



## Swiss Secrets

*The reason Swiss wines are such a well-kept secret is that most never leave their country of origin. A mere one percent of the total wine production is available for export, with some of it arriving recently on Singapore shores.*

BY REBECCA SKINNER

**N**OT ONLY are Swiss wines steeped in history—dating back to the second century BC—but the country produces a number of grape varieties unique in the vinous world. Around 75 different varietals are grown here, which is unusual considering the small size of the country and the fact that only 37,066 acres are under vine.

The most important wine making region is Valais on the slopes of the Upper Rhone valley, with around 12,849 acres of vines yielding 40 percent of the country's crop. It is a picturesque glacial valley with a warm autumn föehn wind, snow in winter and hot, dry summers. It is a

harsh climate, but one that creates great wines.

It was near here that an ancient wine bottle was discovered in a Celtic tomb of a woman from the second century BC. The inscription on the bottle indicated it had contained wine. Around 150 BC in the Celtic era, the people of Valais used to offer wine to the dead, and it was likely that this was the wine that they also drank.

The wine was probably made from indigenous grape varieties that still thrive today and remain unique in the world. Examples of wines using these varieties include Amigne de Vétroz, Cornalin de Chamoson, Humagne Blanche de

*Swiss wines mature in barrels.*



*The Constellation Lounge has panoramic views over the Rhone Valley.*



Chamoson and Humagne Rouge de Chamoson.

During the Middle Ages, we know that winemaking was one of the main pursuits of Valais, as a legal document dated 1313 mentioned the sale of a vineyard containing “Humagne, Rèze and Rouge vines”. Today, the tiny, terraced vineyards grow more than 50 varieties, including the unique l’Amigne, l’Humagne blanche,

l’Humagne Rouge, la Rèze, le Cornalin and Petite Arvine.

Once Switzerland began importing wines from other countries, it needed to look for new markets for its own produce. Since the light, fruity wines are perfect with spicy food, Asia appeared a top choice. “Japan and Singapore are the most mature markets, but we’re also taking wines to China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, North

Korea and Taiwan,” explains Dominique Giroud, oenologist from Giroud Vins of Valais. He was in Singapore for a tasting of his wines at Oenotheque by Wine Universe, his joint business venture with respected Singaporean restaurateur, Magdalene Tang. The Millenia Walk restaurant, wine bar and retail outlet showcases around 100 different Swiss wines. The enterprising Giroud has not

*The Oenotheque offers wine tastings of Giroud wines (top); Giroud vineyards (below).*

only created an impressive, modern wine tourism outlet for Giroud Vins in Valais, but has spearheaded a Swiss marketing network helping other producers to reach international markets. This is the first Asian Oenothèque, but no doubt others could well follow.

“Swiss wines have received many medals internationally,” he says, “and they are especially popular in non-wine-producing countries.” They can now be found in Belgium, Canada, England, northern Europe, France, Germany, Holland, and now

Asia. “Our whites are better known overseas, though Pinot Noir is the most planted red,” he explains. According to Giroud, (pictured right) Pinot Noir, often regarded as a ‘fickle’ grape in other countries, is actually easier to grow than the indigenous varieties.

Giroud’s wines are starting to turn heads, including that of Chateau d’Yquem’s director who, Giraud says, had remarked that he was happy to see Giroud’s wines competing with his own. ☐



## TASTING OF VARIETIES UNIQUE TO SWITZERLAND



### GIROUD ARABESQUE VALAIS 2005

This Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Syrah blend, matured in a mix of new (80 percent French oak) and old oak, comes from extremely low-yield vine stock and shows fine fruit and soft tannins. Its intense bouquet has notes of cocoa and spice; and on the mouth, is rich and well rounded.

### GIROUD BALLERINE 2005

The grapes for this wine were picked two weeks after normal harvest. It is a blend of four grapes: Armigne, Moscato, Petit Arvine and Sauvignon Blanc. The amazingly powerful and complex nose gives way to delicious complex honeysuckle flavors with plenty of rich, sweet fruit that while quite heavy, still remains refreshing.

### GIROUD LA DANSE DES ÉTOILES AMIGNE 2005

This is the flagship Amigne, a single-vineyard wine coming from 45-year-old vines. It is believed Roman legionnaires introduced the vine. It has already won three gold medals. The yield is severely limited and the wine is aged in 400-liter barrels. This still zesty wine is showing lifted almond and citrus characters, and has impressive elegance and finesse. LA DANSE DES ÉTOILES

### CORNALIN 2005

Another Giroud flagship, single-vineyard wine that shows what can be done with this difficult grape. A seductive nose full of jammy fruit flavors, it is very soft and elegant with a hugely long rich finish on the palate. La Danse des Étoiles means ‘Dance of the stars’.

### GIROUD AMIGNE VETROZ 2007

This is a variety with only 79 acres found in the village of Vetroz. Aptly called ‘the royal wine’, its fruit comes from vines more than 40 years old. It is full bodied, with pronounced fig and date flavors on the nose. In the mouth, it starts with plenty of sweet citrus fruit, honey and vanilla. The good acid structure and touches of tannin mean this elegant wine finishes quite dry.

### GIROUD PETIT ARVINE VALAIS 2007

This is grown only in Valais. This difficult to cultivate and low yielding grape is respected in Switzerland as one of the best grapes for white wine. As an aperitif, it has plenty of tropical aromas on the nose, followed by a really interesting, slightly fishy note. On the palate, there is plenty of fresh, sweet aromatic fruit, including apricot and poached pear, but the finishing is quite dry and almost salty—a lovely wine.

### GIROUD CORNALIN VALAIS 2008

According to Giroud, this is the most com-

plicated and unpredictable grape in the world to cultivate, but it is worth the effort. The variety nearly disappeared after phylloxera stopped production in 1995. However, today, Giraud is the biggest producer of the variety in the region. The jammy fruit and spice bouquet has hints of red plums, black cherry and clove, plus a light sprinkle of vanilla. In the mouth, it is soft, sweet and warm with plenty of blackberry fruit, spices, silky tannins and a very long, rich and elegant finish.

### GIROUD FENDANT VALAIS 2008

Chasselas, known as a ‘friendship wine’, is the Swiss favorite and forms the second largest planting compared to Pinot Noir. In Valais, it is known as Fendant, so called because squeezing a ripe grape will cause it to split (fendant in French). Giroud makes a dessert wine from late-harvested Fendant grapes as well as this highly awarded fresh, sweetly perfumed wine with lifted fruit and aromas of white flowers.

### GIROUD HUMAGNE ROUGE VALAIS 2008

Grown only in Valais, this is not the same variety as Cornalin or Humagne Blanche. For a long time it was considered marginal, but it has regained its popularity over the last 20 years. It’s a rich, ruby red wine with lots of red berries and black pepper on the nose. On the palate, it is mouth-filling and powerful with fine, silky tannins, excellent fruit plus plenty of herbs and spices.