



# Switzerland: Swiss Wine Evolution, or the Golden Age of Millennials

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Folks, get ready for something new! There's a lot going on in Switzerland. Unheard of, completely unique wines of great class and expressiveness are flowing into our glasses—not always, but more and more often. The wine scene is as lively, colorful and diverse as an alpine meadow in summer, and anyone who's been to Switzerland and seen the breathtaking landscape between the Rhône and the Alps will be amazed by all the activity. But let's start leisurely, look back and contextualize.

For a long time, Swiss wine stewed somewhat too complacently in its own juice. With a few exceptions, the wines were always good but also rather fruit-driven and soft, flattering to the common consumer and the hardly critical domestic press. Only a few wines and winemakers succeeded in arousing interest abroad, especially among ambitious fine wine drinkers. This should now change with the millennials, i.e., the winemakers born between 1981 and 1996, who have meanwhile taken over the enological scepter of their parents' domaines or founded their own enterprises. This report is dedicated to many well-known but also less well-known names, who, compared to the past, often produce completely new and also novel, post-modern and uncompromisingly origin-oriented, often organically or even biodynamically cultivated wines, which are sure to attract great international interest. Perhaps for the first time, Swiss wines are really cool, especially for young people who value natural expression over power, concentration and sheer fruit intensity. It's no wonder that even New York importers are now traveling to Switzerland to track down the new wines that offer so much quality and soul for comparatively little money. Are there any better Pinot Noirs produced outside Burgundy that cost less than so many fine Pinots from Switzerland? In fact, in the land of expensive watches and chocolates grow perhaps the least expensive Chasselas, Pinot Noir and Syrah, as well as outstanding indigenous specialties such as Petite Arvine, Heida or Cornalin. Their

qualities are characterized by naturalness, liveliness and inspiration, and the only luxury is to get hold of them, rare as they are.



*The steep terraces of Lavaux (Vaud) overlook Lake Geneva. (Photo courtesy of Swiss Wine Production)*

### **Swiss Elites, Swiss Protectionism**

While the first Swiss wine reports in *The Wine Advocate* were thematically related to Pinot Noir and Chasselas or had regional focuses like Valais, for example, this is the first major *Wine Advocate* report on Swiss wine, taking into account more than 400 wines from all major regions. Nevertheless, like any report, it must of course remain incomplete, even if it covers most of the country's best producers. I had to drastically limit the number of wines to be tasted from 115 producers (plus one from Liechtenstein) in order to be able to report in a reasonably representative yet timely manner. Otherwise, I could have included well over 1,000 wines, which, given the fact that still very few Swiss wines leave the country, would have been ridiculous and not very useful to include so many wines for an English-language publication read by fine wine hunters around the world. For this report, it was not an explicit requirement that the wines featured be available in the major export markets. Otherwise, I would have had to remain silent about too many wonderful wines, which would not have done justice to the Swiss wine scene. That you might miss out on some things because you can't get to it is a real shame, but I want you to at least know what you're missing—or not, if you're still coming to Switzerland this year. The pre-selected domaines and producers were each invited to send me a certain number of wines of their

choice to Zurich. I then tasted about 400 wines in February at the Vinothek Brancaia and others at home in Germany. As a consolation for you, not all the wines I wanted to taste arrived there. Some winemakers wanted to show me their wines only at their domaine, but I could not travel across the country due to the pandemic as well as time constraints. Nevertheless, this report shows the high level of so many Swiss wines that I was able to taste in the meantime.



*Donatsch's vines in summer (Photo courtesy of Donatsch)*

Years ago, the Swiss press was still surprised that I had rated so many wines with 90 points and more, since Swiss wines had been virtually absent from the international press until then. Indeed, with its nearly 15,000 hectares of vines, Switzerland is today one of the most dynamic and interesting wine-producing countries in Western Europe. Although some Swiss politicians are still trying to force the mediocre, barely selling Swiss wines into happiness by all sorts of chicanery for domestic wine importers, a free market doesn't work that way, and blind protectionism doesn't bring about an evolution either. People drink not only what is Swiss but everything that is good—especially in Switzerland. In the future, even the Swiss Wine Promotion will rely on the elite producers when it comes to representing Swiss wine in international markets, because only top-quality wines are able to convince and achieve appropriate prices, not just the ones that are Swiss made.



