



CHASSELAS

SWITZERLAND'S DECLARATION OF NEUTRALITY

Chasselas is the symbol of Swiss white wine—and one of the most widely planted white grape varieties in the world. There are several myths about its birthplace, but in 2009 it was proved that its origin is the canton of Vaud around Lake Geneva. **Chandra Kurt** urges wine lovers to discover its beauty there, on the steep slopes facing the water

Chasselas is nothing—but in this power-dominated wine world, nothing is good.” With these provocative words, Japanese wine writer Katsuyuki Tanaka inaugurated a recent Wine and Dine event in Tokyo created specially to showcase this fascinating and still-underrated variety. He couldn’t have got to the essence of the Swiss national grape in fewer words, though Chasselas is actually a global phenomenon, first of all because it is one of the world’s most planted white grape varieties. Approximately 38,000ha (93,900 acres) are planted to it—mainly in Romania (13,000ha [32,100 acres]), Hungary (10,000ha [24,700 acres]), Switzerland (4,013ha [9,900 acres]), France (2,620ha [6,500 acres]), Germany (1,129ha [2,800 acres]), and Russia (540ha [1,330 acres]). Second, because many regions use it as a table grape or produce fruit juice from it—but not the Swiss, who have for centuries used it to make a crisp, fresh white wine, and who consume more than 95 percent of the annual production themselves. Third, because Chasselas is known to adapt very quickly to different climatic conditions and soils. This is largely because Chasselas often lacks an expressive aroma or flavor of its own; for those unfamiliar with its charms, its profile is non-aromatic, or neutral.

I have to confess that I understand that popular image, and that I learned to love Chasselas only after more than 20 years of traveling and tasting wine all over the world, when I could not find any other grape variety that celebrated its aromatic understatement and sheer drinkability so well. A good Chasselas is dry, delicate, and very refreshing, with lots of minerality and a slight floral expression. It is the perfect wine to drink when you are thirsty—as the local term *vin de soif* also suggests—or when you want to give your palate a rest. Chasselas is low in alcohol (typically around 11.5–12% ABV) and can be enjoyed from the apéritif all the way through to the cheese, with all kinds of dishes. It is also said to be one of the few wines that tastes good at 10 o’clock in the morning.

Chasselas or Fendant?

Chasselas has been known under a bewildering number of synonyms. Swiss ampelographer Dr José Vouillamoz of the University of Neuchâtel (who worked with Jancis Robinson MW and Julia Harding MW on *Wine Grapes*) could find no mention of it earlier than 1539, when in his *Kreutterbuch* (“Herb Book”), the German botanist Hieronymus Bock referred to *Dessgleichen gross und kleyn Fränkisch / eins anderen names / Edel oder Lautterdrauben* (“the same large and small Fränkisch / also named / Edel or Lautterdrauben”). Vouillamoz explains: “The name Edeltrauben is probably the precursor of Gutedel (good noble), which occurs later in Württemberg in the Basler naturalist Johann Bauhin’s *Historia Plantarum Universalis* dated 1650, while the name Lautterdrauben most likely corresponds to the local synonyms Luter, Wyssluter, and Gutluter, still used for Chasselas around 1850 in northern Switzerland.”

In Switzerland, the name Fendant was widely used from the 18th century in the canton of Vaud, both for the variety and for the wine it produced. The name means “splitting,” in reference to the berries of this type of Chasselas that split instead of bursting when pressed between the fingers. Only at the beginning of the 20th century did producers start using the name Chasselas and naming the wines—as in Burgundy—after their village of origin, such as Epesses, Aigle, or Dézaley. The name Fendant is still very popular but only in the neighboring canton of Valais. The grape was introduced there around 1850 and became so popular that the Valaisans protected the name and still claim it as their own to this day.

Origin and identity

When speaking of Swiss wine, it is difficult to tell a common story, since four national languages split this country at the heart of Europe. In the north, German is spoken; in the south, Italian; and in the west, French. A fourth language, Romansh, is also used. Each language has its own cultural



The wine region of Vaud, above whose vineyards tower the Swiss and French Alps, has inspired artists from William Turner to Le Corbusier and Marcel Duchamp

heritage, including wine. Nevertheless, wine is produced and consumed throughout the country, having been introduced originally by the Romans.

