

VALAIS, LAND OF VINEYARDS AND WINES

BY DON HEIMBURGER

This Swiss canton's wines match its majestic scenery.

Walking along a short segment of the wine path near Martigny, Switzerland, can sometimes take longer than expected.

Friend and guide Yorick Biselx, local vintner Florian Besse, and I are inspecting the local grapes and vineyards of the Plan-Cerisier – which means “cherry plain” – when an inviting shout comes from a local wine hut, or mazot.

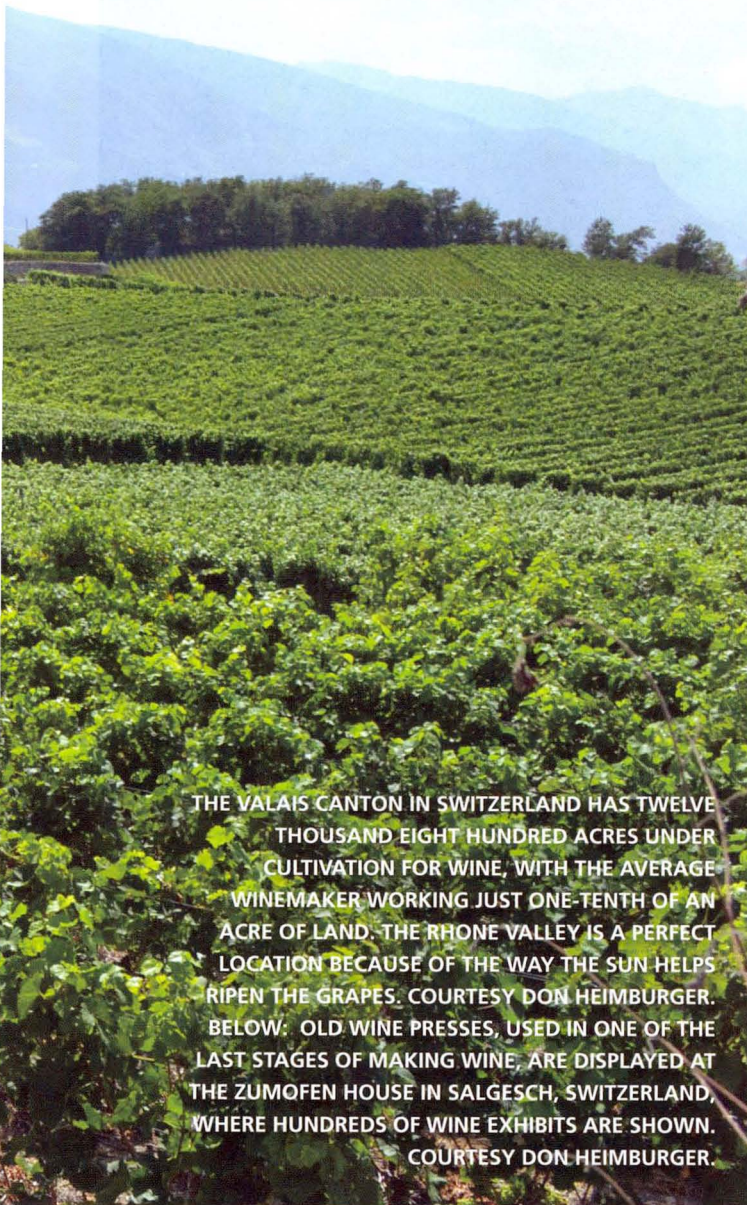
“Stay a while and have some wine,” insists another local vintner, whose colorful grape arbor sits adjacent to his house. He uncorks a bottle of delicious Malvoisie, an aperitif, made from none other than vintner Besse’s own vineyards up the valley.

Forty-five minutes later, after reveling in the Valais wine grown right at our feet and thankfully avoiding the hot mid-day sun under the roof of the mazot, we continue

