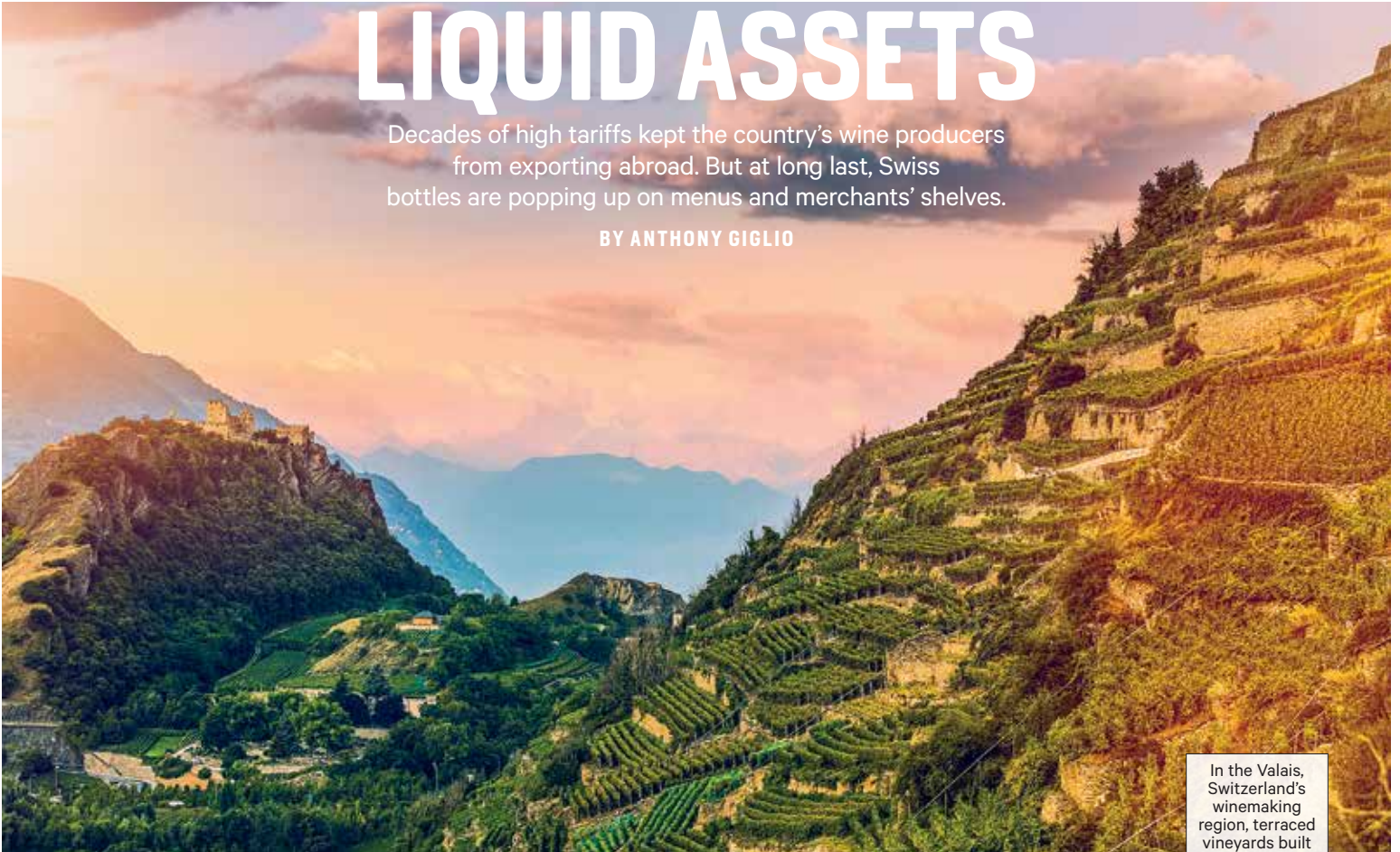


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SWITZERLAND'S LIQUID ASSETS

Decades of high tariffs kept the country's wine producers from exporting abroad. But at long last, Swiss bottles are popping up on menus and merchants' shelves.

BY ANTHONY GIGLIO



In the Valais, Switzerland's winemaking region, terraced vineyards built into mountains are common.

Any adventurous skier who has the temerity to take four cable cars from the Swiss resort village of Verbier to the summit of Mont Fort, at 10,922 feet, is rewarded with vertiginous views of the western Alps in every direction, from the Matterhorn (14,692 feet) to the south; sweeping westward to the Dom (14,911 feet), the Dent Blanche (14,291 feet), and the Dent d'Hérens (13,684 feet); and eastward to Grand Combin (14,154 feet) and Mont Blanc (15,776 feet). All but the last peak lie within or descend into the Valais, one of Switzerland's 26 cantons, or member states, and home to the country's greatest wine production.

The Valais takes its name from the valley formed by the Rhône River, which flows westward into France via Lake Geneva. As in the Rhône Valley in France, grapes grow here with success. Despite the ascents of the Alps on either side of the Swiss Rhône, many slopes are terraced in steep tiers, like giant staircases, to keep vines from sliding off the sides of the mountains. Après-ski imbibing includes all sorts of wines you've never heard of because until recently they were among Switzerland's secrets.

Neal Rosenthal, founder of New York City-based Rosenthal Wine

Merchant, an importer and distributor, began to explore the scene nearly a decade ago during one of his biannual tours of France, Germany, and Italy. "On our way to Alsace, Jura, and Burgundy, and over the mountaintop of Mont Blanc into Italy, we were intrigued by the terraced vineyards," he recalls. "There must be good wine there, we thought, for the effort to maintain vineyards in that forbidding terrain is immense."

