giancarlo Muschi's "La Cappellaccia" is a fine red



The eyes of the connoisseur, viticulturist Giancarlo Muschi.

Merlot which comes in small bottles. As Muschi brings the glass to his mouth, he continues: "This is the typical ruby-red colour of a Merlot, the nostrils are assailed with spicy smells and the typical after-taste of plums." **PC**