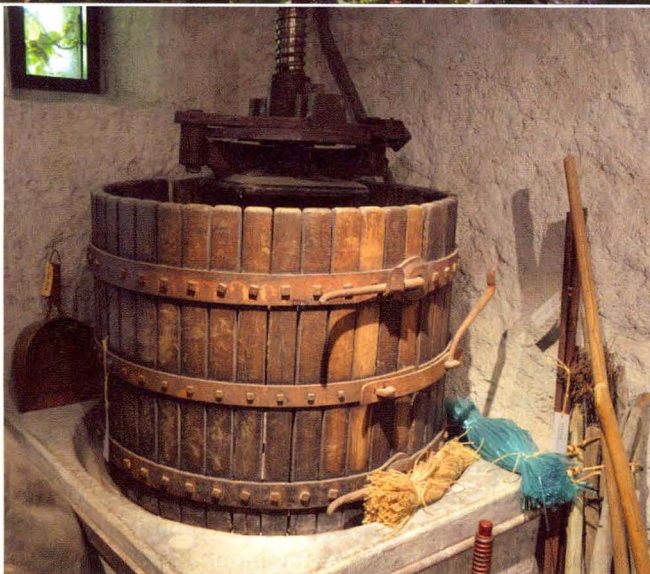
our vineyard walk. That is the joy of the Valais wine region: friends and families sharing the precious acres of grapes that follow the slopes of the Alps all along the Rhone Valley in this hilly, rocky region.

Valais, one of the twenty-six cantons of Switzerland, is home to twenty-two thousand winemakers, six hundred of whom also bottle wine, and twelve thousand eight hundred acres are under cultivation, with the average grower working just one-tenth of an acre of land.

Valais is the largest wine region in Switzerland, responsible for almost half of all Swiss wines of every vintage. Located in the mountainous southwestern corner of this small country, the main vineyard area of Valais runs east-northeast for thirty miles from Martigny to just beyond Siere. It generated twenty-five percent more wine than



THE VALAIS CANTON IN SWITZERLAND HAS TWELVE THOUSAND EIGHT HUNDRED ACRES UNDER CULTIVATION FOR WINE, WITH THE AVERAGE WINEMAKER WORKING JUST ONE-TENTH OF AN ACRE OF LAND. THE RHONE VALLEY IS A PERFECT LOCATION BECAUSE OF THE WAY THE SUN HELPS RIPEN THE GRAPES. COURTESY DON HEIMBURGER. BELOW: OLD WINE PRESSES, USED IN ONE OF THE LAST STAGES OF MAKING WINE, ARE DISPLAYED AT THE ZUMOFEN HOUSE IN SALGESCH, SWITZERLAND, WHERE HUNDREDS OF WINE EXHIBITS ARE SHOWN. COURTESY DON HEIMBURGER.



the country's second-largest wine-making region, Vaud, and five times more than the Italian-speaking Ticino area of Switzerland.

Riding by train through this green valley, you get a visual picture of how the land is used: every square inch of horizontal or vertical soil is brimming with lush vineyards, some with just a few rows of vines. Some of the vineyards are planted on slopes as steep as forty-two percent, which helps provide good drainage and excellent exposure to sunlight.

In fact, the steeper slopes provide superior ventilation and help exaggerate climatic conditions, producing some of the best sweet wines in the world.

Down the valley, Sierre and Salgesch lie near the dividing line (called Röstigraben) between the French- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland, so this latter area of the Valais is subtly different from, and a touch more Germanic than, the more central and western areas. The sun – there are twenty-one hundred hours on average of sunlight a year here – is a main ingredient in wine production; this area is one of the most sun-blessed regions in central Europe.

The dry föhn winds that blow through the valley, and are more frequent in the fall, help the grapes to ripen and concentrate their sugar, and at the same time keep gray rot at bay. When the föhn wind does not blow, other winds from the side valleys serve the same purpose.

Opening a menu at any of the larger restaurants in the region, you will see a good selection of valley wines available, from the delicious floral-fruity white Fendant (which has twenty-seven hundred acres of vineyards devoted to it), to the Sylvaner, which has notes of infused flowers, has potential for aging more than twenty years, and loves the schistose and gravelly soil of the area.

Within a few days in the area I developed a taste for the Petite Arvine, an internationally renowned white Valais wine, which is genetically linked to grapes from Italy's Val d'Aosta, as well as neighboring France. It is a delicate grape that offers a wide range of tastes: from the nervy dry version with aromas of wisteria and grapefruit, to the slightly sweet with notes of rhubarb. A precious bottle of the Petite Arvine came home with me.

Florian and Marie-Christine Besse, who can see their vineyards up on a hillside from the tiny village of aging mazots that crowd together like the scene from a beautiful watercolor painting, have built a small but thriving business near Martigny. With eleven acres of vineyards, they produce eighteen different whites, reds, and rosés. Their modern wine-making facilities are state-of-the-art, they employ five people which balloons to twenty during harvest season, and Florian explains that to be successful, thirteen hundred hours of work is required yearly for every two and a half acres of vineyard.

