

High-Altitude Wines from the ALPS

Wines from the small region of Savoie in the French Alps have long been obscure and are mostly consumed by the liter on the ski slopes. But thanks to a generational shift among the region's winemakers, the future looks different.

Savoie is a historic wine region with very ancient roots. There was a Celtic indigenous population known to have cultivated wine from its own family of grape varieties, "vitis allobrogica," which has since been traced back to more modern varieties. The Romans and Greeks likely brought their knowledge of winemaking with them up the Rhône River. During the Middle Ages, it was the monks who organized and developed winemaking. Savoie's isolated location at the foot of the Alps led to the development of its own grape varieties, unique to the region. White wines account for about 70% of production, and most are made from the jacquère, altesse, and roussanne (known here as bergeron) grapes.

The red wines are made primarily from the Mondeuse and Gamay grapes. The Persan grape was nearly extinct, but a number of growers revived it and have shown that it's possible to make truly excellent wines from it. We were told that Pinot Noir is on the rise, but during my four-day visit, I tasted only one wine. Crémant de Savoie is a relatively new category, established in 2015, but they are very proud of this sparkling wine, and it certainly has a future. In addition to these grapes, there are about ten other permitted varieties, though they are produced in small quantities.

An interesting fact is that Savoie is France's second-largest nursery, producing 25 million grapevines annually. In addition to Savoie, the cuttings are sold to Burgundy and Champagne. The dramatic landscape of high mountains and steeply sloping vineyards makes the departments of Savoie and Haute-Savoie one of France's most beautiful wine regions to visit. Most of the vineyards are located around the city of Chambéry, where the massive Mont Granier cliff dominates the landscape. During a storm on the night of January 24, 1248, a large portion of the cliff broke loose, causing a massive landslide. Many people perished in the five villages that were destroyed. Large boulders still lie scattered across the countryside, and the resulting mixture of soil proved perfect for viticulture; today, it forms the core cru villages of Abymes ("the abyss/ruins") and Apremont ("the bitter mountain") northeast of Mont Granier. Savoie is a small wine region in terms of production.

Of the 15 million bottles produced, only 5% are currently exported—a situation the winemakers now aim to change. It's clear that the new generation of winemakers wants to broaden their horizons. Organic and biodynamic farming are becoming increasingly common among smaller producers, and natural wines with little or no sulfur are trending. Savoie is divided into three main AOCs (Appellation d'origine contrôlée): Savoie, Roussette de Savoie, and Seyssel, which stretch from Lake Geneva in the north down to Chambéry, where most of the producers are located. The French bureaucratic system isn't crystal clear but aims to ensure that the wines are typical of the region.

If you're visiting Savoie, Chambéry is the perfect base. Surrounding the spectacular Mont Granier cliff lie the premier wine regions of Apremont, Chignin, Arbin, and Les Abymes, all of which are home to some of the most exciting producers. A four-day trip to the area last October, during a lull in the pandemic, left me wanting more. The rain poured down relentlessly for most of the stay, but the dramatic landscape was still visible.

The first visit was to Domaine de L'Idylle in Cruet, which had just wrapped up its harvest lunch by thanking neighbors and friends who had helped bring in the grapes. The family has been a leader in Savoie for over 70 years and was among the first to export their wines. Sylvain Tiollier has taken over from his father and uncle, and after studying in Montpellier and Toulouse, he has worked in both Uruguay and Chile. Since he took over, the equipment in the cellar has been modernized, and operations at the vineyard are moving toward more sustainable practices. Today, they hold HVE certification—one of the highest levels before they can become certified organic, a milestone set for 2022. The family was initially a bit hesitant to commit to 100% organic production since it's slightly more expensive, but today there's probably no turning back. Their 30 hectares yield an average of 150,000 bottles per year. For such a small production, they have a wide variety of wines to offer. Mostly Roussette de Savoie made from the Altesse grape, but they produce just as many red wines as white ones, which is somewhat unusual. Their Mondeuse from

Arbin has garnered great acclaim, but Gamay and Pinot Noir are also part of the lineup. Sylvain is one of the growers helping to save the Persan grape, and this year's harvest marks the first time he has made wine from it.

Domaine André et Michel Quenard comes from a well-known family, with several members producing wine under the family name. But Michel is the one who has been actively working to improve the reputation of Savoie wines outside the region. He has served as president of Vin de Savoie and was instrumental in the creation of the sparkling Crémant de Savoie, which was established in 2015 and has become something of a success. His son, Guillaume, has been a winemaker for over ten years and is increasingly leaving his mark on the wines, even though his father Michel remains in the background. Both father and son have worked for the cult producer Jean-Michel Deiss in Alsace, known for his decidedly controversial wine philosophy. They own 27 hectares and produce approximately 200,000 bottles, a large portion of which is Crémant. They have steep, labor-intensive vineyards around Chignin where Bergeron, Jacquère, Mondeuse, and Altesse dominate. They produce twelve different wines, but Guillaume has his own line where he pushes the boundaries without having to consult the family. Biodynamically grown grapes are vinified without added sulfur; the whites undergo skin contact and are aged in terracotta amphorae. Exciting wines that are clearly in line with current trends. Are they good? Yes, they're actually really good! Full-bodied and vibrant wines that leave you wanting more. Their regular wines are of a very high caliber and consist of wines from Chignin, Chignin-Bergeron, Les Abymes, and Arbin. Here, too, the Persan grape makes an appearance; they've planted 0.4 hectares of it, and 2019 is the first vintage.

