

Switzerland

SEEKING SWISS WINES

Switzerland is a rich country with a sophisticated palate, writes **Stephen Quinn**. Demand for wine is high, and Swiss winemakers can only satisfy 40% of that demand. This explains why only one per cent of Swiss wine is exported – perhaps two per cent in a good year

Entry to the Richard Gilliard estate in Valais is through a 60-metre tunnel cut into a mountain



The Swiss rank in the top 10 of the world's wine consumers, in terms of per capita consumption. Local salaries are high and so is the cost of wine – both, to make and to buy. Two-thirds of Swiss wines sell for 15 to 34 Swiss francs a bottle (about US\$16 to \$36). Switzerland has about 15,000 hectares under vine, which means average holdings are quite small.

Each September Vinea (vinea.ch), the association behind the Swiss Wine Fair representing the country's winemakers, organises Swiss Wine Week. The first was in 2013. At this year's event which started on September 6, Vinea released its Swiss wine app for smartphones and also launched the Swiss Wine Directory, an online companion to the Swiss Wine Guide, containing details of about 450 producers. The printed guide is published every two years. Ellen Wallace, an American wine writer based in Switzerland for more than a quarter century,

also launched her book – a charmingly written and handsome introduction to the industry, “Vineglorious: Switzerland's Wondrous World of Wines” at Swiss Wine Week.

Switzerland is the world's seventh largest producer of Pinot Noir. The winners of Mondial des Pinots, an international competition focusing on the Pinot grape and also the brainchild of Vinea, were announced during Swiss Wine Week. According to Director Elisabeth Pasquier, this year's competition involved 1,288 Pinot-based wines from 465 estates from 25 countries. Only 8% received a gold medal and five wines – one from Burgundy, another from Germany and three from Switzerland – gained the highest honour, a “great gold” award. The three locals all came from Valais, she said.

Valais is the largest of Switzerland's six wine regions. It makes a third of all Swiss wines. Vaud is the second biggest, producing a quarter of the country's output. The Richard Gilliard estate





The Castle of Chillon on Lake Geneva, which is more than 300 metres deep and the largest natural lake in western Europe

Vines love slopes. They provide good drainage, an angled face to the sun to get extra warmth, and good movement of air to prevent mildew

in Valais is one of the world's most unusual vineyards. Entry is via a 60-metre tunnel cut through a mountain. The world's highest dry-stone wall surrounds the vineyard. Made of slate and schist blocks, it is 22 metres high in parts. Built over several years from 1885, the wall snakes for 280 metres around slopes about 650 metres above the town of Sion. Some parts of the vineyard are so steep they must be almost impassable in winter. All picking is by hand, though some small machines have been tried. Harvest starts in mid-September and continues until the end of October. Three pickings are needed because the grapes ripen at different times.

A third of Switzerland is mountainous with an average height of 3,500 metres. The country has 48 peaks higher than 4,000 metres – more than any country in Europe – with Mont Blanc as the highest peak at 4,800

metres. Mountains are useful because vines love slopes. They provide good drainage, an angled face to the sun to get extra warmth, and good movement of air to prevent mildew. The limit for viable vines is about 600 metres above sea level.

Some slopes are 60° to the horizontal. One could be tempted to say that vines grow in every available space in the south of the country around magnificent lakes like Lake Geneva – the largest natural lake in western Europe – and Lake Lugano. Lake Geneva is more than 300 metres deep and is like a hot water bottle for the vines in winter. It reflects heat into the slopes in summer to help grapes ripen.

The Ticino region is the fourth largest in the country, with 1,000 hectares of vines. Ticino produces about seven million bottles of wine in all, said wine consultant Urs Mader, but it could make ten million if it chose. The region has many small vineyards which produces a fragmented industry when it comes to consensus. “About 95% of winemakers here own under two hectares,” said Mader, adding that in the recent past, the odd years have produced the best vintages – 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011. And, what of the even years? “It's still possible to make good wine in a bad year,” he conceded.

The Ceneri Mountains cut Ticino in half horizontally. In the north the soils are granite and mineral and produce more



Clockwise from top
 Lake Lugano, one of Switzerland's magnificent lakes named after the city of Lugano;
 Former economist turned winemaker and viticulturalist, Antonio Girardi (right) with a vineyard staff member;
 Winemaker & co-owner, Paolo Visini with his wife Barbara, from Cantina Kopp of the Crone Visini located south of Lugano;
 Aerial view of Valais, the largest of Switzerland's six wine regions situated in the southwest of the country around the valley of the Rhône;
 A vineyard in the Ticino region which has 1,000 hectares under vine

tannic wines. In the south, the soil is mostly clay. Some say this gives Cuban cigar or tobacco notes and aromas to the wines. About 70% of vines in Ticino are planted to Merlot, which ripens early and likes water. Ticino has high rainfall. Wine producers as far back as 1906 chose to plant this grape and it is one of the few areas in the world that makes white wine from Merlot grapes.

One of the biggest companies in Ticino, Gialdi Brivio produces about one million bottles a year. Almost all wines (98%) are sold locally but some are exported to Japan, The Netherlands, Britain and Belgium. The company is part of a consortium called Quattrimano, which translates as four hands. Quattrimano is aimed at the premium end of the market. The wine receives 20 months in new French oak and will be available in the first class cabins of Swiss Air from March 2015.