Florian Besse wines, like most Swiss-made wines, are not shipped far away from the vineyards. Only five percent of his yearly crop is shipped to places like Germany, France, Belgium, Canada, and Kenya. The remainder stays in Switzerland. Besse is proud that the cultivation and harvesting of his grapes is not mechanized, and that he is a



TOP: FLORIAN BESSE OF PLAN-CERISIER CHECKS HIS VINEYARDS WHICH PRODUCE A VARIETY OF WHITE, RED, AND ROSE WINES NEAR MARTIGNY. COURTESY DON HEIMBURGER.

ABOVE: TRADITIONALLY IN VALAIS, GROUPS OF VITNERS BUILT HOMES CLOSE TO ONE ANOTHER; THESE HOMES, CALLED MAZOTS, HOUSED THE OWNERS DURING TIMES WHEN THEY NEEDED TO BE CLOSE TO THEIR VINEYARDS. COURTESY DON HEIMBURGER.

third generation winemaker in his family, which started with his grandfather.

Robert Taramarcaz is another Valais winemaker in Sierre, who joined his father and mother in 1992 as part of the *Domaine Des Muses Winery*. It produces a variety of excellent Valais wines such as Chardonnay, Muscat, Gamay, Heida, Cornalin, Pinot Noir, and Merlot, and has been recognized for its quality in many competitions.

Sitting around a small, shaded table outside Taramarcaz's rustic winery, surrounded by fertile vineyards on three sides, he offers a taste of his 2011 Cornalin, a fruity red wine selection with a hint of blackberries and cherries. The wine, made in the Valais since the year 1300, is always a good choice; he produces seven thousand bottles of it every year. His Heida selection, originally a French variety, produces a complex bouquet of jelly, plum jam, and fruits.

In Salgesch, a small wine-growing community, a Vine and Wine Museum, called the *Zumofen House* situated in a renovated peasant's house, relates the history of the local wine region. Complete with old wine presses, various hand vine cutters, knives and rakes, leather grape-gathering bags, and wooden grape boxes, the museum is the crowning touch to the three and seven-tenths-mile Wine Path situated between the *Chateau de Villa* in Sierre and the museum. To fully walk the path, allow about two and a half hours, and have good hiking shoes.

Along the path, information panels in both German and French tell about the planting, cultivation, and harvesting of the grape varieties on display. At the *Chateau de Villa*, take time to taste the *raclette*, which comes from various areas of Switzerland – of course, various Valais wines are served with this specialty.

Fruit growing was first discovered in the Valais before the time of the Gauls, but the Romans, who conquered the Valais a century before the time of Christ, are credited with the first wine-making here.

Christianity brought the Romanized Gauls new reasons for wine production: wine was used in communion, but it was also used for drinking in the monk hostels and used

AT THE CHATEAU DE VILLA IN SIERRE, EXCELLENT REGIONAL WINES, ALONG WITH RACLETTE, ARE SERVED IN AN ELEGANT SETTING. COURTESY DON HEIMBURGER.



SIGNAGE ALONG THE WINE PATH EXPLAINS TO VISITORS THE GROWING PROCESS OF THE GRAPES AND WHAT VARIETIES OF GRAPES THEY ARE SEEING. COURTESY DON HEIMBURGER.



as medical treatment in hospitals, besides being a bartering tool.

In 1803, when a new road over the Gotthard Pass was opened, it also opened up new trade routes which gave wine a boost; until then the vineyards had been accessible only via the St. Maurice Pass. In 1860, the railroad also contributed to the growth of the wine industry.

With an impressive number of vintners in the valley, export of Swiss wines is surprisingly much lower than that of neighboring Germany and France. There are as many as one hundred twenty-five appellations in the Valais region, which comprise wine and labeling laws of a particular geographical area, and which include regional boundaries and specifications for vineyards and winery practices.

Maurice Chappaz, an award-winning Swiss poet from the region, in one of his many works in which he wrote about Valais wines, said, "Let us go to a secret corner of my garden, where I will recite a litany of the wonders of grapes." Indeed, the wines of the Valais are worth several poems, and worth several trips to discover the families that grow these delicious, plump grapes. **GL**

If You Go...

There is a lot to see and do in this area, but some advanced planning will help. For more information, go to www.myswitzerland.com, or www.sierre-salgesch.ch, www.sierre-anniviers.ch, or www.martigny.com.