

Swiss Wine



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An overview of Swiss Wine

Swiss wines are mostly drunk locally by a prosperous, wine loving nation. Prices have always been high. That said, a decent Swiss wine will almost always be cheaper than an American wine of similar quality; whether ordering in a restaurant or buying in a supermarket.

The Swiss love their wine and seldom order French or Italian wines in restaurants. One reason for this is that the Swiss Government puts high import duties on foreign wine to make their own wines more competitive.

Efficiency has long been a necessity in the vineyards of Switzerland, where demand for wine far exceeds the amount that can be produced in often difficult terrain: the Swiss each drink about 20 litres of their own and some 30 litres of imported wine a year. Vineyards clinging to south-facing slopes along the river valleys, and beside lakes (which some reflect heat), are difficult to cultivate, and the high production costs make Swiss wine expensive. In the past the drive for efficiency, with excessive use of fertilizers and over-production, often resulted in wines with little acidity. Yields for the better wines are now legally restricted, although some people feel that 112hl/ha is still too much if vines are not to become exhausted too soon.

The average size of vineyard holding - less than half a hectare (1.2 acres) - is one-third of the figure for the EC; most growers leave winemaking to large wineries or cooperative cellars. There is also a growing number of small estate -bottlers, often managed by young people from the viticultural schools of Wädenswil and Changins. For years most wine was simply an everyday drink, but today training and experience gained elsewhere in Europe and the New World are helping to produce Swiss wines of a quality previously unknown. Vines are grown in most parts, making both red and white wines, but the most important vineyards are found in the French-speaking cantons of Valais and Vaud, Almost all Swiss wines are dry and 56% is white. The main white grape in the French cantons is Chasselas, which generally produces a wine to be drunk within three years, but can surprise by being more than drinkable after 25. To avoid tasting flat it is bottled with some of the natural carbon dioxide retained in the wine. Relatively neutral in taste, good Chasselas can show character and flavour from its soil. In the German-speaking cantons the predominant white variety is Riesling-Sylvaner - the Swiss name for Muller-Thurgau. Pinot Noir, known here as Blauburgunder, is the country's top red grape. It also makes Oeil de Perdrix ("partridge eye"), a pale rose, in the French-speaking cantons. But in the warmer Italian canton of Ticino, Merlot reigns supreme to make some of the country's best reds.

Swiss Bottles

As food critic, Patricia Well's says :

"Don't be surprised - even with a bottle of Swiss wine priced at 60 francs a bottle - when the sommelier unscrews rather than uncorks. "

The « capsule » (screw-top) is omnipresent in Switzerland. Although you'll find the occasional bottle of Swiss with a cork, most Swiss wines are bottles with a capsule. This is a bit disappointing for those of us who have come to cherish the popping of the cork. Nevertheless, the hyper-practical Swiss do have their reasons. A few paragraphs...

That nasty little infection [2,4,6-Trichloroanisole](#) (TCA) has made its mark. The contamination happens during the cork sterilization process, so little can be done to halt it other than careful bark selection and lot inspection. Unfortunately, the cork industry has been very slow to respond to winemakers' demands for quality. As a result we are seeing more Stelvin-type closures, also known as screw caps. Don't worry, it's not happening overnight—although Switzerland already uses more than 15 million annually. In the United States, usage could reach ten million this year.

(Fred Dame, Master Sommelier)

American wineries use fewer than 10 million screwcaps a year. Switzerland, whose wineries have used screwcaps for more than a decade, now employs some 70 million of them annually.

"Far too much wine gets spoiled by cork contamination," Crawford said, citing a 2000 Air New Zealand competition in which the judges declared 32 percent of riesling entries to be "corked," or tainted. The main cause of cork taint is a compound called 2,4,6-trichloro anisole, or TCA, formed by the interaction of moisture, chlorine and mold.

Estimates of how much wine is "corked" vary from as high as 10 percent to less than 1 percent.

(Frank Prial, New York Times News Service)

Swiss Labels

Labelling in the past been very much at the whim of the producer: wines have been labeled by place name, grape variety or a brand name. However, the laws controlling the wine industry are being updated in order to improve the competitiveness of Swiss wine, to make the income of producers more secure and to align Swiss legislation with that of the EC. For example, bottles are being standardized to contain 750ml (rather than 700ml), and terms such as "Grand Cru" and 'Grand Vin', which have no legal basis, are likely to be abolished.

These are some of local Geneva grape varieties grown by our associate that you'll be experiencing during our evening aperitifs.

WHITES

Chasselas : Originally from the Mâconnais region of Burgundy in France, Chasselas is the most cultivated grape in Switzerland. As a fresh, light wine, it makes an ideal apéritif. The wine goes well with fresh-water fish, cheese dishes, and poultry. It can also accompany frogs' legs, shrimp and salt-water fish such as red mullet.

