



# Buyer's guide to Swiss wine

An enigma to many, this Alpine nation at the heart of Europe produces some excitingly diverse quality wines, though many never make it beyond its borders. Sue Style takes us on a tour, and recommends 12 to try



WHEN I STARTED exploring and writing about Swiss wines 30 years ago, few people had heard of them beyond the borders of this tiny, mountainous, landlocked country. Even today when I sing their praises – which I do at every available opportunity – I still get more than a few raised eyebrows.

Many people are unaware that wines are produced here. Others have heard of them, and maybe even unearthed a few jewels – a rare Petite Arvine from the Valais, perhaps, or a fragrant Pinot Noir from one of the cool-climate, German-speaking cantons; a complex Chasselas from the Lavaux vineyards that rise in majesty above Lake Geneva, or even a sleek Merlot from Italian-speaking Ticino. Inevitably the question of price comes up, swiftly followed by the complaint that Swiss wines are hard to find outside the country.

## What's new?

Wine has been made in Switzerland – as it has throughout Europe – for at least 2,000 years, but it's the past 20 years that have seen the greatest changes. Two key developments came in the 1990s, which helped to push Swiss

winemaking into another gear. Firstly, the federal government no longer agreed to buy up swimming pools (literally) of unsold Chasselas – neutral, mildly fizzy, inevitably designated as a vin de soif – at guaranteed prices, or oceans of Dôle, then a dull blend of Pinot Noir and Gamay that did few favours to either grape. In parallel, restrictions on foreign wine imports were lifted.

Producers were forced to conclude that, in a high-cost country, the only game in town was quality. Novel varieties have since been pioneered by the federal research station at Changins, ancient varieties resurrected and grapes new to Switzerland planted.

And while the older generation has been quietly investing its ever-strengthening Swiss francs in vineyards, barriques and even the occasional concrete egg fermenter, the younger generation of winemakers has been off on study trips and internships in France, Australia and New Zealand.

The net result has been a significant rise in quality and a welcome increase in the 'tingle factor' of Swiss wines. At a time when more and more people are interested in sampling

**Above: picture postcard views of vineyards in Valais, which produces a third of Switzerland's wine**

*'In a high-cost country, the only game in town was quality'*

curiosities and hunting down original, exciting wines that stand out from the crowd, these Alpine treasures are worth seeking out.

## Regional essentials

Switzerland's vineyards – 15,000 hectares in total; about half the planted area of Burgundy – are a magnificent patchwork of widely varying climates and terroirs, from the cool, verdant slopes of the northern cantons to the sunbaked Alpine terraces and parched heat of the Valais. Of the wines, 58% is red and 42% white, with Pinot Noir and Chasselas leading the pack respectively.

The country divides itself, wine wise, into six distinct regions (*see box, right*). Starting in the north, a virtual tour takes us first to the German-speaking region, which sprawls across gently hilly farming country running from Basel through Aargau, Zurich, Schaffhausen and Thurgau to Graubünden, >

## Switzerland's six wine regions

**Valais** (33% of total wine volume produced) In the heart of the Alps, with vineyards extending over 100km along the Rhône river

**Vaud** (25%) Predominantly along the shores of Lake Geneva, with some vineyards at the southwestern end of Lake Neuchâtel

**German-speaking region** (19%) Widely scattered across 17 German-speaking cantons from Basel and Aargau in the northwest via Zurich, Schaffhausen and Thurgau, to St Gallen and Graubünden in the east

**Geneva** (10%) In the foothills of the sub-Alpine Jura mountains and both banks of the Rhône as it leaves the western end of Lake Geneva

**Ticino** (7%) On the southern side of the Alps close to the Italian border, with abundant sunshine tempered by lake-effect rain from its proximity to Lakes Lugano and Maggiore

**Three Lakes** (5%) Mostly on the slopes of the Jura along the northern banks of Lake Neuchâtel, with the balance on the equivalent shores of nearby Lakes Biel/Bienne and Murten/Morat

