

TEXT MIKE BENNIE

Peak Performers

High in the Swiss Alps a band of vigneron are relying on biodynamic and organic practices to produce tantalising small-batch wines that speak of their pristine sites.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF DOMAINE DE BEUDON AND MIKE BENNIE.

UP AND AWAY
Right: **Domaine de Beudon.** Opposite: **Mythopia's vineyard.**

The Valais, Switzerland's largest wine region, is nestled close to the Savoie of France and runs along the Rhône Valley to the fringe of Lake Geneva. Snow-capped peaks, that include the Matterhorn and part of Mont Blanc, seem to stretch forever, and the alpine village of Zermatt is a popular destination for tourists.

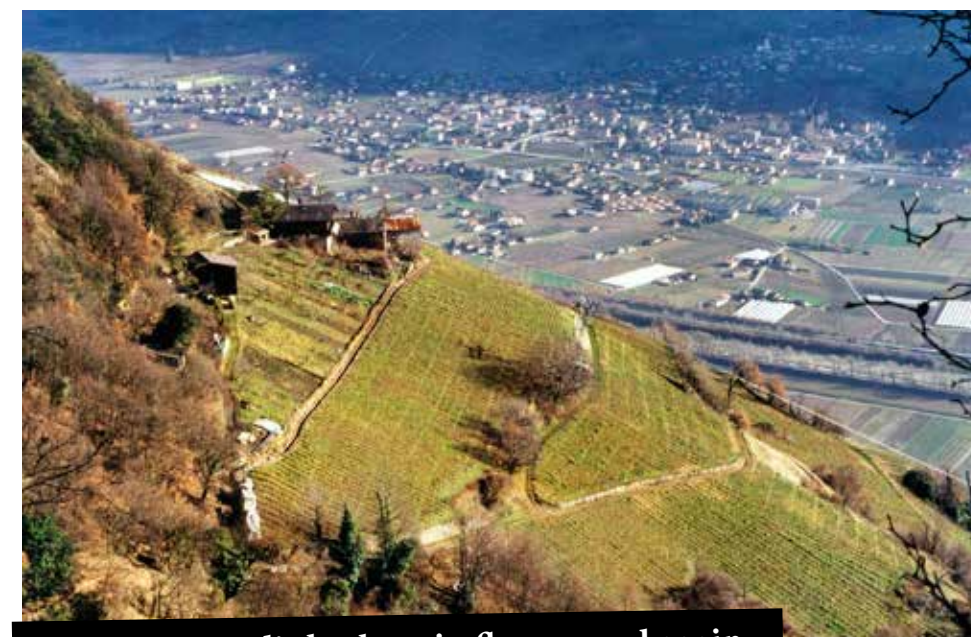
Valais is not just Switzerland's largest wine region, but also its oldest. It is home to some of Europe's highest vineyards, stretching up to the village of Visperterminen, where vines tuck into terraced slopes at 1150 metres above sea level. Ludicrous angles mean vineyards are often tended by hand, though primitive looking train tracks for shifting grapes up and down the hillsides do help to make working the land a little easier.

Valais is well-known in Switzerland but expense and interest seem to limit the spread of its intriguing wines, and the unofficial grand crus of the region – Fully, Conthey, Saint Leonard, Vetrox and Salgesch – aren't exactly household names. That being said, ask an in-the-know Swiss about the pinot noir or fendant (chasselas) of Valais, and they tend to give glowing approval.

Varieties found across the other appellations include savagnin blanc, riesling, gewürztraminer, pinot blanc, pinot gris, chardonnay and sylvaner, alongside lesser known amigne and rêze. For reds, gamay is widely planted as are hybrid local varieties including gamaret and garanoir with syrah, humagne rouge and a few indigenous grapes including dollinoir, cornalin and durize. It's a broad palette to be working with.

While large-scale winemaking is common, an undercurrent of small, like-minded producers are helping to elevate the offering from supermarket wines to a more tantalising range of biodynamic and organic wines that speak of their pure alpine sites.

This cutting edge of Swiss wine is rearing its head in wine festivals like RAW and The Real Wine Fair in London, and canny importers are beginning the march of these intriguing wines to Australia. An increasing number of small producers farming sustainably and producing wines with minimal intervention makes a compelling reason to visit the dizzying vineyards of Valais.



Pinot noir is sleek, long in flavour and again delicate, like many of the wines of Beudon.

