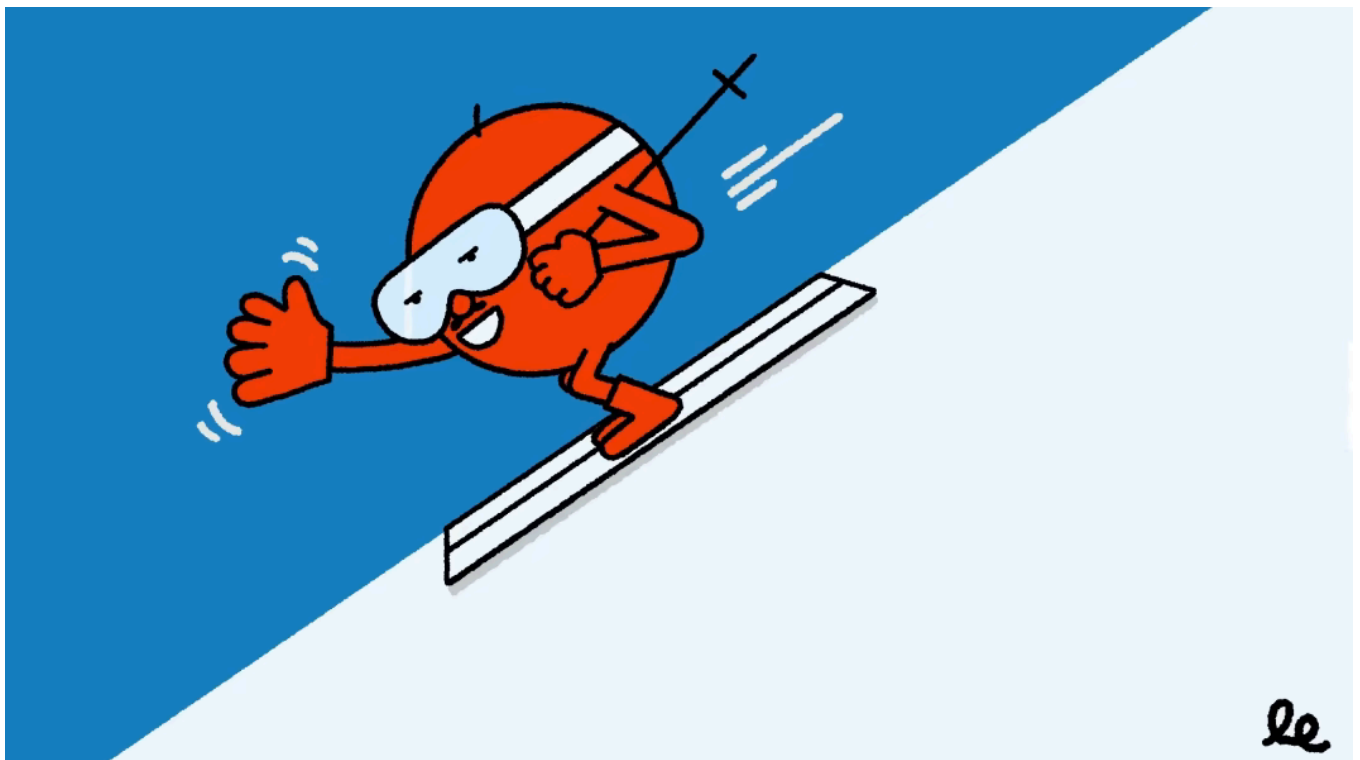


Chasselas: a Swiss speciality that is peak perfection

This subtle, ageworthy white is best served chilled... preferably on the slopes

December 17 2022



© Leon Edler

Every year Michel Chapoutier, the Rhône Valley's most cosmopolitan wine producer, comes to London to present his latest single-vineyard releases. He loves an audience and he loves top quality champagne. So he sits on a platform with a glass constantly filled from a bottle in an ice bucket beside him and pontificates, while taking us through his babies from the Rhône, Alsace and Roussillon.

This year, at the Corinthia hotel, he did not include any of the M Chapoutier wines from Provence, Beaujolais, Spain, Portugal or Australia. But he did drop something of a bombshell (in a wine context, at least).

Chapoutier, who has markedly expanded the geographical reach of his family company of late, was asked whether he was considering investing in [English wine](#). His response was unexpected in two respects. Yes, he said, if he were to make a move, it would be to plant the Chasselas grape in the Scilly Isles. He famously loves granitic soils, and there are already one or two vineyards on the Scillies, so the choice of location was not so surprising, but we were dumbfounded by his choice of grape.

Bar one corner of the wine world, Chasselas is best known as a table grape rather than a white wine grape. Yet in the scenically terraced, south-facing, Unesco-protected vineyards of the Vaud canton on Lake Geneva in Switzerland, Chasselas is considered the finest wine grape of all. Chapoutier was unbending in his enthusiasm for this potential new project: "It's more interesting to be a leader not a follower," he crowed, "and the potential of Chasselas is amazing. It could become the British grape, not just the Swiss one!"

This chimed with me because I had recently — and not before time — fallen for fine Swiss Chasselas at a tasting in London organised by Simon Hardy and Jean-François Genoud, a pair of Swiss wine evangelists who act as an enthusiastic bridge between the regions' producers and UK importers.

I spent quite a lot of time in Switzerland in my early twenties but knew Chasselas only by its Valais synonym Fendant, which I associated with cheap litre-bottles of extremely neutral wine on offer at the supermarket and at mountain restaurants. At that time these basic Fendants were probably bolstered by imported plonk and stiffened by copious additions of sugar to the fermentation vat, the process known as chaptalisation that used to be routine in Switzerland.

