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Swiss Pinot Noir: Too Good to be Exported

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Switzerland is proud of its "specialty" white grape varieties such as Petite Arvine, Amine or Heida or their indigenous red wine grapes like Humagne Rouge, Cornalin or Bondola. All these varieties are cultivated mostly in the French-speaking Valais or, the Bondola grape, in the Italian-speaking Ticino. The only relevant red grape variety planted in almost every canton, no matter if French-, Italian- or German-speaking, is Pinot Noir or Blauburgunder as it is called in the eastern, German-speaking part of Switzerland. In total about 4430 hectares of vines are Pinot Noir making the varietal a prominent share of the total area under vine which is a little bit less than 15000 hectares.

The biggest Pinot producer is the Valais in the French-speaking, southwestern corner of the country where 1840 hectares are dedicated to Pinot Noir. The scenery is quite spectacular here with all these terraces seemingly piled on top of each other. Since many red wines from the Valais are blends of Pinot Noir and Gamay Noir (the wine is called Dôle), Grisons (Graubünden) in the upper Rhine valley is the most prominent and, still, the finest Pinot Noir producing area in Switzerland, although Zurich and Neuchâtel produce more and more excellent Pinot Noirs, too.

In Grisons the vines are cultivated on the steep and sunny, south and southwest facing slopes of the Alps in altitudes between 500 and 650 meters above sea level and benefit from the foehn, otherwise they would rot away before they had a chance to ripen in this spectacular area where rainfalls are dramatically higher than in most other European wine growing regions. The vines root in clayey, calcareous slate soils and give well structured, fresh and lovely perfumed Pinots of which the finest are aged in barriques. They can age for a decade and more but often needs some years to show all their talents.

Other important appellations for Pinot Noir in Switzerland are Vaud (501 ha), Zurich (380 ha), the Drei-Seen-Land including the cantons of Bern, Fribourg and Neuchâtel (275 ha) and Genève (122 ha).

Mid of November I tasted roughly 150 top Pinot Noirs from Switzerland blind in Zurich just to get an overview of styles and qualities. The finest 50 or 60 I tasted again on two days and the results are presented below.

Although the vilification methods of the finest Pinots are almost the same like in Burgundy or elsewhere (with cold maceration, a *cuvaison* between 14 and 28 days, *saignée*, malolactic fermentation and barrique aging between 12 and 24 months) styles and qualities can vary enormously. Everywhere you can find top producers working with old Swiss clones which are mass selected since many years whereas others have completely changed to Burgundian clones or prefer a mixture. Even more crucial for the style is the harvest date and, in correlation, the acceptance of acidity and a firm tannin structure. In Grisons acidity can almost not be avoided though it can be smoothened by rich and creamy textures and the sweetness of grapes harvested with 100 or more degrees of *oechsle*. Warmer, sweet and juicy types of Pinot Noir can be found in the Valais although world class Pinots are quite rare here. However, the contemporary hot sports for Pinot Noir lovers are Zurich's Ottenberg and the wines from Neuchâtel where Pinot gives powerful and intense, though also silky textured and very elegant wines grown on calcareous soils. Jacques Tatasciore's Domaine de la Rochette is surely the most spectacular Pinot producer in Switzerland. His "*grands crus*" can compete even with the finest Burgundies. They are very rare and highly expensive but a must try for all Pinot Noir lovers and growers.

Most of the wines I tasted were from the excellent 2011 vintage which gave rich and healthy wines with power, intensity and length. The only danger was super or over-ripeness but again this is rather a question of style than of quality. 2012 was much more difficult due to rain and hail and diseases such as mildew. The wines have transparency and raciness but often lack the intensity and power of a great wine. 2013 is too early to judge though the Pinots I had showed a good concentration and vibrancy.

There are not that many wines exported into the foreign countries. Since Swiss people know what's

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drinking well (besides of Bordeaux, Barolo and Amarone) they buy almost the complete production of the finest wines straight from the producer or one of the many excellent wine shops of the country. However, since Zurich, Lausanne or Geneva are always worth a trip there is a good chance to find the wine you want in restaurants and bars. Life is good in Switzerland and it does not get deleted by Swiss Pinot Noir. Just the contrary is the case. Cheers!

—*Stephan Reinhardt*

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