Domaine de Beudon

www.beudon.ch

Domaine de Beudon is a remarkable place; a pint-sized farm perched on the steep side of a towering rocky mountain, isolated from all else and locally known as the "vineyard in the sky". The property, which sits above the commune of Fully, was planted in 1947, although people have lived on this remote, elevated farmland for well over 100 years.

"There are two ways to visit us," explains proprietor Marion Granges. "One is by small cable car or you can walk for an hour." After an early start, a stroll through the gently undulating forest at the base of Domaine de Beudon's 800 metre-high perch above the picturesque valley seemed very appealing. But the muddy flanks of the forest quickly turned to broken rocks and grasses with narrow paths weaving around increasingly steep ledges which dropped away to the base of the perilously sheer rise.

After about 45 minutes the walk became a mountain climb. The ledges narrowed and things started to get a bit hair-raising. Struggling to stay upright on the edge of the cliff, the next section of track revealed a foot-wide ledge and a chain-rope bolted into the rock. The drop was straight down hundreds of metres. No thanks. The rickety, old cable car was now looking like a very good option.

The quaint and rustic contraption is back at the base of the mountain. Locals will tell you about the time the cable car fell off its rails and plunged down the mountain. It left Marion's husband Jacques seriously injured in hospital, and meant the only access to Beudon was up the daunting mountain path. "It wasn't a big deal, we just had to take everything up and down by hand for a few years," explains Marion.

Marion's father was an early adopter of biodynamics, in 1936 he started introducing Rudolph Steiner's practices in his nursery, and then farm. Marion continued farming biodynamically in the 1960s, about the time she lost her father while he was foraging for crystals near Mont Blanc. "It was terrible, but for him to die in the mountains while looking to further his beliefs was good," she offers. "Biodynamics is very important to us. We want to show that if it is possible at Beudon, then it is possible everywhere."

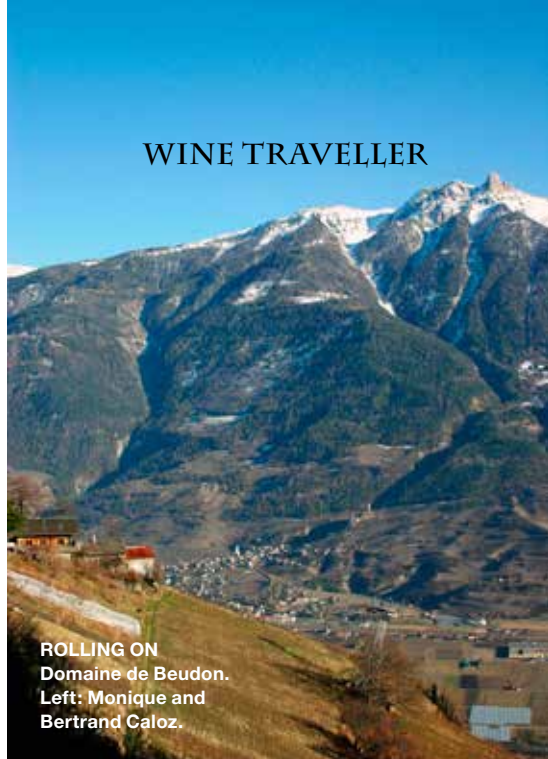
The six hectares under vine looks like a garden with flowers, vegetables and fruit trees growing in the vineyard. "We believe we produce better fruit when its grown in harmony with nature," says Jacques.

Production of wines under their own label began in 1971 and the technique has hardly varied since. The grapes are hand-picked and sent to a vintage crusher, the must then travels down a long pipeline to the winery shed which sits on more level ground below. No additives are used and no filtering occurs throughout the winemaking. Neutral vessels are predominately used for fermentation, which takes place naturally.

"In older times whites and reds weren't made as differently as they are now. It's only about 50 to 70 years ago that we began making white wine more floral and not as strong in flavour," explains Jacques. "We use more skin contact in our white winemaking."

Varieties planted run from pinot noir, gamay and riesling to local grapes including fendant (chasselas), sylvaner, petit arvine and gamaret. Beudon also makes a Schiller wine with both white and red grapes co-fermented from a field blend harvest.

Tasting across a number of vintages, the outstanding wines included Cuvée Antique,



ROLLING ON
Domaine de Beudon.
Left: Monique and
Bertrand Caloz.



TREAD CAREFULLY
Jacques Granges in his
vineyard. Right: Marie-
Thérèse Chappaz.



CHOSEN PATHS
The road to Mythopia
(above). Centre: cable car
to the "vineyard in the sky".

a textural, amber-hued wine which shows fresh perfume with a touch of richness, like apricot nectar. The fine, sandy tannins finish with a lick of brine-like acidity. The fendant is given eight days skin maceration for additional character.

