

## Switzerland: Swiss Neutrality É Chasselas

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In mid-November 2014, I had an appointment in the Lavaux and took the chance to taste a selection of 95 Chasselas, most of them from the 2013 vintage. I also met up with the doyen of Chasselas, Monsieur Louis-Philippe Bovard. Find here my personal Chasselas favorites as well as a selection of wines (not just Chasselas) from the iconic Domaine Bovard. For generations Chasselas, or Fendant as it is known in the Valais, has been the most prominent white wine in Switzerland. Swiss people drink this light and friendly wine as Apéro, whereas real freaks match the whole menu with Chasselas. It can age stunningly well, although the acidity of this rather early ripening, ancient variety is quite low.

As genetic studies in combination with historical data have shown, the origin of Chasselas is most likely the area around the Lac Léman (Lake Geneva). Indeed the Lavaux in the canton Vaud is the most prestigious origin of modern Swiss Chasselas and in my tasting most of the finest wines came from the steep terraces of the Lavaux that became Unesco World Heritage in 2007. Almost 4,000 hectares (3,954 hectares in 2013 to be exact, so 26% of the total area under vine) are planted with Chasselas in Switzerland what makes this the country's most prominent white grape variety. (Note: 6 out of 10 Swiss white wines are Chasselas.) The Vaud (2,313 hectares and the Valais 994 hectares) are the most prominent cantons of Chasselas, respectively Fendant. The vigorous, early ripening and by nature rather high-yielding variety is discreet in its aromatic expression, but reflects its particular origin impressively, most of all through the soils and the different microclimates. Chasselas is not a spectacular wine, but its subtleness, elegance and aromatic neutrality makes it a first class gastronomic wine. Matching cheese and wine is sometimes a tricky issue, but with the wide range of young and matured Chasselas from different appellations there are serious favorites, you just have to experiment! (Do you really think the Swiss don't know how to put their world-class cheese into the right light? Vacherin de Fribourg, Raclette or cheese fondue is only half the discovery without a good Chasselas). Also, a matured Chasselas Grand Cru from the Dézaley can match all kinds of food, even meat.

Indeed, the most prestigious Swiss Chasselas come from the Dézaley Grand Cru. This is a steep, terraced mountain where more than 100 owners share a total of 55 hectares of predominantly old vines, which root in 30-million-year-old conglomerate or even older marl and sandstone soils. The terraces of the Lavaux were set up by Cistercian monks in the 12th century and were always cultivated. The scenery along Lake Geneva is really breathtaking. The wines from here (90% is Chasselas) are deep, complex and elegant and can age for far more than 20 years. If you prefer more tension and raciness try a rather cool Chasselas from Chablais!

In Switzerland, most of the Chasselas undergo malolactic fermentation, which makes it a rather boring example for people from abroad who prefer crisp and aromatic wines such as Sauvignon Blanc or Riesling. However, like Silvaner in Germany Chasselas is also an excellent food wine that can be light and fresh (often thanks to CO<sub>2</sub> which is sometimes too much), but also full-bodied, deep and complex.

In Switzerland, villages or appellations such as Féchy, Morges, Cully, Epesses, Calamin, Dézaley, Saint-Saphorin, Chardonne, Yverne or Aigle have similar reputations to the world-famous villages and AOC's in Burgundy, as José Vouillamoz and Swiss wine writer Chandra Kurt once told me. The warm and dry climate of the Valais in combination with its spectacular terroir bring another type of Chasselas. The Fendant is a more full-bodied and powerful wine with fully ripe and intense fruit aromas. Also Neuchâtel and Geneva produce some very good Chasselas, whereas in the Germanspeaking eastern part of the country Gutedel is quite rare. People prefer Müller-Thurgau here and, for a couple of years, they even don't fear acidity anymore. There are some excellent, racy Müllers made today, but that's something completely different.

### Vintage 2013

Yields were down by 16.5% in all Switzerland compared to 2012, and 2013 was recorded as the smallest harvest since 1980. Spring was wet and cold and so the flowering was very late, too. Due to the nice summer and sunny autumn the vines caught up a little bit, but finally the harvest was two weeks later than normal and was not finished before mid-November. The berries were significantly smaller than in the years before, but could give intense and well-concentrated wines.

Many Chasselas producers around Geneva and the lakes were hit hard by a heavy hailstorm on June 20, which destroyed much of the harvest, namely in the Neuchâtel appellation that produced 54% less compared to average yields. So, unfortunately, most of the wines recommended in this report are most likely sold out already, at least in Switzerland, where most of the wine production is consumed. However, some Chasselas are exported and they really deserve your curiosity.

· *Stephan Reinhardt*