Chardonnay : One of the great Burgundy grapes, Chardonnay yields an aromatic wine ideally suited to spicy foods.

Pinot blanc : A white member of the Pinot family, Pinot Blanc is a subtly aromatic wine that makes an excellent apéritif but is also good with fish, and cheese dishes like raclette and fondue.

Sauvignon : Sauvignon has been cultivated for several centuries in the Loire and Graves regions of France. The grape has acclimatized particularly well to Geneva soil, especially in Satigny and Dardagny. With high but delicate acidity levels and a citrus-y character sometimes tinged with notes of passion fruit or black currant, Sauvignon is ideal with goat cheeses.

REDS

Gamay : Geneva's best-known red wine is made from this variety. Originally from Beaujolais, the grape was grown by the Celts before the arrival of the Romans. Often fruity and low in tannins, Gamay wine can also be structured with aromas of red fruit and spices. Ideal with poultry, it is good as well with rabbit and pigeon, and cold meat such as pork charcuterie and sausage, or terrines and patés. Also delicious with strawberries.

Pinot noir: Pinot Noir is probably the oldest grape variety cultivated outside the Mediterranean region. Originally from Burgundy, it has long been grown in Geneva, and yields distinguished, fine and racy wines with fruity notes of raspberry and blackberry that lend themselves well to oak-aging. Pinot Noir is good with red meat, game and duck, but is also worth trying with local fresh-water fish such as 'omble chevalier' (char) or 'sandre', a perch-like fish.

Merlot: An accidental arrival from Bordeaux, in Switzerland the Merlot grape responds to Geneva's soil almost as well as it does to that of the Swiss-Italian canton of Ticino. More supple than Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot wine is round and fruity with notes of currant. Generally oak-aged, this wine keeps well. Serve with meat – it is particularly good with roast lamb and rosemary – chicken in sauces, and some cheeses.

Special Guest

Nick Dobson, UK Wine Merchant

In developing his e-business, Wokingham-based Nick Dobson chose to focus on niche selections from Southern Burgundy, Germany, Austria and Switzerland – with Geneva wines so far being the only ones in the Swiss assortment –
WWW.NICKDOBSONWINES.CO.UK . Gail Mangold-Vine finds out more.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NICK DOBSON

GW: Apparently you used to work in Geneva?

ND: I used to work for the UK subsidiary of a Swiss telecommunications company, Landis and Gyr, as a project manager, and was responsible for managing engineering staff in Geneva. So between 1998 and the end of 2000, I commuted regularly between the UK and Geneva, spending very large amounts of time in Switzerland on business, not only working in the Geneva office, but also on customer visits in the Bern and Sion regions.

GW: Can you tell us about how and when your interest in wine began and how it developed? Do you write the commentary about your wines yourself?

ND: I think I've always been interested in wine, although my interest in fine wines was kindled during my university days, when by some quirk there was a very out-of-date price list – probably 15 or 20 years old – governing off-sales of wine from one of the university bars, enabling the purchase of fantastic Bordeaux wines for a fraction of the correct price. Needless to say, this error had to be taken advantage of... But then just about every holiday since has been spent in a winegrowing district somewhere or other. The tasting notes on the website are mine, although they are sometimes supplemented with notes written by other wine professionals to whom I have sent samples. Any supplemental notes are clearly identified as such.

GW: When did you open your business?

ND: The business was started at the end of 2002, although the first few months were spent putting everything in place and getting the first wines here, the website up and running, etc. Our first sales were in about April 2003.

GW: How did you 'discover' Geneva wines?

ND: I tried them in restaurants, and bought bottles to bring back from my many business trips. Plus following this up with family holidays to the Lake Geneva area, when with a car it was easier to get out and about into the countryside and buy directly from the producers. When I worked in Geneva I was fortunate enough to have some colleagues who were very knowledgeable about local wines, and who gave me some pointers. I am still in contact with these people, and sometimes seek their opinions on specific wines and makers.

GW: About the character of Geneva wine country – the light, landscapes, villages, and vineyards. How would you describe it?

ND: It's a very pretty undulating region, with lovely villages, superb backdrops (Jura, Salève) and of course one is never far from the lake and the beauty of that. It's not a vinous monoculture, as one finds elsewhere, which makes it rather more interesting. And it is endlessly changing with the seasons – the





mountains and the snow they collect seem to reinforce that. In many ways it has a lot in common with other winegrowing regions, yet it doesn't seem to me to be "steeped in time" as do some of

them. It is only superficially sleepy and bucolic, with a definite buzz and vitality – a real sense of purpose – just below the surface. I'm sure many visitors to Geneva (the city) would be completely unaware that this was on their doorstep.

GW: How about the wineries and wine-makers? What general characteristics strike you?

