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The three suns of Lavaux The picturesque viticultural region of Lavaux is situated between Lausanne and Montreux. The terraced vineyards at the foot of the Alps on the shore of Lake Geneva, nestling in a landscape blessedly free from urbanisation, are home to some noble wines – reason enough for the citizens of Lavaux to submit their region for inclusion on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. By Alain Wey.



Fascinating Lavaux: view to the East

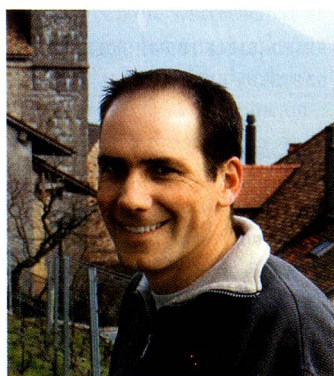
In this small corner of the world, Man and Nature have joined forces to create the nectar of the gods. Bacchus would be proud of the diligence shown by the people of Lavaux. The vintners we met have been practising their art for more than four generations. Wine growing is inextricably linked with the region that stretches from Pully to Montreux. The steeply terraced vineyards are a feast for the eyes and the senses. Row upon row of vines rise from the

lakeside like a gigantic fortress: immense steps leading to the highlands of the Vaud. Assets like these (the region is already protected by cantonal law) have prompted the citizens of Lavaux to apply for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List. An overview of a region where Chasselas is king.

The application documents for the World Heritage List were submitted in Paris in December 2005, with the approval of the Federal

Office for Culture. Florence Siegrist (47), Prefect of Lavaux and member of the registration committee, explains the history behind the project and the motivation behind it. Following a feasibility study conducted by the canton of Vaud, the baton was handed over to the district of Lavaux. Lavaux submitted a project to the region and set up a committee. "It's a project involving the entire region," stresses Florence Siegrist. And what makes the location so original and extraordinary? "You only have to look around you: A landscape shaped by human hand over the centuries, architectural uniformity; the conservation and strong protection of the region have ensured the harmony of Lavaux." The object of the application is a cohesive, lively cultural landscape where wine growing continues to be practised. Everything in Lavaux revolves around the vine. The terraces – an ideal example of a specific type of wine-growing – were retained at the same time as wine-growing techniques were enhanced. "We are presenting not only a landscape," says Florence Siegrist, "but also a cultural whole. This summer, experts from Icomos (International Council on Monuments and Sites) are to visit Lavaux. The decision will be made in 2007." The vitality and social life of Lavaux that revolves around wine are reflected not only in the vintners' know-how and the brand image of the appellations of origin (Epresses, Saint-Saphorin, Villette, Dezailey, Calamin etc.), but also in another attractive characteristic: every village in Lavaux runs a wine cellar where the products can be tasted and purchased.

11 a.m., and it's time for an aperitif. In Cully, vintner Mélanie Weber (29) welcomes us to the wine cellar of Francis Weber & Daughter. The young woman is a member of the *Confrérie des vigneron-tâcherons* (Association of Vintners and Wine Workers), which grades the vines three times a year and organises the huge *Fête des Vignerons* every 25 years. The young vintner runs a vineyard in the commune of Riex, selling her produce to other vintners and preparing wine for the family cellars. Mélanie



Vintners of Lavaux: Florence Sigrist, Bernard Chevalley, Mélanie Weber, Jean-Luc Blondel (from left)

Weber represents the fifth generation of this family of vintners. Over a glass of wine her father talks about the hard work in the terraced vineyards, particularly following severe weather conditions. Some 15,000 bottles of Epesses, Calamin and Dézaley are produced here each year. The wine cellar dates from 1900. "It used to be the village byre," smiles Mélanie Weber, who has been a vintner for twelve years. "The love of wine runs in our family's blood!" Is it rare for a woman to be a vintner? "No. More and more women are joining the profession. I personally know more than ten..." What does Lavaux mean to you? "Something wonderful. A very special landscape from any perspective – whether you're in the vineyards or approaching it from the lake or from Berne. You can never get enough of it."