Rosenthal's use of the term *forbidding* is also apropos of the Swiss wine market for the better part of its modern history. For years, the Swiss government protected its trade with high tariffs, so only about 1 percent of all wines left the country. It wasn't until the beginning of this century that the Swiss dismantled the final barriers to international importers, including universally adopting standard 750-milliliter bottles. As Jeremy Sells, Rosenthal's operations director, recalls, vintners "didn't know how to handle exporting, beginning with shipping."

This resistance to selling abroad, coupled with the strong Swiss franc and high domestic demand, made the product expensive. In the U.S., retailers categorize bottles into pricing segments based on quality, availability, and "typicity" (how much a Merlot tastes like a Merlot). Cat-

egorically, wines in the premium tier are priced between \$15 and \$20, followed by super premium (\$20 to \$30) and ultra premium (\$30 to \$50). What distinguishes Rosenthal's Swiss imports from practically all other foreign cases is that most clear customs at the luxury tier (\$50 to \$100). In other words, there are no Swiss "everyday" bargains. But compared with super luxury wines (\$100 to \$200) like top California Cabernets and French Burgundys, Swiss wines are—for now—relative values, given their pedigree. All of which raises the question: Are Swiss wines your next must-have? Rosenthal thinks so. "No, we do not sell shipping containers full of it," he says. "But the market has been generous and curious about this special place."

The Valais is a mostly French-speaking region that begins on the eastern edge of Lake Geneva and extends 100 miles east to Obergoms. The town of Vétroz is the area's viticultural heart, with vineyards spread around the village and up the slopes of the Alps. Upward of 200 grape varieties grow in Switzerland—many of them in the Valais. "Like Chenin Blanc, they run the gamut from brisk to rich, intensely minerally to densely honeyed," says Hewah Bahrami, wine director at Michelin two-star Aska in Brooklyn.

Païen is another name for Savagnin, a grape in Jura that Rosenthal championed. No surprise that his choice of Cave Caloz Heida-Païen "Les Bernunes" 2014 (\$50) hints of sweetness in the nose, like cider, but tastes like Braeburn apples, straddling sweet and tart, with distinct crispness. There's also Petite Arvine, like Serge Roh's Petite Arvine de Vétroz 2011 (\$45), a honeyed, medium-bodied white reminiscent of Marsanne: soft at the core, then bracing in the finish. The Chasselas grape, called Fendant here, is nearly ubiquitous and when grown without constraint can lack character. Conrad Caloz, who prunes his Fendant severely to limit harvest levels, crafted a Cave Caloz Coteaux de Sierre Fendant "La Mourzière" 2014 (\$30) with a steely character and bright acidity reminiscent of a Burgundy Chablis.

The best-known white grape in the Valais, however, is Amigne, a native variety whose styles range from dry to sweet. Cave des Tilleuls Fabienne Cottagnoud's Amigne de Vétroz "Clos des Perdrix" 2013 (\$50) is a rich, round example brimming with fleshy apricots and earthy hazel-

nuts. The label is marked with two bees (out of three), which refer to the Brix, or sugar level of the grapes at harvest—an indication of the vintage's richness—and the words *légèrement douce/halb süss* ("slightly sweet" in French and German). "There is a feminine richness to the wines that is addictive," says Tina Vaughn, sommelier at the Simone in New York, where she pours four Rosenthal producers, including Clos des Perdrix.



From left: Bottles from Cave Caloz, Romain Papilloud, and Cave des Tilleuls Fabienne Cottagnoud

At \$50 to \$100, there are no Swiss "EVERYDAY" BARGAINS. But given their pedigree, they're relative values—for now.

nesen, wine director for five Los Angeles restaurants, including Son of a Gun and Trois Mec, and owner of a wine shop, Helen's, admits she's usually drawn to Swiss whites, but her favorite is the red Cave Caloz Les Coteaux de Sierre Humagne Rouge La Mourzière 2014 (\$50). "It has this brightness that's reminiscent of Gamay, but the texture and rustic elegance that a true Cornalin should have," she says.

In other words, it's all about the unconventional otherworldliness of these wines. For oenophiles familiar with wines of Jura, Savoie, and Valle d'Aosta, it's an easy transition, says John Keife, owner of Keife & Co. wine shop in New Orleans. He adds, "It's gratifying to complete our offerings from the winemaking countries of western Europe with these Swiss wines, like filling in the last piece of a puzzle." ♦

To find these wines locally, contact Rosenthal Wine Merchants at 800-910-1990; madrose.com/company-info/distributors.

Among the Valais's red wines there's a lot of generic Dôle (Pinot Noir blended with Gamay), as well as straight Pinot Noir. Cave des Tilleuls Fabienne Cottagnoud's Pinot Noir de Vétroz 2007 (\$50) is exceptional. Beyond classic cherry fruit lies Alpine minerality and fine-grain texture; it's intense and dense and unlike any other old-world Pinot Noir.

Even more interesting are the Cornalin and Humagne Rouge grapes. Though recognized as separate varieties, they're genetically identical but stylistically different; you'll find either on labels in the Valais. Adding to the confusion, both grapes can be traced back to the Italian side of the Alps in Valle d'Aosta, where only the term *Cornalin* is used. Romain Papilloud's Cave du Vieux-Moulin Cornalin de Vétroz 2012 (\$75) is a dead ringer for a northern Rhône Côte Rôtie, tasting of delicate black fruit, stony minerality, and balancing acidity. Helen Johan-