

Skip cheese and sip wine in Switzerland

Beyond chocolates and cheese, there's another Swiss gem to discover—vineyards that have been passed down through the generations

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Think of wine while in Europe, and France, Spain and Italy spring to mind. Switzerland is better known for its cheese and chocolates. The Alpine slopes, however, are dotted with terraced vineyards in six main wine growing regions. Some of these are family owned and go back centuries, but the country has chosen to keep its exceptional wines at home, exporting only one per cent of the produce. A vineyard tour is a great way to discover this near-unknown wine haven.

The tiny, quaint village of Praz, nestled between the gleaming Lake Murten and the hilly slopes of Mont Vully in western Switzerland is home to just 400 residents and six winemakers. The region grows about 45 grape varieties with Pinot noir and Sauvignon blanc being the most popular ones.

It's a sunny day, perfect for grape harvesting. The rows of fruit-laden vines seem unending, the lake glistens ahead and the village homes look like tiny dots against this gorgeous backdrop. In a lush vineyard in the estate of Cave Guillod SA, its owner Cédric Guillod hands me a yellow box and a pair of long nose scissors. "The secret of why my grandfather lived to be 100 years is because he drank a glass of wine every day," Guillod says smilingly. His family has been growing grapes and producing wines here for four generations, since 1931.

Taking a deep breath to soak in the incredible vista, I get down to work. I go snip-snap, cutting carefully at the stem so that I don't damage the grapes. After half an hour, I am tired, but my box is only half full, and I realise how much time and

effort goes into making a glass of wine.

My hard work has led to hunger pangs—fortunately an inviting table overlooking the lake is calling to me. It's time to taste some wines from this vineyard. The first is a crisp white wine that's a blend between Pinot gris and Chasselas made in 2022. It is paired with Gâteau du Vully, a delicious local bread that looks like focaccia. Made by Guillod's mother, it is topped with bacon and sprinkled with cumin.

A red wine is next, Gaia, rich with spicy notes. Guillod tells me that Chasselas is an old grape variety that grows in the regions of Vaud, Valais and Geneva and is little known outside Switzerland. These delicate grapes, which are exclusive to Alpine slopes, produce subtle and elegant wines, which are a local favourite.

Dinner is at a candle-lit wine cellar in the 16th century Château Salavaux in

Vully, where I am staying. The dishes, crafted from local produce, are accompanied by more of the local wine.

The next day I head out to explore another wine region with a completely different vibe—the canton of Ticino bordering Italy in southern Switzerland. The journey is as memorable as the destination. I board the Vigezzina-Centovalli Railway, a narrow-gauge train from the tiny town of Domodossola in Italy, that chugs at a leisurely pace and covers the 50-odd km in two hours. The unbelievably scenic ride winds through wild chestnut forests, vine-covered slopes and waterfalls as it goes over 83 bridges and viaducts.

My home here is a charming village, Vico Morcote, 200m above Lake Lugano. Counted as one of Switzerland's rustic gems, nature and history blend seamlessly here. I check into Relais Castello di Morcote, a former 17th century convent



turned hotel with 12 rooms that overlooks the vast expanse of the lake. The next morning, a 10-minute walk from the hotel takes me to the family-run Tenuta Castello di Morcote, a sprawling 150-hectare farm and wine estate that is surrounded by the lake and home to the 15th-century Morcote Castle. Built in the 1400s on the site of a Roman watchtower, it is the only remaining medieval fortress

in this region. As I amble through the estate and reach the castle, I am told that the Roman well from the watchtower days is still intact.

I walk into the wine tasting room and get a tour of the wine cellar that is lined with steel tanks and oak barrels. The owners, Gaby Gianini—one of Switzerland's best-known winemakers—and her husband Maurizio, are passionate about the

vineyard started by Gaby's grandfather, Massimo. The vineyard produces around 60,000 bottles a year, mostly Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. The grapes are harvested by hand and all the wines are organic and biodynamic, which means they follow a holistic and natural approach to farming as well as post-harvest processing. Among the wines I taste, the Rubino, a 50% Mer-



(above) A glass of white wine at Tenuta Castello di Morcote; and the Château Salavaux in Vully.

lot, stands out for its aroma of pepper and fruity hints of cherries and figs.

During lunch at Morcote, Gianini gives me the answer to the question I've been asking since I arrived here: why doesn't Switzerland export more of its wines. Most of the vineyards have been passed down through the generations and the families want travellers and visitors to taste their produce at the site where it is grown and manufactured rather than miles away. It makes sense—with the Swiss Alps and a gorgeous lake as the backdrop, the personal touch of the growers explaining their process and produce, the wine takes on a new note. I promise myself that I will come back—certainly for the wine, and maybe for the cheese and chocolate too.

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