One whiff of a Chasselas and I'm immediately transported to the slopes and ski lifts. (As I hope some FT readers will be this month.) But today there are much tighter controls on blending wine imported into

Switzerland, and chaptalisation is apparently no longer the norm. As I tasted my way through 37 of the Swiss wines on show, Simon Hardy told me that the practice is now much more precise; guided by the various characteristics of vintage and terroir rather than being automatic.

Besides, the wines at the London tasting were infinitely superior to my introduction to the grape, with those listed in the box being especially impressive. In some respects, Swiss Chasselas is not unlike Sylvaner (or Silvaner), and, like Sylvaner, surely no one would accuse it of being showy. (Is there perhaps an analogy to be drawn with the Swiss people?) It's innately subtle, sometimes a little saline, dry and relatively low alcohol — rarely more than 13 per cent — and responds well, really filling the palate, to being chilled. It is also uncannily ageworthy.

Eight years ago, I was sent six pairs of bottles of some top Swiss Chasselas from its Swiss heartland, the Grand Cru of Dézaley in the Vaud canton. I tasted them and begrudgingly wrote in my notes that only one of the wines, the 1984 vintage of the delightfully named Chemin de Fer bottling from Luc Massy, knocked my socks off.

As preparation for this article, I tasted its duplicates at the end of last month and was much more impressed. Partly this was because the London tasting had allowed me to put the wines in context, but it was also because the majority of these wines, whites ranging from 14 to 46 years old, were still in such good condition. Admittedly, the 1976 was past it but all vintages from 1997 to 2008 were still very lively and had gained more interest from their long time in bottle. With the decidedly honourable exception of Rieslings, not many other white wines of this age would have survived so well.

It was noticeable that the white wines in the London tasting that had been made from non-Swiss grape varieties, such as Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, were less successful than all the Chasselas examples. The one and only varietal Completer from German Switzerland was really fine,

however, and among the whites from the Valais canton were some especially distinctive examples made from Swiss grape specialities such as Petite Arvine and Amigne.

As for the reds, Pinot Noir, and to a lesser extent the Gamay of Beaujolais, dominated the tasting — except for the Merlot that is the speciality of Switzerland's Italian-speaking region, Ticino. The most successful Pinots were those grown in German Switzerland where they tended to have a bit more body and flavour than those grown elsewhere. (Much to their disappointment, Messrs Hardy and Genoud were unable to rustle up any wines from the Geneva canton.)

These wines are not cheap, but nor is viticulture in Switzerland, and the Swiss import far more wine than they export, most of which goes to Germany. But both at this London tasting and in an earlier encounter, I was seriously impressed by a Chasselas (labelled with my old friend Fendant) from the relatively large Caves Orsat. Their Treize Étoiles 2021 can be found for under £20, much cheaper than most Swiss wines, and would serve as a good introduction to this elusive variety.

I'm afraid I cannot guarantee that my recommendations will be easy to find, even for those planning to ski in Switzerland. I recommend, however, that any curious wine lover has at least one taste of a well-made Swiss Chasselas or Fendant.

Swiss favourites

All wines are made from the white wine grape Chasselas except where stated otherwise.

VAUD

- **Les Frères Dutruy, Les Terrasses 2020 Dézaley Grand Cru 12.8%**
Alpine Wines import other Dutruy wines but not this, the debut

vintage of a new wine

- **Dom La Colombe, La Colombe Noire Hors Série 2019 La Côte 13%**
£39.09 Vida Wines & Spirits
- **Louis Bovard, Le Méridien Saint-Saphorin 2018 Lavaux 12.8%**
£34.95 Harrison's Wines of Ealing
- **Louis Bovard, Médinette 2016 Dézaley Grand Cru 12.5%**
£36.95 Harrison's Wines of Ealing
- **Blaise Duboux, Haut de Pierre Vieilles Vignes 2020 (and 2016) Dézaley Grand Cru 12.5%**
About £33 for the 2011 and 2008 from Gauntleys of Nottingham
- **Luc Massy, Chemin de Fer 2020 Dézaley Grand Cru 13%**
£47.90 (2021) Hedonism, £47 (2016) Albion Wines
- **Dom de la Pierre Latine, L'Yvorne 2019 Yvorne Grand Cru 12.5%**

TICINO

- **Brivio, Riflessi d'Epoca 2016 Ticino 13.2% (Merlot red)**
bestofwines.co.uk (currently sold out). Younger vintages widely available in Switzerland from SFr21

VALAIS

- **Caves Orsat, Fendant Treize Etoiles Fendant 2021 Valais 12.5%**
£15 Yorkshire Vintners
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Petite Arvine Tradition 2020 Valais 13.3% (relatively rare Swiss white wine grape)**
£43.90 Hedonism (currently sold out); SFr32 Gerstl Weinsektionen, Aargau

GERMAN SWITZERLAND

- **Donatsch, Completer Malanserrebe 2016 Graubünden 14.5% (rare Swiss grape)**

Howard Ripley (currently sold out); \$89.99 Flatiron Wines & Spirits, NY

- **Donatsch, Passion Pinot Noir 2017 Graubünden 13.5% (Pinot Noir red)**

£304 for six Howard Ripley

More stockists from [Wine-searcher.com](https://www.wine-searcher.com). Tasting notes on Purple Pages of [JancisRobinson.com](https://www.jancisrobinson.com)

Follow Jancis on Twitter [@JancisRobinson](https://twitter.com/JancisRobinson)

Follow [@FTMag](https://twitter.com/FTMag) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first