Photograph: blickwinkel/Alamy Stock Photo





**Above: Completer wines made by Donatsch in Malans, one of the few producers in the world to use this rare grape**

*'If ever Switzerland had a signature grape, Chasselas would be the obvious candidate'*

tucked in beneath the Alps on the eastern border with Liechtenstein. This German-speaking region turns out some of Switzerland's most exciting and ageworthy Pinot Noir (sometimes labelled Blauburgunder) and Chardonnay. Growers acknowledge the role of climate change, which – with a little help from the Föhn, the warm wind that caresses the autumn vineyards – has brought increased ripeness to these northerly grapes. Meanwhile Müller-Thurgau, known in Switzerland as Riesling-Sylvaner, has upped its game, since many winemakers have reduced or eliminated their use of malolactic fermentation, giving a crisper profile to this otherwise mild-mannered wine. Two white specialities to seek out in this region include the historic Räuschling, grown on the shores of Lake Zurich, and the vanishingly rare Completer, produced by Donatsch in Malans in tiny quantities and aged in used oak barrels to tame the grape's natural acidity. 'We're the largest producers of Completer in the world,' jokes Martin Donatsch – hard to dispute, since barely anyone else in the world makes it. Across the Alps via the San Bernardino Pass is Ticino, Switzerland's Italian-speaking Lake District. Though its steep terraces bask in sunshine much of the year, it has about twice the precipitation of neighbouring Valais. Merlot rules here, mainly as a single varietal but increasingly in Bordeaux-inspired blends. Straw-hatted Ivo Monti of Cantina Monti ferments his prize-winning wines to the strains of salsa and then soothes them gently with Bach in the barrel. 'Merlot is a great soloist,' he comments, 'but in a blend you get the whole orchestra.'



**Above: the steep, terraced Chasselas vineyards of Lavaux at St-Saphorin, looking across Lake Geneva towards Lausanne**

**Much to discover**

Continuing around the country in a clockwise direction, we come to Valais, the country's largest wine region, producing one-third of all Swiss bottlings. The climate was once described by poet Rainer Maria Rilke as a cross between Provence and southern Spain, with an annual sunshine rate to rival both. Here, confirms Gilles Besse, oenologist at Domaine Jean-René Germanier in Vétroz and head of Swiss Wine Promotion, quality and professionalism are now the norm, and the days of 'les vigneron du samedi' (part-time grape-growers) a distant memory. Valais is a happy hunting ground for lovers of rare grape varieties: Amigne, Arvine, Cornalin, Humagne Rouge and Heida have replaced swathes of Chasselas (known here as Fendant), alongside the well-established reds of Pinot Noir, Syrah and Gamay. Following the Rhône downstream to Lake

Geneva brings us to Vaud, the nerve-centre of Chasselas. If ever Switzerland had a signature grape, comments Swiss wine writer, author and consultant Chandra Kurt, Chasselas would be the obvious candidate. In the giddingly steep vineyards of Lavaux, stacked above the lake from Vevey around to Lausanne, the grape over-delivers to give wines of rare depth and complexity. On the red front, Pinot Noir and Gamay have a new challenger in Vaud: 'Who would have thought we would ever grow Merlot here?' wonders Epesses winemaker Luc Massy, who is not alone in acknowledging the extent to which global warming is changing the Swiss vineyard landscape. At the western end of the croissant-shaped lake are the Geneva vineyards, formerly known for tank-loads of overcropped and underperforming Chasselas and dilute Gamay. The region has embraced the quality-over-quantity message with particular fervour: Jean-Pierre Pellegrin of Domaine Grand'Cour notes that while the total vineyard area here has not decreased, yields have halved – or in his case, quartered. The area is buzzing >

