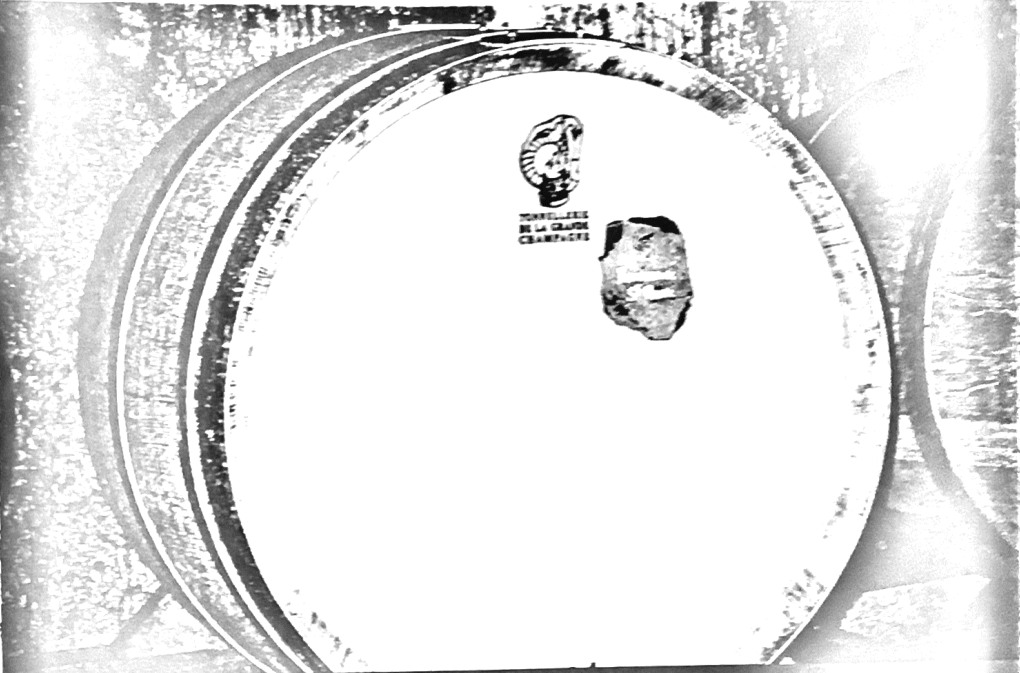




Mike Favre in his vineyards

In Chamusca; Favre's new
barrique



HOT OFF THE PRESS FROM SWITZERLAND

With the removal of import quotas, Swiss wine producers are currently going through a period of transition. **Wink Lorch** looks at how they are adapting to secure their future in a free market

Big, spicy, barrel-aged Syrah and extraordinarily flavoured, powerful whites from curious grape varieties provide a heady mix in the tasting rooms of today's producers in the Valais, Switzerland's largest wine region. The Fendants (Chasselas) and Dôles (Pinot Noir blends) have far from disappeared, but diversification is the name of the game in this region, which is at the cutting edge of the Swiss wine scene today. Is Switzerland's wine industry undergoing a period of transition, or is it simply experiencing a somewhat bumpy ride?

Swiss wines no longer have an assured market at home, due to the removing of import quotas, which has already happened with red wines and will apply to whites in the next couple of years. Faced with a free market, Swiss producers have an urgent need to re-assess both the styles and the quality of wines they produce.

Exports remain minuscule, but are far from insignificant in shaping the industry. The dilemma is that the wines which the Swiss would like to export are those produced in large volumes, yet at current prices these are unlikely to ignite the interest of the world's wine consumers. But, give them a taste of the finest

Switzerland can offer and they might just be encouraged to buy without recognising the grape or regional name. This is something that Jean-René Germanier, a well-respected producer and president of OPAV (the Valais promotional body) believes is essential to assure a future for exports: "We must export a little of our top wines even if we know there is not enough to go round." Mike Favre, partner in a small family estate and secretary of the international Union Internationale des Oenologue, agreed: "The export problem is that few producers put their top wines aside for export – they simply want to sell Chasselas." He continued: "We need to work more with indigenous grapes – wine needs a story to sell".

Swiss vineyards are planted 80 per cent to Chasselas, Pinot Noir and Gamay. A further 12 per cent is planted with Merlot, Müller-Thurgau (there called Riesling-Sylvaner) and Sylvaner (Johannisberg). This leaves just 8 per cent for the so-called "specialities", more than 50 further varieties which split into three informal categories: international classics such as Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon; traditional varieties including Syrah, Marsanne, Savagnin and Pinot Gris which the Swiss have grown



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for decades; and a myriad of indigenous varieties which have survived on the point of extinction.

In the 1980s it was said that Chardonnay would replace Chasselas in the Valais. Yet, to many people's relief Chardonnay remains at a mere 60ha compared to the giant 1750ha of Chasselas. Chardonnay has not adapted well – it was often planted in prime, south-facing, steep sites better used for other varieties, and the Swiss took a long time to modify their winemaking techniques for Chardonnay. As the 90s come to an end, many producers believe that the best hope for the future is with indigenous varieties and with certain traditional varieties such as Syrah, which thrives in the warm climate enjoyed by vineyards in the Valais.

Warm climate? The long-cherished image of the mountainous region of Switzerland producing delicate, cool whites from high-altitude vineyards belies the truth about the climate in many regions, notably the Valais. Even the growers themselves have been labouring under false pretences, with Pinot Noir (and latterly, Chardonnay) often planted in south-facing vineyards which are simply too hot. Is it any wonder that Syrah fever is gripping both producers and Swiss wine critics alike? At the foot of the glaciers, the Valais climate gives very warm summer days and cold nights, ideal to ripen Syrah, and the Valais is, after all, the start of the Rhône Valley.