A fine, gently savoury Rosé de Gamay offering maraschino cherry fruit character with enough tannin and crunch to refresh the palate is produced from gamay planted at around 500 metres and 800 metres, "cultivated with love at the top and bottom of the farm," says Jacques.

The Schiller, now produced across Switzerland as an officially named wine style, is floral scented with a crisp and delicate

says with a sweeping gesture across his vineyard, which seems buried under plants, trees and flowers, and teaming with animal life. It resembles a small forest.

The striking scene is brought about by years of ecology research and practice by Schmidt. "One of the leading distinctions of societies is seen through ecological collapses through history. Economics is linked to this. Why settle on an income from just grapes and wine when you have space on your land for secondary and tertiary crops between the vines? If you have soil and biodiversity health, why not find greater social health through balance of our ecosystems?" asks Schmidt. His work is demonstrated through

Among all this are healthy, vibrant fruit and vines. "It's a unified program, the fruit is amazing, and we feed ourselves and our animals from the biodiversity of the vineyard. Our secondary and tertiary food crops can be sold commercially; we profit in so many ways from our vineyard," says Schmidt.

Vineyards here are set in terrace-like lots on mad angles up the slopes of the Valais' mountains. It's picturesque, but Schmidt quickly points out the irrigation systems that jut out from the vines of neighbouring vineyards. "They are mostly for spraying chemicals more efficiently," he explains. "People here are reliant on this, but their vineyards seem so sad." Of course, Schmidt's vineyard is farmed without chemicals. A natural whirlpool system in an adjacent creek acts as a vortex to mix biodynamic and other preparations for the farm.

Schmidt took over the 35-year-old vineyard in 2004. Since then he has produced some extraordinary wines including pinot noir, fendant and sylvaner.

His humble winery is in a cellar below his house, located in a neighbouring village to his vineyard. The cellar is cool with a low-slung ceiling and contains a small clutch of old barrels from which Schmidt draws his wines. He uses no additions and little or no sulfur in his winemaking, yet the wines are incredibly fresh and youthful to taste, even with bottle age.

The mouth-watering 2010 Fendant Terre de Manneau is pure, floral and bright, almost peppery in scent and taste with spring field-like aromas and a nuttiness in flavour. 2012 Disobedience sees fendant spend 35 days on skins and two years in barrel, rendering an orange hued wine of depth, toastiness and complexity with chalky tannins in tow. Its presence on the palate is as striking as it is delicious.

his organisation The Ithaka Institute which consults on "biodiversity climate farming" manifested through a calculated charter.

The charter offers advice on farming, from encouraging soil rejuvenation and health to transforming vineyard land into biodiverse wonderlands. "We try to make rich soil with plenty of bioactivity, the quality of wine comes from this and the presence of other plants." In the past vines grew wild in forests and weren't cultivated. Schmidt is trying to replicate this environment.

The vineyard is astonishing, and as per the charter, it is strategically planted and managed. Peach and other fruit trees grow at the end of vineyard rows, and hedges are planted to increase insect and animal life. In 'hot spots' of about 50 square metres per hectare, more trees, flowers and fruits are nurtured. Wasp nests are encouraged, miniature sheep trim lower lying vines and chickens produce manure.

Tremendous peaks and the kaleidoscope of farmland epitomise the Valais wine region.

texture and a heft of red grapes showing deep berry fruit character.

Gamay as a table wine is highly perfumed and offers amaro-like sour sweetness with a light crunch to the texture, while the pinot noir is slinky, long in flavour and again delicate, like many of the wines of Beudon.

"We know this is a very special site," says Marion. "We are preserving it for coming generations, and farming it with great love." Perched at a rustic wooden table in the lee of the family home, gazing out across Valais' Alps and valley, it's hard not to appreciate just how remarkable Beudon is.

Mythopia

www.mythopia.ch

Mythopia's proprietor, winemaker and, most importantly, ecologist, Hans-Peter Schmidt is a lean and energetic man. He wants to change the way people farm vineyards. "Here we are trying to make a garden," he

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF COLLINE DE DAVAL, MARIE THÉRÈSE CHAPPAZ, DOMAINE DE BEUDON AND MIKE BENNIE.

2010 Finito Terre de Tsampon is a petillant naturel, a lightly sparkling sylvaner still alive with bubbles from bottle fermentation. It has a muted perfume offering some florals and is nutty to taste with a fine tight bead. There's a touch less clarity in this wine as it reaches to more savoury, dusty fringes.