In Switzerland, nearly 15,000ha (37,000 acres) of vines are cultivated, equivalent to roughly half the area under vine in Champagne, and to only 0.2 percent of the area under vine globally. Switzerland consists of 26 cantons, and the country is divided into six official wine regions, which are (in order of size): Valais (5,113ha [12,600 acres]), Vaud (3,838ha [9,500 acres]), German-speaking Switzerland (2,593ha [6,400 acres]), Geneva (1,297ha [3,200 acres]), Ticino (1,065ha [2,600 acres]), and the region of the Three Lakes (940ha [2,300 acres]). Almost 60 percent of Swiss vineyards are planted to red grape varieties, of which number one is Pinot Noir, with 4,450ha (11,000 acres). Of the whites, Chasselas is number one, with 4,013ha (9,900 acres).

One of the defining characteristics of Swiss wine is its extraordinary diversity of grape varieties and its high number of indigenous varieties, which are, moreover, rarely found in other countries. Most of these varieties are found in the largest Swiss wine region, Valais. This is a region of contrasts, with glaciers and palm trees, saffron and cheese, Chasselas and Heida. It accounts for about one third of Switzerland’s total wine production—mainly Pinot Noir and Chasselas (Fendant) but also more than 50 different indigenous grapes such as Petite Arvine, Heida, Humagne Rouge, Blanche Humagne, and Cornalin.

In the neighboring canton, Vaud, the second-largest Swiss wine region, the scenery is completely different. While Valais is marked by diversity, here almost everything revolves around Chasselas, to which 2,365ha (5,800 acres), or 67 percent of the area under vine, is planted. In 2009, Vaud—rather than Egypt or Turkey, as previously thought—was proved to be source of the variety. Vouillamoz, who discovered the proof, elaborates: “Like many old grape varieties, Chasselas has been the subject of much speculation

as to its origin. Direct domestication from Swiss wild grapes has been suggested and then rejected. An Egyptian origin was supported. Others believed that the village of Chasselas near Mâcon in Burgundy was the birthplace of the variety.” A recent genetic study by Vouillamoz and Arnold, which compared the DNA of Chasselas with that of more than 500 varieties from 18 countries in Europe and the Near East, revealed the region around Lake Geneva—and more specifically, Vaud—as its origin.

Vaud désir

Vaud comprises the following six wine areas: La Côte, Lavaux, Chablais, Côtes de l’Orbe, Vully, and Bonvillars. Typical of Vaud Chasselas is the priority attached to terroir. Most wines are labeled not as Chasselas but rather with the name of the village, the domaine, or the vineyard from which they come (as in Burgundy)—St-Saphorin, Yverne, Aigle, Féchy, Dézaley, or Epesses, for example. The best wines come from terraced vineyards along Lake Geneva.

To appreciate or discover the often hidden beauty of Chasselas, a visit to Lavaux is crucial. It has inspired many artists down the centuries, including William Turner, François Boccion, Gustave Courbet, Ferdinand Hodler, and Oskar Kokoschka, as well as Le Corbusier, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint-Phalle, and Christo. The scenery of the lake, the mountains, and the 10,000 terraces is breathtaking but would not exist in its current form were it not for the long and intimate relationship between man and nature that has shaped it and that led to its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007.

Man has been shaping this landscape for millennia. It contains relics from the Neolithic period, but it was during the Middle Ages that the terraced vineyards first appeared, the foundations being laid in the 11th century by monks. The know-how has been transmitted from generation to generation ever since, and despite phylloxera, the



Previous page: Slopes above Lake Geneva planted to Chasselas in the UNESCO-protected wine region of Vaud, now confirmed as the birthplace of the variety. Above: Paul Boesch woodcuts from *La Grande Année Vigneronne*, a calendar depicting the month-to-month work in the vineyards of Vaud (Roth & Sauter; Denges, 1935)



The steep Clos du Crosex Grillé Chasselas vineyard in Yvorne, formerly owned by the family of Sir Winston Churchill and now by the mayor of Yvorne, Philippe Gex

dauntingly steep slopes, and the uncertain weather, local vigneronns have continued to produce their unique wine with its special taste of ancient wine history.

“Soil formation in the Lavaux region dates back some 25 million years,” explains winemaker Pierre-Luc Leyvraz from Chexbres. “The geologic fault that became Lake Geneva and the Rhône Valley was created by the folding of the earth’s crust during the formation of the Alps. Then the cycle of successive glaciations cut into the region’s slopes, changing the appearance of the landscape and depositing a moraine of soil materials brought from the Alps. The soil of these vineyards has thus been in place since the last glacier retreated more than 15,000 years ago.”