ND: Several things... the first is how focused many are on the domestic market, and how so few export. And how some are so blasé about the beauty of the setting of their vineyards. And there seems to be quite a lot of experimentation – pushing of boundaries – going on, far more so than in some other regions I buy in. On the whole the people seem to me to be very pleasant, dedicated, quite businesslike, and very eager to help me in my endeavor.

GW: And how about Geneva wines – where are the strong points?

ND: For me, Geneva is the best region for reds rather than whites, with some superb wines being made. The reds seem to be heavier and more full-bodied than many of those from other regions, although of course it must be said that I have not yet concluded research for the introduction of wines from regions other than Geneva – this next stage being my "Switzerland phase 2" – and this may yield some surprises. And there are some very competent whites made around Geneva too.



GW: How do UK customers react when you talk about Swiss wine, and more specifically Geneva wine? Are they beginning to get conversant with it, or with the exception of a few is it all still uncharted territory?

ND: I'd say that on the whole, it's pretty much uncharted territory for the vast majority of them. Occasionally you come across someone who is quite knowledgeable, but this tends to be mainly those who have either lived in Switzerland or have traveled there extensively. There are also quite a few people who have sampled Swiss wines on skiing holidays. With my other ranges of wines, customers often pick their own rather than go for a ready-made case, but with the Swiss wines it's almost exclusively ready-made cases, suggesting people don't have the knowledge or confidence to choose their own, and are happy to have someone else make the decisions for them. But it's early days yet – ask me this question again in a year's time, when I've had a chance to sell, and get feedback on, a more comprehensive range.

GW: What are typical reactions when they taste Geneva wines?

ND: Because we don't have a shop, the opportunities to gauge people's reaction to tasting the wines are limited. I do get some feedback from customers who have actually drunk the wines, which has always been positive, plus the reactions from people who taste the wines at the occasional wine fair where I have a stand. On the whole the reactions are (a) one of surprise, that there is even such a thing as Swiss wine, (b) pleasant surprise that the wines are so good – with many expecting thin insipid reds.

GW: Do they feel that Geneva wines offer good price/quality value? Assuming they do think that, do you think they'd still think it if the wines were being sold by a retailer and were thus more expensive than they are on your price list? Is being able to offer such wines for sale contingent on a set-up like yours, with no middlemen to pay and low overheads? Does web marketing actually open up real opportunities for the relatively expensive hand-crafted wines of small producers?

ND: There is definitely an issue with the cost of Swiss wines in the UK, and the people who do buy them are at the less price-sensitive end of the spectrum, and recognize they are not cheap. This will be so for all Swiss wines, not just Geneva wines. In fact, it may be more of an issue for some of the other regions, where the indigenous grape varieties are more prevalent, as the prices for these are higher. They will never be a bargain and will never, in my opinion, become mainstream – rather

Geneva's Vineyards : Geneva is one of Switzerland's smallest canton's, but the third largest wine producer.



Getting your wine home safely.

If you plan on bringing some treasured bottles of wine back to the States, here are a few things you should know:

- **How many bottles can I bring home?** Technically speaking, you can bring any number of cases of wine home with you for *personal use only* (see the [ATF website](#)). If you're bringing home more than 10 cases of wine, US Customs might assume that it's not for your personal use — have a good story or risk losing it all.
- **Can I ship by FedEx, UPS, or DHL?** Yes and no, and it's expensive. Expect rates for air shipping to be at least \$200/case. Few shippers will ship wine for consumers (that's you), so some shipping agents classify it as olive oil to get your wine in 'under the radar.' However, the shipper or US Customs will seize and destroy your contraband if they find out. My recommendation: don't do it.
- **Can I check my wine with the airline?** Yes, and this is the only practical option for getting your wine home safely and quickly. Simply have your wine bottles packed in styrofoam inserts and a sturdy box and check it with your luggage. It's free up to the airline's checked bag limit, then typically \$90/case after that. You can find wine boxes at [Mail Boxes Etc.](#) Buy them before you leave and bring them with you as checked baggage. When you check in, show the agent how well you've packed your bottles if they have any concerns about checking the wine. And never try to check loose cases of wine — they'll break.
- **Can I carry my wine on-board?** This can be a bit iffy depending upon how militant the agents are at the check-in counter, but typically you can carry about 6 bottles of wine as carry-on luggage *per person* in your traveling party. Pack the bottles well and buy a cheap carry-on bag to make carrying easier.
- **How do I clear US Customs?** When you arrive at the first US port, you have to clear Immigration and [US Customs](#). Simply mark your Immigration Landing Card as 'carrying food' and tell the agent that you have wine. If you are asked to pay duty taxes (technically, you should), don't worry — it's less than 50 cents/bottle for most wine. Keep your story simple: you're bringing wine home for your own personal consumption, and you won't sell or give it away. Make sure you keep receipts.

