# Switzerland

4 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

**In a nutshell**: Fragrant whites and some increasingly concentrated reds from three very different cultures.

**Main grape varieties**: Chasselas, Sylvaner (whites); Gamay, Blauburgunder (Pinot Noir), Merlot (reds).

Swiss wine, like Swiss anything, is expensive. It is a direct reflection of the Swiss cost of living, and its reputation has not been helped by the fact that the bigger Swiss wine merchants were in the past allowed to blend imported wines with their own. This was banned in 2006 and there have been many changes since the wine market was fully opened to the outside world at the beginning of this century, not least the fact that Switzerland now produces more red wine than white. (Because Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, it is not answerable to European wine law, although it has although it has tightened up its wine laws considerably in recent years and has developed its own appellation contrôlée system.)

But all over Switzerland are passionately obsessive winemakers who each year are making better and better wines, many of them red, in such small quantities that they go straight into the cellars of the connoisseurs of Geneva, Zurich and Vaduz (Liechtenstein is close to one of the best wine regions) and are rarely mentioned in the international wine press. Only about two per cent of Swiss wine leaves the country.

The Swiss have been careful to preserve their agricultural heritage, which means not only the preservation of the clanking cowbell Heidi tradition, but the preservation of some of the world's prettier and more inconvenient vineyards - the great majority of which are in the western French part of the country.

Swiss white wines taste quite unlike those of Germany or Austria, for example, because Swiss winemakers routinely encourage the second, softening malolactic fermentation so the wines seem much less obviously acid. They have also tended to increase most of their wines' final alcohol content quite considerably by adding sugar to the fermentation vat (a practice familiar to any Frenchman as chaptalisation) and so most Swiss whites taste much less tart and thin than the country's high altitude and relatively continental climate might suggest. Climate change is making chaptalisation unnecessary however. For the increasingly fashionable reds, Pinot Noir (also known as Blauburgunder or Clevener) is the dominant variety and is grown everywhere except the southern Ticino region, where Merlot is more popular.

**French Switzerland**

The main grape variety by far here in the south and east of the country is Chasselas, which is also sometimes sold as a table grape. The sunny, south-facing slopes of the **Valais** in the upper Rhône Valley south east of Lake Geneva produce more Swiss wine than any other region. So dry and warm are summers here that some vineyards, many of them so steep they need to be terraced or worked with pulleys, may need irrigation from time to time. Local vine variety specialities in some of the highest vineyards include the characterful, full bodied white variety Petite Arvine, Amigne, Humagne, and the red grapes Humagne Rouge and Cornalin, and some serious late-harvest sweet wines are made, sometimes from raisined (*flétri*) grapes. Further down the valley, some concentrated whites from Fendant (Chasselas), Johannisberg (Sylvaner), Ermitage (Marsanne), Malvoisie (Pinot Gris) are made, as well as some deep, red Syrahs which would impress many winemakers in Tain l'Hermitage miles further down the river Rhône in France. Much of the Pinot Noir and Gamay grown in Valais is blended to be sold as Dôle, Switzerland's answer to Burgundy's Bourgogne-Passetoutgrains (see Burgundy). The best producers include Michel Boven, Marie-Thérèse Chappaz, Claudy Clavien, Cornulus, Didier Joris, René Favre & Fils, Jean-René Germanier, Simon Maye & Fils, Denis Mercier and Rouvinez, and the most highly regarded areas, officially designated as grands crus, are Fully, Conthey, Vétroz, St-Léonard and Salgesch.

The canton of **Vaud**, on the northern shore of Lake Geneva, is also an important Swiss wine region, and houses many of the larger merchants. Aigle, La Côte, Lavaux, Dézaley, Chablais and Yvorne are the main Vaud wine regions and are also dominated by Chasselas. Salvagnin is Vaud's version of Dôle, although it displays even less Pinot Noir influence. Some Chardonnay and Pinot Gris is also grown here on vineyards which slope gently towards the lake, benefiting from its reflected, grape-ripening light. Some of the most respected winemakers are Some of the most respected winemakers are Bernard Cavé, Michel et Raoul Cruchon, Christian Dugon, Philippe Gex, the Ville de Lausanne and Raymond Paccot. The two grands cru here are Dézaley and Calamin.

A wide variety of vine varieties is grown around the city of **Geneva** itself. where Gamay is now the most planted grape variety but respect for Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Gris have been growing. In **Neuchâtel**, where the dominant varieties are Chasselas and Pinot Noir, pale pink Oeil de Perdrix (partridge's eye) is a popular local invention.

**German Switzerland**

The wines of eastern Switzerland are quite different. Pinot Noir or Blauburgunder is particularly popular and is made in a wide range of styles from slightly sweet and juicy through seriously burgundian to a strong, sweet version made from dried grapes in the **Graubünden** region, a hotbed of experimentation. Reds make up 80 per cent of production and Müller-Thurgau (also known as Riesling-Sylvaner) dominates the whites; indeed the largest wine region **Schaffhausen** is effectively a southern extension of Germany's Baden region. Baumann, Bovel, Gantenbein, Kesselrring, and Schwarzenach are some of the most reliable names.

**Italian Switzerland**

The Ticino is yet another quite distinct winemaking zone in Switzerland (with an unusal tradition of still cultivating hybrids). Much of its produce is light Merlot designed to satisfy the Swiss thirst for wine of any quality so long as it's red. Some top-quality, oak-aged Merlot del Ticino and other international reds are made, however, from low-yielding vines grown in particularly well-favoured sites - even if few of them escape the clutches of the Swiss themselves. Brivio, Gialdi, Monti, Zanini and Zündel are some of the most admired winemakers.

See the Swiss Wine Page for more information on this region, and for an up-to-date list of good Swiss wines to try from our Purple pagers, see Swiss wine recommendations.