**Five names to look out for**



**Martha and Daniel Gantenbein**

**Gantenbein in Malans, Graubünden**

Martha and Daniel Gantenbein's handcrafted wines are among the few Swiss wines to have gained international fame. Every step is dictated by a single-minded pursuit of perfection, from the selection table in the vineyards through the architect-designed cellar to the array of oak barrels toasted by Burgundy's best coopers. Elegant, complex, long-lived Pinot Noir and Chardonnay (plus some Riesling), produced in minute quantities and dispensed by the drop through a small network of global distributors. [www.gantenbeinwine.com](http://www.gantenbeinwine.com)

**Marie-Therese Chappaz in Fully, Valais**

Chappaz is often described as *la grande dame* of Valais' wine growers, with 10ha of vines planted on steep terraces braced by dry-stone walls and farmed along biodynamic lines. Several cuvées of Fendant (Chasselas) illustrate her belief that the grape is a great reflector of terroir, her Petite Arvine (including a late-harvest) is legendary and her Dôle (the Valais blend of Pinot Noir and Gamay) unusually dense and racy. [www.chappaz.ch](http://www.chappaz.ch)

**Chanton in Visp, Valais**

Josef-Marie (aka Chosy) Chanton, now succeeded by son Mario, has spent a lifetime resurrecting and rebuilding a collection of the Valais' near-extinct specialities including Lafnetscha, Himbertscha, Resi, Gwäss and Petite Arvine.

The star of the show is Heida, grown in the vineyards of Visperterminen at 800m altitude, giving a deep golden wine of exotic character and class. [www.chanton.ch](http://www.chanton.ch)

**Louis-Philippe Bovard in Cully, Vaud**

Lord of Lavaux, Bovard started out as a lawyer and now heads the 18ha family estate with vines in prime sites from Lausanne all the way around to Vevey. His recently created Conservatoire Mondial du Chasselas, planted with 19 different Chasselas varieties, aims to explore which ones are best suited to Lavaux's uniquely positioned, clay-limestone soils. But Bovard is also an iconoclast, bringing Chenin and Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Syrah to what was once only territory for Chasselas. [www.domainebovard.com](http://www.domainebovard.com)

**Jean-Pierre Pellegrin in Peissy, Geneva**

Pellegrin is nicknamed 'the watchmaker of Swiss wine' for the beauty and precision of his wines. Responsible for an eclectic range from white and red blends aimed at the Swiss gastropub market through fine Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier varietals to elegant Domaine Grand'Cour white and red blends. The pinnacle of his production are the oak-aged Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Syrah wines, designated C, P, M and S respectively. +41 22 753 15 00



**Mario and Josef-Marie Chanton**

Photograph: ImageBroker/Alamy Stock Photo



## Swiss grape varieties

**[Petite] Arvine** Thrilling, newly trendy white variety indigenous to the Valais.

Wines vary from lipsmackingly dry with grapefruit tones and a characteristic salty finish, to lusciously sweet and highly concentrated from late-harvested grapes

**Chasselas (Fendant)**

Typically gives delicate, low-acid, low-alcohol wines with a slight CO<sub>2</sub> prickle. Planted in prime sites (notably Lavaux), it can give wines of distinction and subtle depth

**Heida (Païen)** The Savagnin grape of Jura fame, now firmly established in the

Valais where it gives grand, spicy whites of great distinction

**Amigne** Another ancient white variety indigenous to the Valais. Small-berried, late-ripening, giving luscious, honeyed wines of varying sweetness levels

**Pinot Noir (Blauburgunder)**

Switzerland's most widely planted grape, the best traditionally from Graubünden in the east and Neuchâtel in the west, with increasingly impressive examples from Aargau, Zurich and Schaffhausen

**Humagne Rouge** Correctly known as Cornalin [d'Aoste].



**Merlot in Ticino**  
Distinctive, late-ripening Valais variety; can have a rustic character and pronounced tannins, but in the right hands it gives scented, cherry-red wines that can age with elegance

**Merlot** Arrived in Ticino from Bordeaux in 1906 and now occupies 90% of the canton's vineyard area. Made both as a varietal and in Bordeaux-style blends, plus small amounts vinified as white wine

with young talent, such as rising star Sophie Dugerdil, who recently left a career as a teacher to take over the family vineyards and who is branching out with new varieties including Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc as well as Sauvignon Blanc.