Leyvraz is dedicated to the meticulous farming of the mosaic of steep plots that constitutes his estate. Far from mass production, he values plant density, vine age, and precision viticulture to yield grapes of the highest quality. His aim is to make best use of this exceptional terroir to produce wines worthy of the reputation of St-Saphorin, one of Lavaux’s most famous appellations.

Another of my favorite Chasselas producers is Blaise Duboux. The family story of the Duboux goes back to the 15th century, and for 15 generations they have cultivated their steep-sloping vineyards, where the average age of their Chasselas vines is 25 years. Blaise Duboux produces wonderful terroir wines full of elegance and finesse. He farms biodynamically and clearly believes that less is more.

A grand seigneur

Switzerland is lucky to have one *grand seigneur* du Chasselas—Louis-Philippe Bovard. As the head of the tenth generation, he took the helm of his family’s 16ha (40-acre) estate only in 1983 but has since transformed it into one of the most prestigious in Vaud. Inspired by the fertile contacts he enjoyed with other winemakers, both Swiss and French, as well as with great chefs, Bovard broke with tradition. Ahead of his time, he introduced new grape varieties, aged Chasselas in oak, and created a noteworthy collection of old Dézaley vintages. (The appellation of Dézaley is, along with Calamin, perhaps the best Chasselas terroir of them all.) His Dézaley Médinette is a complex Chasselas with the potential to age gracefully for more than 20 years.

In 2010, Domaine Louis Bovard made 3,000 sq m (0.75 acre) of land available to create the Conservatoire Mondial du Chasselas, where various types of Chasselas are preserved. Located above the village of Rivaz, the Conservatoire was realized in partnership with Vaud’s

Office Cantonal de la Viticulture and the Swiss federal Agroscope Changins-Wädenswil research station. As many as 19 types of Chasselas currently grow at the Conservatoire. In the upper section are the five types that predominate in Vaud: Fendant Roux, Vert de la Côte, Giclet, Blanchette, and Bois Rouge. Four hundred vines of each type were planted on rootstock for winemaking purposes, the objective being to compare their potential as wine grapes and, more specifically, to see whether Fendant Roux, the most common type in Vaud, continues to be the most interesting not only culturally but enologically—in terms of aromatic potential, acidity, and longevity.

“Today wine growers can evolve in all kinds of directions, but it is important that they don’t lose their identity or the identity of their region,” Bovard insists. “In Chasselas we have a heritage that is a symbol not only of Switzerland’s uniqueness but also of a style of wine that returns to delicacy, finesse, and quiet aromatic expression.”

Theme and variations

A special style of Chasselas—available only locally and therefore another reason to visit—is *non-filtré* (unfiltered), from Neuchâtel. As the name suggests, it is Chasselas with residual yeast, always launched in January as the first wine of the new vintage. The sediment in the young wine will settle at the bottom of the bottle, but for the first six months shaking the bottle before opening will enhance the fresh feel of this distinctive and evocative local product.

Geneva also produces interesting Chasselas in Satigny, Peissy, and Dardagny, while under the name Gutedel some wines are also produced in German-speaking Switzerland. Interesting here is the belief that malolactic fermentation is not necessary for Chasselas. I used to think so, too, but not anymore, since the grape has naturally high acidity.

Indeed, maybe acidity is the key word for Chasselas. Some feel there is too little, while others feel there is too much. But a high-quality Chasselas has just the right amount—and by right, I mean inconspicuous, an attribute perfectly in tune with Swiss culture. Switzerland is a country of consensus, or at least the search for consensus—a country of precision and the pursuit of high quality. Switzerland is also a country of modesty and understatement, with an inner strength and determination—just like its signature grape variety. To finish as we began, with the perceptive words of Katsuyuki Tanaka: “Chasselas is a support, never dominant, never wanting to be in the lead. But with a unique determination.” ■

FAVORITE CHASSELAS PRODUCERS

Vaud

Domaine Blaise Duboux (Lavaux), Pierre-Luc Leyvraz (Lavaux), Luc Massy (Epesses), Louis Bovard (Cully), Domaine La Colombe Raymond Paccot (Féchy), Domaine Bovy (Chexbres), Château Chatagnéraz (Tartegnin), Château de Vinzel (Vinzel), Domaine de Sarraux-Dessous (Begnins), Domaine de l’Ovaille (Yvorne), Domaine de la Pierre Latine (Yvorne)

Fendant (from Valais)

Provins Valais (Sion), Caves Mabillard-Fuchs (Venthône), Simon Maye et fils (Chamoson)

Non-Filtré (Neuchâtel)

Domaine de Chambleau (Colombier)