Fine examples of Syrah from Valais can combine the peppery characters of the Rhône, with good structure and concentrated

black fruits, with a real warm climate feel. Other top Swiss reds include, of course, Pinot Noir, which is being taken much more seriously than before by many producers in Valais, the canton of Geneva and Eastern Switzerland with many successes. Use of oak maturation is becoming commonplace for Pinot Noir, as it is for the best Merlots from Ticino which can combine a pure Merlot plumminess with fine structure. On the more eclectic side, Valais has two indigenous red varieties, the rustic and quite Italianate Humagne Rouge, and the rare Cornalin, a difficult grape to grow which rewards with a fine-structured wine of great character. Both are growing in popularity.

For fine whites, Chasselas now has competition, although the finest Chasselas examples from the canton of Vaud, remain without rival and can be superb. Geneva does best with classic, international varieties such as Sauvignon and Chardonnay which do well in the moderate climate, much influenced by Lake Geneva. On the other hand, the Valais revels in the weird and wonderful flavours of its indigenous grapes, especially Petite Arvine and Amigne. Both can be made in dry and sweet styles, with either botrytised or shrivelled grapes (called Flétri in Switzerland) used for the latter. Petite Arvine has good structure for ageing, a wild flower, citrus and honeyed nose, with a slightly salty tang on the finish. Amigne, which is localised in the central Valais, is another white variety to age with nutty flavours and a richness which suits partnering with Foie Gras or desserts. Three foreign grapes also



*In Vétroz, looking
towards Sion, Valais*

thrive in the Valais: the Jura's Savagnin (Païen or Heida), Alsace's Pinot Gris (Malvoisie) and the Rhône's Marsanne (Ermitage). All are dry, but in a rich style, and the last two may also be made sweet from botrytised grapes. A Grain Noble designation which may appear on a label has been created to assure quality.

The very high labour cost in the vineyards is one of the greatest contributory factors to high price of Swiss wines. As an example, in the Valais, where mechanisation is impossible in the 80 per cent of vineyards on terraces, labour averages out at 1,300 man-hours per hectare. As it is impossible to reduce these costs, the only successful future, certainly for the small producer, will be in the production of top-quality wines with commensurate prices.

Improvements in vineyard techniques, most notably significant reductions in yields, have taken place since phasing in AOC regulations in the 80s. Madeleine Gay, who has been winemaker for over 20 years at the vast Provins co-operative in the Valais, asserts that the introduction of summer pruning has made a huge improvement in grape quality. However, some believe that yields amongst many producers are still far too high for quality. Environmental awareness is growing and there is far less use of chemical fertilisers. This has led to a longer life for vines, giving a higher average age than before. It had also improved the acidity levels in the grapes, most important to balance the high ripeness achieved, particularly in the best sites. The most difficult environmental problem remains the use of herbicides, as mechanical weeding is simply not an option in many of the steep sites.

As elsewhere in Europe, winemaking skills have improved. The new generation of vigneronns have undergone a period of formal training and overall quality is driven by the enthusiasm of younger growers.

Jean Hutin, from the sought-after Domaine Les Hutins in the canton of Geneva, explained: "People took some time to learn that each grape variety had to be treated differently and that all

wines could not be made in the same way as Chasselas or Gamay." And, "The use of barriques is now better understood," said Mike Favre. "At first the mistake was to believe that one could improve a wine by putting it into barrique – it took time to understand that a mediocre wine got worse in barrique, but an extraordinary wine improved. Now after 20 years of using barriques in Switzerland, people are starting to make really good wines."

The Valais is of course not the only significant Swiss region, although it accounts for about 35 per cent of Switzerland's production. The French-speaking cantons combine to produce around 80 per cent of the country's wines. Bruno Carroy, who is in charge of buying Swiss wines for the innovative wine merchants, La Cité des Vins in Geneva, believes there is a real future for Swiss wines. "I believe that the Valais is spearheading the drive for quality, particularly with Petite Arvine, Païen, Syrah and some of the lesser-known indigenous varieties, but the canton of Geneva is the most dynamic region."

Geneva is larger than one might think (with around 1,500ha – Switzerland's third biggest canton) and benefits from a discerning and experimental local clientele, including Swiss nationals and a significant international population. Switzerland's second biggest wine canton of Vaud remains and probably always will be more traditional, producing the finest Chasselas, but with less experimentation with other varieties. There are some exciting Pinot Noirs emerging from the German-speaking, Eastern Switzerland areas and certain Ticino Merlots are also well worth seeking out, but these last two areas will remain small.

Wine educator Neil Courtier, who has conducted several consumer tastings of Swiss wines over the past year, describes the indigenous Petite Arvine as the "star" white variety and claims that consumers find an element of surprise in the Merlots from Ticino. "Most consumers arguably perceive Swiss wines as coming from a cool climate, yet interestingly the red wines have often been more enjoyed than the whites, with the exception of Petite Arvine."

Carroy from La Cité des Vins predicts that although Swiss wines will always be relatively expensive, they will be prized for their rarity value. "In 15 to 20 years' time Michelin-starred restaurants the world over will stock a selection of Swiss wines and specialist wine merchants will too."

Worldwide acceptance of Swiss wines will take time, but could be a reality providing the producers consolidate their experiences and throw their weight behind the drive for quality and individuality. ■