With the tiny Three Lakes region, which straddles Switzerland's linguistic French-German border in the far west, our Swiss wine tour comes full circle. Vines flourish on the shores of Lakes Neuchâtel, Biel/Bienne and Murten/Morat. Loyalties here lie with Pinot Noir – the ones from Neuchâtel frequently score in international competitions and in the annual Grand Prix du Vin Suisse – and Chasselas, which gives fine, nervy aperitif wines, quite unlike the fleshy, long-lived Chasselas of Lavaux.

### High time to try

Swiss wines will never be exported in any quantity; currently only about 1.5% of production ever leaves the country. 'Our problem is we can't even produce enough for ourselves,' comments Besse. This doesn't mean Swiss winemakers are unaware of what's going on beyond their borders. On the contrary: they travel – and taste – widely,

drink fine wine from both the Old and the New World and draw inspiration from these international benchmarks.

The combined effects of the quality imperative, seasoned local palates and steady investment, along with Swiss meticulousness and an appetite for innovation (the country topped the WIPO Global Innovation Index again in 2016) have all borne fruit. Swiss wines are scaling new heights and catching the eye of curious wine drinkers.

And that pesky question of price? Good wine is expensive to produce, wherever it comes from. I'm increasingly convinced that top Swiss wine, when measured against quality wines from other countries, represents good value for money. To put price in perspective, you need to compare like with like.

So, the next time you reach for a New Zealand Pinot Noir, consider instead a Swiss Pinot from Neuchâtel or one of the northern cantons. If white Burgundy or the northern Rhône are your default choices, take a chance: look for a Chardonnay from Graubünden in the country's southeast, or a Valais Syrah instead. And if you love Pomerol, take a punt on one of the top Merlots coming out of Ticino in the far south, or from Geneva. **D**

*Sue Style is a freelance wine, food and travel writer, whose nine books include A Taste of Switzerland*

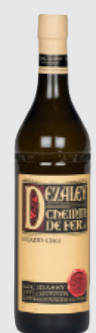
## Style's selection: Swiss wines to seek out



**Jean-René Germanier, Petite Arvine, Valais 2015** 90  
£30 *Alpine Wines, L'Assemblage*  
Classic Petite Arvine from Germanier's dramatic clay-schist moraine vineyards around Vétroz in central Valais. Grapefruit aromas and a rich, intense but fully dry palate with Arvine's typical saline finish. My desert-island Swiss white. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%

**Brivio, Bianco Rovere, Ticino 2014** 89  
£34.10-£36 *Alpine Wines, Hedonism*  
Alongside his stunning range of Merlots and Bordeaux-inspired red blends, Brivio and its winemaker Alfred de Martin make this distinguished white, elegantly oaked in 70% new barriques and boasting toasty, smoky, carried hints. Characterful and full-bodied, calling for Mediterranean-style chargrilled fish and vegetables. **Drink** 2017-2027 **Alc** 14%

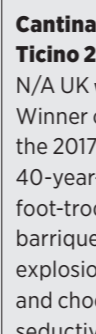
**Cru de l'Hôpital, Traminer, Vully, Three Lakes 2015** 89  
N/A UK [www.cru-hopital.ch](http://www.cru-hopital.ch)  
Precise, elegant, dry Gewurztraminer – a speciality for this region by oenologist Christian Vessaz. Discreet lychees and roses on the nose, then a rich, exotic mouthful with all the typicity and minerality of great Alsace Gewurz (and none of the sweetness of the less great). **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 14.7%



