

Learn about Swiss wine with Ellen Wallace



How one man changed the wine profile of Valais

05/04/2019 by [Ellen Wallace](#)

Switzerland hosts a number of educational classes, often with tastings, from schools and museums and various wine groups. They are a great way to learn more about the landscape of Swiss wines – the culture, history, heritage, geography and more.

The 1001 lives of Dr Wuilloud

Henry Wuilloud was the subject of an evening conference organized by the [Wine Museum in Sierre](#) 28 March; he is the subject of a second conference, about his world travels 1 May. The museum's current exhibit is called the "[1001 lives of Dr Wuilloud](#)", which runs to November.

Wuilloud was arguably the man with the greatest impact on wine production in Valais, and by extension, in Switzerland. From 1921 to 1960 he pushed the modernisation of the canton's vineyards, Switzerland's largest in terms of surface area and wine production, through his research, teaching, introduction of new grape varieties in the post-phylloxera world, his efforts to save some native grape varieties and much more. In short, it is hard to summarize his work and his impact. His [archives](#), which went to the state in 2015, take up 20 linear metres of space, so extensive were his writings.

He studied in Zurich and Milan, engineering and agriculture, picking up languages along the way; his impact began to be felt when he was named head of the cantonal viticultural services. One part of his responsibilities covered the Grand-Brûlé domain in Leytron, which remains the centre of viticultural research for the canton. He was a meticulous and workaholic defender of quality and the many projects in which he was involved were underscored by this. His stamp is partly to have put order into a chaotic world of wine, to have insisted on high standards and to show that these paid off.

The evening conference I attended, led by José Vouillamoz, international grape DNA specialist, presented the grape varieties Wuilloud introduced to Valais. It was startling to be reminded

how recent many of these are, and thus how profoundly the world of wine has changed in Switzerland in just one century. Syrah and Chardonnay were two of these. Today we have confirmation through fine wines of his conviction that Valais, the starting point of the Rhone river which gave rise to the grape further south, would be a good home for Syrah.



- 2005 golden RieslingxSylvaner



- Domaine de Beudon, RieslingxSylvaner – various names for what is also called Müller-Thurgau



- José Vouillamoz with a bottle of Dr Vuilloud's wine from 1974

The eight wines

Müller-Thurgau, aka Riesling-Sylvaner, vintage 2005 from Domaine de Beudon in Fully, was remarkably young and fresh. The nose: honey and almond paste (I found kumquat and tangerine briefly, and then it was gone). A wine that was not filtered or with other interventions.

Pinot Blanc, 2016, Gérard Raymond in Saillon, with Vouillamoz telling us that it was introduced by Vuilloud as Chardonnay – but then at the time many people were confused by the similarities between the two.

Chardonnay Fontannes 2017, Dominique Passaquay, Choëx. Good to be able to compare it with the Pinot Blanc – this was an oaked Chardonnay in a style I don't care for (marked notes of vanilla from the oak), but the "great acidity and citrus" helped it work. Wuilloud imported the grape in 1918, at the start of his career.

Chenin Blanc Clos de Mangold 2018, Domaine Cornulus, Savièse. There is little of this in Switzerland, which strikes me as a shame, based on the quality of this one: Almost a sweetness to the nose from the notes of pineapple, but very good complexity: grape, mirabelle plums, fleur de lys, Vouillamoz noted. The attack is fast, and in mouth it is rich and acidic. Wuilloud brought it back to Switzerland from a trip to Anjou in France in 1927.

Completer, Clos de Tasampéhro, Cave La Romaine, Réserve du Château 2015. Big and rich with curry, quince and spices for the nose; a mouth with great acidity, long finish. A bit too young yet. Wuilloud and [Josef-Marie Chanton](#) in Visp brought it back from near-extinction in 1958. Today Valais has about 4,000 m² planted.

Merlot AOC Valais 2016, Cave le Vidomne, St-Pierre-de-Clages. Wonderful nose, but somewhat harsh tannins. We had a good discussion about this grape, which he brought in from Ticino in 1926: its birthplace, remarkably, may have been Brittany, with Vouillamoz showing us a temperatures chart for several centuries. The Middle Ages was much, much warmer, possibly like what we are now starting to see there.

Diolinoir is a new grape variety. It was included because Wuilloud indirectly helped create it and influenced its name with his personal vineyard called Diolly, where he experimented with grapes.

Syrah Vieilles Vignes 2015, Gilbert Devayes, Leytron. The grape was brought back from Tain in France by Wuilloud in 1921. A discussion with wine producers in the audience ensued, with questions about the original clones that were brought to Switzerland and which ones are now used.

If there was a lesson to be learned here, it is that the world of wine is anything but static – what we think we know today will soon be plowed under as new grapes, new clones, new growing methods and tools and new ideas replace what we currently have. Dr. Wuilloud would, I think, have liked today's emphasis on quality as these changes takes place.