The company buys 600 new barrels from France each year, making it the biggest market for oak in Switzerland. Guido Brivio, co-owner and winemaker said new oak loses two litres a barrel each month through evaporation. Many companies store their barrels in cellars under Monte Generoso because a natural cooling system from nearby Lake Como produces a constant 10° to 11°C all year even on the hottest summer days, with no need for electricity.

Paolo Visini, the winemaker and co-owner at Cantina Kopp von der Crone Visini represents the other end of the spectrum with only 7ha in Ticino. They only make 40,000 bottles a year. Paolo Visini said all his wines were gravity fed to retain their flavours. And, as the aromas of baking bread waft through the cellars, he added that the winemakers also bake their own bread each day. All reds receive 18 to 24 months in oak, either barriques or *foudres*. Some of the latter are made in Switzerland. Most Swiss winemakers use French barriques, although some have experimented with barrels from the United



States and Russia.

Another small producer making great wine is Azienda Mondò owned by Giorgio Rossi. Antonio Girardi, a former economist turned winemaker and viticulturalist, said his site was only six hectares, divided into 30 parcels. Even though he would like to be organic, it was not possible because the vines needed to be sprayed to cope with the humidity. The vineyard sits at an elevation of 350 metres and work is mostly manual because of the steep slopes. The site only produces 35,000 bottles a year, all from estate grapes. About 70% is Merlot, by far the most common grape in Ticino, along with parcels of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Bondola. The last is one of the original grapes of the area that fell out of fashion in the 1980s because of the widespread planting of Merlot. Bondola makes rustic wines that taste of cherry and blueberries. The wine is popular in Ticino's *grotti*, restaurants where local people gather for lunch. Citizens of Ticino drink twice as much wine on average as people from other parts of the country. Azienda Mondò is working hard to bring Bondola back into fashion.



Bottles of Merlot produced by Gialdi Brivio – one of the biggest companies in Ticino



View from the Azienda Mondò vineyard situated at an elevation of 350 metres with manual cultivation on steep slopes

Nearby is the Tamborini estate. Carlo Tamborini was Swiss Winemaker of the Year in 2012. This award is based on the number of medals won at domestic competitions each year. Carlo's daughter, Valentina Tamborini said that most wines were locally sold, with small exports to Hong Kong and Swiss embassies around the world. Tamborini produces 700,000 bottles a year and buys about 500 new barrels a year. About 20% of their wine goes into oak.

The Angelo Delea estate is unique in being both a winery and a distiller of balsamic vinegar. Angelo's son David provided a tour of the huge storage cellars built under the estate, where they store their own wines as well as the bottles of other companies. The cellar currently holds 700,000 bottles with plenty of room for expansion. The delicious aromas of balsamic vinegar permeate the main buildings. David Delea noted that balsamic is initially matured in tiny casks, about a tenth the size of a barrique. Balsamic loses 60% of the initial

quantity of liquid by the time it is ready to be bottled.

Meinrad Perler, Swiss winemaker of the year in 2010, introduced his wines at a dinner by Lake Lugano. His company Agriloro has 28 varieties of grape on the estate and makes 200,000 bottles a year, with three in four wines being red. Perler, 74, has lived in the region for 52 years, and has made wine for 34 years.

A visit to the Vinattieri Ticinesi group and Castello Luigi offered a microcosm of the Swiss wine business in one location. These vineyards are only two kilometres from the Italian border. Luigi Zanini established a family estate in 1964 and started making wine in 1971. He founded Vinattieri Ticinesi in 1985. Consultant Urs Mader, known as the "wine bear" because "urs" means "bear" in Latin, said Vinattieri Ticinesi controlled 110 hectares of vines. It owns 80 hectares and has contracts with grape growers from another 30 hectares. The company could produce 1,000,000 bottles a year, he said, but he prefers to focus on quality and makes only 450,000.

Mader believes that when Swiss wine has an international reputation local people will buy more. He has noted big improvements in Swiss wine since the 1980s but now believes new developments must involve "lots of small steps". He also believes elite wine, such as that made by Castello Luigi, will sell. Castello Luigi started as Luigi Zanini's hobby and only makes 2,000 bottles of white and 6,500 of red a year. But they are aimed at the premium end of the market. The white sells for CHF 110 (\$120) a bottle and the red for CHF 135 (\$145). Castello Luigi produced its first wines in 1993 but the castle was not built until 1997. All reds spend 24 months in new French oak. The estate experimented with other varieties of oak but has returned to classic providers and a traditional approach, Mader said.

Tenuta Montalbano offers yet another example of the Swiss approach to wine. It is a co-operative with about 320 producers. The company owns the single biggest concentration of vines in one place in Switzerland – 22 hectares near the Italian border. Founded in 1949, it sells 60% of its wines to supermarkets and the rest to restaurants and private clients.

Director Remo Tettamanti said almost all Montalbano wine was sold in Switzerland but the company had one client at the Burj al Arab, the world's tallest building in the United Arab Emirates, and another at the Mir Hotel in Hong Kong. According to Tettamanti, both appreciated the uniqueness of white wine made from Merlot.

In conclusion, it could safely be said that as a wine-growing nation, Switzerland is unique. ❖