At the heart of the wine-growing region on the terraces of Lavaux sit the Blondel vineyards, which have produced five acclaimed appellations of origin: Villette, Epesses, Saint-Saphorin, Calamin and Dézaley. Jean-Luc (45), fourth-generation vintner, and Francine Blondel, whose family has been tending vines since 1453, produce award-winning quality wines. "We grow mainly Chasselas. With this grape we set ourselves apart from other regions and produce superior wines. Chasselas is the workhorse of Lavaux." The high quality standards apply throughout the growing season until harvest time and the decanting of the wine. "Here we don't re-invent the wheel, but maintain strict discipline from planting of the grapes until the bottled end product." Jean-Luc Blondel, a member of the Candidacy Committee for UNESCO World Heritage Sites, emphasises that the canton of Vaud has protected the Lavaux region for

more than thirty years through a law that imposes restrictions on construction. "We live in an exceptionally beautiful landscape. I often travel around Switzerland. It's a beautiful country but no region can match Lavaux."

On the steep slopes of Saint-Saphorin only a few kilometres from the Blondel vineyards is the Domaine des Fosses run by Bernard Chevalley (33). This muscular blue-eyed young man, the fourth generation of a vintner family, is studying oenology. Situated on a gradient of almost 50%, his vineyard starts at a height of 430

producing Saint-Saphorin for more than a hundred years." Our hosts live in a house built in 1734 in the timeless little village of Saint-Saphorin. Bernard Chevalley uses scientific terminology – a strange jargon to the layman's ear – and speaks of wine with an undying passion.

The vintner's symbiotic relationship with Nature, the terraced slopes of Lavaux and the weather is clearly revealed when Bernard Chevalley talks darkly of the heavy hailstorm of 18 July 2005: "It happened at exactly 3.32 p.m.: we'll never forget it."



Fascinating Lavaux: view to the West

metres and rises to 650 metres. Bernard Chevalley talks of the "green harvest" in July, when the vines are pruned back. "Our family has been

www.lavaux-unesco-inscription.ch / www.lavaux.ch
www.domaine-blondel.ch (Lavaux mit einer Webcam bereisen) / www.lesfosses.ch

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

■ The sunny vine-growing slopes of the Lavaux were formed by the Rhône glacier. The glacier hollowed out the depression now filled by Lake Geneva, in the process shaping not only the region's physiognomy but also the underlying flesh – the soil – of Lavaux. This subterranean alchemy produces a soil of fascinating diversity. Nature's handwork has been crafting this region since time immemorial, but what about Man? Wine growing was introduced by the Romans, but only in the twelfth century did monks

make use of the steepest slopes, cutting terraces on which to grow the vines. After centuries of painstaking labour, and following a few decades which saw the inexorable advance of concrete, the wine-growing region of Lavaux successfully turned its back on urbanisation. Lavaux now boasts some 830 hectares of vineyards i.e. 5.5 percent of Switzerland's total wine-growing land. The wines are heavily characterised by the special qualities of the soil. Loam exerts a significant influence on the flavour. Another special characteristic of the re-

gion is provided by the three suns of Lavaux: The actual sun that bestows light and heat on the steep vine terraces; the sun reflected by Lake Geneva, which acts as a giant mirror and at certain times of the year casts a second shadow on the terrace walls like a second sun; and the solar heat stored in the stone walls, which is slowly released during the cool of the night and creates a unique microclimate.

APPELLATIONS OF ORIGIN

■ Vintners in Lavaux primarily produce white wine from the

Chasselas grape. The region is home to eight controlled appellations of origin and grapes: Lutry, Villette, Epesses, Saint-Saphorin, Chardonne, Calamin, Dézaley and Vevey-Montreux. Each grape has its own special characteristics and flavour, depending on the soil qualities (more or less loamy) and situation (near the lake, bordering the forest, or on terraces with thick load-bearing walls).