*Vineyards in Lavaux (Vaud) on the shores of Lake Geneva (Photo courtesy of Swiss Wine Production)*

### **Swiss Self-Confidence**

The fact that Switzerland does not produce as much wine as it consumes and that many of the best Swiss wines are only available to long-standing regular customers has long shown that Swiss wine can compete but not through nationalistic protectionism. Or by a wholly uncritical press that tends to court the winemakers or names them clients. Self-sufficiency also led Swiss wine into a crisis in the early 1980s, from which today's elites, who focus on the highest quality and small harvests, have remedied. While international styles—Bordeaux and Burgundy, for example—may have been the focus of aesthetic considerations back then, today it is the local terroirs and the country's own drinking culture that have led to decidedly origin-based, lively and digestible, indeed unique and unmistakable wines. No copies carry the success, just self-consciously Swiss originals. If you don't believe it and want to check it out, try a dozen Chasselas wines from different appellations. The fact that Chasselas can transport terroir in such a versatile way is unfortunately no longer believed throughout Europe. Swiss winemakers, however, unflinchingly prove, not only in Vaud and Valais (where Chasselas is called Fendant), that one only has to understand this art, while the rejection (for example in the Loire or in the French Northern Rhône, where it was once also widespread) is not only very simple but also quite snobbish. Does every wine have to be a great Burgundy? You have to be able to listen well to Chasselas to really understand it and enjoy it in its

subtlety, say the Paccots of Domaine La Colombe in Féchy (Vaud). How right they are. And actually, this bon mot applies to all wines, doesn't it?



*Jean-René Germanier's Coteau de Vétroz in the Valais*

So, the best Swiss producers don't need protectionism at all—it might even be counterproductive for them. Really, all the elites of Swiss wine, starting with Gantenbein, Donatsch and Fromm to Bovard, Chappaz, Simon Maye, Germanier, Zündel and Huber (I could certainly mention more names), who made Swiss wine internationally known as early as the 1990s, are unimaginable without exchange with the world. They are all well-networked internationally, exchange ideas and critically taste beyond their own four walls. They all have advanced Swiss wine over three or even four decades, leaving their children (if they have any) to build on this achievement (if they are smart).



*Thomas and Martin Donatsch receiving perfectly ripe and healthy Pinot Noir grapes  
(Photo courtesy of Donatsch)*

### **The Time of the Millennials**

In any case, the Swiss wine scene has become very young. Highly educated and well-traveled, cosmopolitan winemakers between the ages of 25 and 40 who have recognized the signs of the times and for whom proper, i.e., good winemaking is only possible with nature and only sustainably. Many Swiss wines are now produced organically and, more and more, biodynamically. It now even seems to be a trend to produce organic wines with BioSuisse certification. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that the younger generation seems to have more confidence in their own terroirs and vineyards as well as in the healing and self-regulating powers of nature than their parents did. Still, in Switzerland, especially among winemakers around 60 years of age, one finds the ambition to be able to produce wines like the great, famous appellations of this world. Sometimes wines are the models—such as from Bordeaux, the French Rhône and, of course, Burgundy—and other times it is grape varieties, such as Merlot or Malbec.



*A Bouvet-Jablor Neuchâtel vineyard (Photo courtesy of Bouvet-Jablor)*

It is now up to the Millennials to produce wines in their own style, to be more intuitive and to listen to nature and the given conditions to see how they could be expressed in the wines, while the winemaker takes a step back with all his ideas. Many are taking over their parents' businesses on their own responsibility and can build on their great achievements, develop them further and adapt them to today's requirements—key words are authenticity, regionality, naturalness, liveliness, sustainability. Other young winemakers without an agricultural background are just starting up in order to give their previous experiences and intuitions not only a playground but also a meaning to their lives and hopefully a sustainable economic basis as well. In doing so, they are proving themselves to be inventive and have been making use of social media for crowdfunding projects. These can be farms like Ô Fâya by Ilona Thétaz in Valais or négociant projects like "Väterchen Frost" or "What the Hail!" by Stephan Herter near Winterthur (Zurich). Others work honestly and excellently in secret and on a low flame; they don't talk about it, like Sven Fröhlich (Graubünden), Anne-Claire Schott (Lake Biel), Christian Vessaz (Cru de l'Hôpital, Vully), Etienne Javet (Javet-Javet, Vully), Olivier Pittet (Valais) or Adrien Stevens (Ticino). Still others, whom I recommended as a discovery only a few years ago, are now starting to establish themselves among the best in Switzerland, such as Tom Litwan (Aargau), Möhr-Niggli (Graubünden) or the Riehen winery (Basel Landschaft). It also fascinates me to see how even renowned domaines that have