2011 Primogenitur Pinot Noir however, is the opposite, made in a 'nouveau' style with carbonic maceration as the linchpin. The wine is fresh, crisp, light and gently sweet-fruited with delicacy and vibrancy; a classic vin de soif.

2010 Pi-No is a more serious wine, fine-tuned with ribbons of suede tannins and showing game meat-like complexity and savouriness. It's an elegant, beautiful wine.

2011 Insoumis Pinot Noir is a late-picked, concentrated and powerful wine with rich, dried fruit and spice characters; a heady drop that tastes quite exotic in its own way. There's a lot of character-filled wine in the cellar, born from this remarkable site. "We see Mythopia as a Utopia of sorts, but an applicable and practical one. An example for others," states Schmidt. "Mythopia is a mythical location. Or it will become one!"

Colline de Daval

www.collinededaval.ch

Colline de Daval may not have achieved the proud heights of Beudon or the aspirational practices of Mythopia, but their la lutte raisonnée, or reasoned struggle, approach to farming, sees biodynamic practices in place and minimal chemical input in the vineyard. The family-run producer sits on a rise above the valley floor in the commune of Sierre.

Mountains dominate the landscape from which the fruit is sourced. The estate has five hectares of land under vine, set on typical chalky soils and planted with fendant, pinot noir, chardonnay, gamaret, savagnin and

merlot. "We are about a complete picture of the region, about the terroir of our site, using the varieties as the mouthpieces," says proprietor Bertrand Caloz.

Wines from these lower flats of Valais still manage to maintain a delicacy and purity, particularly on this site which regularly sees long, cold winters offset by a sudden burst of warmth through spring and flowering. Vines range from 30 or so years old to around 60 years old for the pinot noir.

Again, fendant is the yardstick. The 2012 Coteaux de Sierre is a mineral-laden wine of flinty, delicate texture and a bright, frisky fruit profile. The 2011 Païen is produced from savagnin and one of Colline de Daval's most complex, interesting whites. It is slippery in texture with a smoky perfume and generous fruit flavours with a lick of brine-like acidity. The wines all have a brightness, crunch and lift, even the 2010 Chardonnay with barrel ferment and time on lees seems to pop out of the glass – unsurprising seeing as though the commune of Sierre is known as the sunniest place in Switzerland.

The red wines are not quite as exciting, but still have some mojo. The 2012 Coteaux de Sierre is a refreshing pinot noir with cherry pip and maraschino fruit, a light and clean wine. A rogue syrah, brought to the tasting table as a 2013 barrel sample, shows promise with meaty, gamey, savoury intent.

Marie-Thérèse Chappaz

www.chappaz.ch

Marie-Thérèse Chappaz is arguably one of Valais, if not Switzerland's, best-known winemakers. Her wines under the Domaine de la Liaudisaz name come from her eight-hectare, biodynamic vineyard set high in the mountain country, offering views of those tremendous peaks and the kaleidoscope of

farmland that epitomise the Valais wine region so definitively.

She is renowned for her meticulous approach to viticulture, minimal intervention in winemaking, and her exploration of various soil profile terroirs. While Chappaz is elusive, her vineyard suggests great vitality with abundance of flowers, plants, insects and birds intermingling.

Her wines see much airtime in Switzerland due to her profile, with wine bars in Geneva, Zurich and, more locally, in Valais, popping corks on her cuvées. The best wines tasted included the joyous field blend, 2012 Rhodonite, a blend of merlot, pinot noir, gamay, syrah and cornalin that results in a finely balance, tightly wound wine. There is gentle spice and savouriness with a trim line of acidity holding the wine long and firm. 2012 Petit Arvine Grain Blanc is a complex wine with savoury nuttiness coupled to gently honeyed characters and a polished texture. It's rich, vibrant and fresh.

Another complex white, 2011 Ermitage Grain d'Or is a marsanne with immense power and presence. Though trim across the palate, it shows depth of roasted nuttiness coupled to wet stone-like minerality. It's a curious and glorious wine. 2012 Grain Gamay is also striking, a supple wine of farmhouse funk and bittersweet fruit character with crisp texture. 2012 Grain Cinq is compelling, showing layers of sweetness, benign bitterness, richness and spice through a blend of pinot blanc, païen, sylvaner, petite arvine and marsanne.

In a region where identity is often lost in volume of wine, the setting has inspired a growing clutch of winemakers who show a dedication to their land and understand the potential of fruit and wine from considered, more sustainable farming. Proscht!