**Luc Massy, Chemin de Fer, Dézaley, Vaud 2014** 89  
£36.36 *Alpine Wines*  
Dézaley is Lavaux's most iconic site and Massy one of the leading interpreters of its terroir. Unlike most Chasselas (Massy makes three quite distinct examples), Chemin de Fer has an intensely honeyed nose, terrific structure, minerality and staying power – definitely a wine for food, rather than an aperitif. **Drink** 2017-2026 **Alc** 13%



**Badoux, Aigle Les Murailles, Vaud 2015** 88  
£27.60 *Alpine Wines*  
An elegant Chasselas grown on steep shale/gravel terraces above Aigle. Gently floral nose, good minerality and a memorable, slightly bitter finish – Switzerland in a glass, preferably sipped on a terrace overlooking Lake Geneva. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%



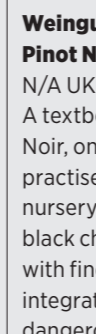
**Cantina Monti, Il Canto della Terra, Ticino 2011** 94  
N/A UK [www.cantinamonti.ch](http://www.cantinamonti.ch)  
Winner of the Gran Maestro du Merlot in the 2017 Mondial du Merlot. From 40-year-old vines, the grapes are foot-trodden and the wine aged in used barriques. Sweetly oaky nose, an explosion of blackcurrants, black cherries and chocolate on the palate. Suave and seductive, it sings of its steep, sunny slopes above Lake Lugano. **Drink** 2017-2021 **Alc** 14%

**Donatsch, Passion Pinot Noir, Graubünden 2013** 93  
£40.62 (2012) *Alpine Wines*  
The Donatsch family are undisputed champions of Pinot Noir. Passion, produced from 30- to 40-year-old vines, is the second of three cuvées, which they benchmark against premier cru Burgundy. Sensitive oaking (new and used), rounded tannins and beautiful balance. A memorable mouthful. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

**Jean-René Germanier, Cayas Syrah, Valais 2013** 93  
£49.39 *Alpine Wines, L'Assemblage*  
A thoroughbred Syrah grown on schist on the right (south-facing) bank of the Rhône. Clear signs of plenty of Alpine sun, yet impressively fresh. The two years spent in oak barrels (50% new) is beautifully disciplined, giving a spicy, leathery, complex wine. Gorgeous now with barbecued rib of beef, but patient cellaring will be rewarded. **Drink** 2017-2033 **Alc** 13.5%



**Simon Maye, Humagne Rouge, Valais 2012** 92  
£30 (2011) *Alpine Wines*  
Stamped with the character of the sun-baked, limestone Zouma vineyard, this unoaked Valais speciality has lively, black cherry and berry aromas, spicy, peppery flavours and forward fruit tannins, conferring brightness and lift. A wine with personality. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 12.8%



**Weingut zum Sternen, Kloster Sion Pinot Noir, Klingnau, Aargau 2013** 92  
N/A UK [www.weingut-sternen.ch](http://www.weingut-sternen.ch)  
A textbook, cool-climate Swiss Pinot Noir, one of eight different bottlings by practised Pinot producer and vine nurseryman Andreas Meier. Bright, black cherry characters, subtly oaked with fine structure and beautifully integrated tannins. Poised, elegant and dangerously drinkable. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

**Gialdi, Sassi Grossi, Ticino 2013** 91  
£48-£57.70 (2012) *Alpine Wines, Hedonism*  
Elegant Merlot from Gialdi's more northerly Tre Valli gneiss and granite vineyards. Spends 16 months in barriques (80% new), in barrel-vaulted, naturally cooled cellars beneath Monte Ceneri. Magnificent plummy aromas, well-integrated oak and delightful freshness for a wine of such structure. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13.5%



**Peter Wegelin, Malanser Blauburgunder, Graubünden 2014** 91  
£40.80 (2012) *Alpine Wines*  
Prize-winning Pinot aged 12 months in 500-litre casks from multi-award winning grower Peter Wegelin. Succulent, crushed red fruit on a shapely, well-structured palate – it's practically irresistible. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 13%  
*For full details of UK stockists, see p94*