been established for decades are transferred quite naturally and without revolution into the present and future by being further developed by the younger generation instead of being wound up or completely rehashed, as can easily happen after a change of generations. Myra Zündel in Ticino is an example of a good transition, as well as Catherine Cruchon in Vaud; Laura Paccot, Sarah Besse, Madeleine Mercier and Sandrine Caloz in Valais; Martin Donatsch and Patrick Adank in Graubünden; or Cédric and Nadine Besson-Strasser (Schaffhausen and Zurich) and Alain Schwarzenbach on Lake Zurich.



*Henri Cruchon's Chasselas cru Au Clos with the Château de Vufflens in the background*

It is the millennials who are carrying the baton forward today, and I hope that this report and its reception will also help to increase the world's interest in Swiss wines. The young people are well educated not only in theory but also in practical experience they have gained from all over the world: in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, California, Oregon and, of course, in the neighboring countries of France, Italy, Austria and Germany. They move at the international natural wine fairs as naturally as at the domestic wine fairs and are lucky to have parents behind them who see their children's experiences and visions as an asset and not as fluff in their heads. Handing over the scepter to them, but at the same time standing by with advice and action, is another basic requirement of the new Swiss self-image. It recognizes its own identity in the exchange with the world as well as with its parents and its own culture. Developing its own style through adaptation but tied to natural and cultural conditions is what

distinguishes Swiss winemaking today. And the conditions for this? They are excellent.



*Donatsch's vines at harvest (Photo courtesy of Donatsch)*

Switzerland not only has fabulous landscapes and diverse terroirs from the Rhine Valley to 1,000+ meters above sea level, it also has diverse soils and geological substrates that leave nothing to be desired, climates that are mild to Mediterranean and sometimes even extreme, and last but not least, a rich fund of international as well as autochthonous grape varieties that are suitable for the highest qualities and individual wine styles. Completer, Räuschling and Freisamer are old-established varieties in German-speaking Switzerland, and in the Valais are Cornalin, Heida, Humagne Blanche, Humagne Rouge, Petite and Grosse Arvine, as well as many more rarities to discover. In addition to classics such as Chardonnay, Chasselas, Sylvaner (Johannisberger) Traminer, Cabernet, Gamay, Merlot, Pinot Noir and Syrah, there are also proven Swiss breeds such as Müller-Thurgau (Riesling x Sylvaner), Gamaret or Diolinoir. In short: There is nothing that does not exist, and winemakers can resist the rich offerings and only grow what suits the region and makes its terroirs resound. In doing so, great wines can emerge. Where "great" here means "distinctive and of the highest quality."



*Jean-René Germanier's Coteau d'Ardon with Parcelle de Rives in the Valais*

### **Spring Awakening in the Three-Lakes Region**

While I can't mention all of Switzerland's regions, I would like to mention the Drei-Seen-Land (literally translated to Three-Lakes-Land). It has been underexposed so far, but during these tastings, it has aroused my increased interest and is a possible destination for future visits. Therefore, I would like to draw your attention to this area as well, where four wine regions and four cantons come together: Bielersee or Lac de Bienné (Lake Biel, Canton of Bern), Lake Neuchâtel (Neuchâtel), Vully/Murtensee (Vaud and Fribourg) and the Côtes de l'Orbel (Vaud), which is not highlighted here.

Created by the Valais glacier and characterized by rolling hills, the diverse Three-Lakes region is at the transition from the Jura chain to the midland molasse basin and is not only scenically and climatically beautiful (namely, mild to sometimes even Mediterranean) but also currently one of the best kept secrets in all of Switzerland. Here, one can find fascinatingly fruity or even mineral as well as structured, extremely elegant, round and vital Chasselas and Pinot Noir, to name the two most prominent varieties that grow in the limestone-rich, marly vineyards of the Jura foothills on sandy molasse or on moraine and river deposits along Lake Biel, Lake Neuchâtel and Lake Murten. The lakes usually protect the vines from spring frosts and allow the grapes to ripen more slowly in the fall. Almost 1,300 hectares of vines are cultivated here, just over half of which are white varieties. In total, Chasselas (40%, mainly on Mont Vully) and Pinot Noir (35.5%, mainly grown on Lake Neuchâtel) occupy three-quarters of the total

vineyard area, but this does not mean that you will not find other specialties, such as Gamay, Gamaret, Pinot Gris, Traminer or even Freisamer (Freiburger).