Next door to Quenard are brothers Didier and Denis Berthollier at Domaine La Combe des Grand' Vignes. They took over the estate in 2000 and have since worked diligently to improve quality step by step. They acquired a number of very steep vineyard plots, Les Salins, below the Savoyard mountain, which had been abandoned for fifty years. There, they planted Bergeron and increased their total acreage to 12 hectares. Their inspiration is a Roussanne-based wine produced by Château de Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, so they're truly aiming for the stars. It took them a few years to transition to organic farming, and today they are Ecocert-certified. The transition has taken its toll; they speak of a five-year "journey through the wilderness" during which they lost a quarter of their harvest. Starting in 2021, they made the transition to fully biodynamic farming, and the vineyards are now more harmonious. The soil is in much better condition and now yields normal harvests. Very little sulfur is added—basically only during bottling—so levels remain below 30 mg/liter for reds and 40 mg/liter for whites. They experiment with wild yeast but may add a small amount of cultured yeast to ensure the wine is completely dry. The reds are initiated with a "pied de cuvée," where active wild yeast is added to the must. Both brothers work together in the vineyard, but Didier handles the finances and Denis is responsible for winemaking. In addition to stainless steel tanks, they use oak barrels of various sizes, and the latest trend—terracotta amphorae—is used for their premier Bergeron cuvée. They are very unassuming and likable people, and one truly wishes them well for the success they've achieved with their wines.

The winemakers in Savoie are first and foremost small family businesses, producing a couple hundred thousand bottles. But there are exceptions, and one of the larger players is Philippe Viallet. Raised in a family of winemakers, he had greater ambitions and began buying up run-down estates. Today, he owns 120 hectares and also buys grapes from many producers. His company produces 3.3 million bottles and is a major player in the export market. We visited one of his more recent acquisitions, the formerly highly regarded Domaine Bouvet, which had fallen on hard times after the passing of its owner, Gilbert Bouvet. Today, the wines are at their peak, and a new, modern reception area is open for wine tourism, which will hopefully pick up again after the pandemic. Here, one can truly speak of the transition from the large to the small.

The contrast is striking when we meet Matthieu Goury at Domaine Chevillard in the village of the same name. Seven years ago, he bought an old house dating back to 1703 that had previously been used as a winery. His grandfather lived in the village and ran a mixed farm with cows, a little tobacco, and a few grapevines, where the grapes were sold to the cooperative in Cruet. Matthieu loved his grandfather and spent a lot of time with him. He decided to pursue winemaking and studied in Burgundy. He completed internships at Chapoutier in the Rhône Valley, at Jasper Hill in Australia, and spent some time in Canada. After that, he returned to Savoie and worked for several larger producers before striking out on his own. Bit by bit, he was able to purchase a few

vineyards while waiting to take over 2 hectares that the family has leased out until 2023. He works in a very traditional style, using his grandfather's century-old press as well as another vertical press from 1972. The vineyard is managed biodynamically, the yeast is natural, and the wine is aged in old oak barrels. Jacquère and Roussette are the main white wines, and Mondeuse is the primary red, though he also produces Gamay and Pinot Noir as complementary varieties. The years 2017 and 2018 were disastrous, as he lost nearly half his harvest due to frost, but recent years have been better. Matthieu has garnered attention in the international wine press, and today nearly 70% of production is exported.

Domaine Genoux/Château de Mérande is located in Arbin. André and Daniel Genoux purchased Château de Mérande in 2000 and carefully restored it to its former glory. Mérande was previously owned by their parents, who were forced to sell it for financial reasons. Both brothers had previously worked in other professions but now decided to focus on winemaking. Their philosophy was clear from the start: on their 12 hectares, everything is cultivated biodynamically according to all the rules of the art. But the transition took time, and they did not become certified until 2015. Daniel has been the lead winemaker but has now handed the reins over to his sons Pierre and Elie, both of whom apprenticed under Jean-Michel Deiss in Alsace. Unusually, they focus more on red wine, and their La Belle Romain accounts for 60% of production. The name refers to the Roman ruins upon which the castle is built. The grape variety is Mondeuse, which can be a bit sharp on the finish, but this is a fine wine that benefits greatly from being allowed to breathe. Their premier Mondeuse is La Noire, which comes from a low-yield vineyard. The grapes are foot-crushed, and the wine is aged in large oak barrels. Their white Chignin-Bergeron Le Grand Blanc is, as the name suggests, a grand wine. No sulfur—or very little—is added during bottling of these wines.

Fabien and Chloé Trosset are a dynamic duo who have built a modern winery together. They met and became a couple while both were studying in Beaujolais. They moved to Savoie and worked for a few producers before starting their own business. They took over 2 hectares from a relative and began purchasing additional land. Some of the grapes were sold to wine merchants, but in 2017 their ultra-modern facility was completed, and they now produce 100,000–150,000 bottles per year. Much of it is sold in their own store, but they are focusing on exports. Here, too, Mondeuse is the primary grape; they own one-third of the Arbin cru, comprising 14 hectares. Natural yeast is used, and destemming varies depending on the vintage and wine. Stainless-steel tanks, oak barrels, and concrete eggs line the winery. Their three young daughters play carefree in the premises, where there's plenty of room to ride their bikes around. Charles-Henri Gayet is one of the major players in Savoie, and his trading house and distribution network account for the majority of the bottles sold in supermarkets and consumed at ski resorts. Maison Adrian Vacher accounts for over three million bottles—one-fifth of all wine produced in Savoie. Château de la Violette is a small drop in the ocean, but one they're happy to showcase. The wines are consistently decent and good value for the price. A small, charming winery at the foot of Mont Granier, featuring a fairytale castle that gave the estate its name. The castle is no longer owned by the family but operates as a "Bed & Breakfast" under new ownership. The view from there is fantastic!