

# Swiss wines : aiming for uncompromising Swiss quality

Autor(en): **Baumann, Alice / Schwander, Philipp**

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duced from internationally grown types of wine. 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 specialities, 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.



## 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 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 wine "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

**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