*Another Neuchâtel vineyard of Bouvet-Jablor*

The varieties of these wines are varied due to the different soils, so there is hardly an area-typical wine from the Three-Lakes region, but I am particularly fascinated by the Pinot Noir here. It is no longer a secret that Pinot is produced at Lake Neuchâtel, especially at the Maison de la Carrée of the Perrochet family and the Caves de Chambleau of Louis-Philippe Burgat. Rather, the secret is that producers on Mont Vully at Lake Murten are also able to do it, where both Christian Vessaz (Cru de l'Hôpital) and Etienne Javet (Javez-Javez) produce fascinatingly intense, profound and sensual Pinots, partly without the addition of sulfur. I count these wines among the finest in Switzerland. Other highly interesting, dense and modern red wines are produced by Fabrice Simonet's Petit Château in Môtier. The wines are based entirely or in part on Diolinoir (a Swiss crossing of Dioly x Pinot Noir) or Merlot that age in predominantly new barriques for up to 22 months, as well as a fascinating Freisamer (a Swiss crossing of Sylvaner x Pinot Gris). And the fact that Anne-Claire Schott in Twann on Lake Biel is an artist working in the vines and produces extremely subtle natural wines is another reason for my fascination, not to mention what Thomas Gromann from the Vogelsang site fills into the bottle.

Of course, other regions deserve our interest as well, in particular Zurich and Graubünden, of course, but also the Aargau, Ticino, the Vaud and always the Valais. There is a lot to discover, even if it's only by reading for those who cannot make it to this spectacular country.



*Tenuta Castello di Morcote sits on a mountaintop in the Ticino region. (Photo courtesy of Swiss Wine Production)*

### **Statistics: Vineyard Area**

In 2020, the Swiss vineyard area amounted to 14,696 hectares, a decrease of 0.05% (eight hectares) compared to 2019. The area planted with white grape varieties accounted for 6,427 hectares (41 more than in 2019), while the area planted with red grape varieties was 8,269 hectares (49 less than in 2019). The area planted with white grape varieties represented 44% of the total area, while the area planted with red grape varieties represented 56%. In the canton of Valais, the area planted with vines in 2020 was 4,766 (29 less than in 2019). However, Valais still remains the largest wine-growing canton in Switzerland, followed by the cantons of Vaud with 3,787 hectares of vineyards (13 more than in 2019) and Geneva with 1,391 hectares (16 less than in 2019). The Ticino vineyard area expanded by 31 hectares compared to 2019, with a total of 1,127

hectares in 2020. In German-speaking Switzerland, the canton of Zurich had the largest area under vines in 2020, with 608 hectares (down by six hectares compared to 2019), which was ahead of the cantons of Schaffhausen with 472 hectares (down by seven hectares), Graubünden with 423 hectares (down by 0.5 hectares) and Aargau with 386 hectares (down by 0.6).

Despite a further decline in 2020, with a decrease of 73 hectares compared to 2019, Pinot Noir remained the most cultivated grape variety in Switzerland, with 3,875 hectares of vineyards. The area planted with Chasselas also decreased in 2020, with 51 fewer hectares, for a total of 3,606 hectares. Previously the third most cultivated grape, Gamay continued to decrease in area in 2020, with 58 fewer hectares than in 2019, and was overtaken by Merlot, which increased by 39 hectares. Other grape varieties are also on the rise in Switzerland. These include the white grape varieties Savagnin Blanc (with an increase of 20 hectares in 2020), Sylvaner/Rhin (an increase of 18 hectares) and Petite Arvine (an increase of 16 hectares). (Source: [Bundesamt für Landwirtschaft. Das Weinjahr 2020. Weinwirtschaftliche Statistik, 30-31](#))



*A Donatsch vineyard in spring (left) and at harvest (right)*