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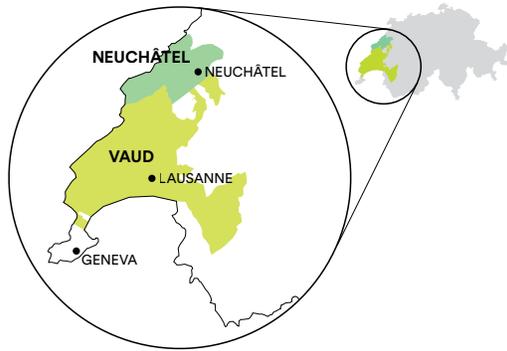


Among the oldest vineyards in the Swiss Alps, Chateau de Mont dates back to the sixteenth century.

QUICK TRIP

SWISS BLISS

Long overshadowed by the famed wines of its neighbors, Switzerland might just count its delicious pinot noirs and lesser-known gamarets among its best-kept secrets. Head north of Geneva to the fairy-tale villages of the Fura Mountains for a crash course in fondue wine-pairing.



1. Little has changed at *Domaine de la Maison Carrée* since 1827: The original press is still used to crush the grapes. 2. *Domaine Nicolas Ruedin's* vineyards overlook medieval Cressier. 3. At *La Maison Carrée*, wine is aged in 100-year-old oak barrels.

ABOUT AN hour's drive from Geneva lies a stretch of the Jura Mountains nicknamed Watch Valley. There, amid the lush slopes of the range, sit the ateliers of the world's finest timepiece makers—Patek Philippe, Rolex, and Breitling, among others. But what few travelers know is that these mountains are also the seat of the equally distinguished, but much less prominent, Swiss wine industry.

There are various reasons Swiss wine is so little known outside the country—for one, it costs more to farm on such craggy hillsides, which drives the prices higher than for similar French or Italian vintages. Mostly, though, it's the Swiss thirst for homegrown tipples that has kept Alpine wines out of American cellars: Last year, fewer than 600,000 gallons were exported, or just two percent of the country's annual output.

But given the quality, and appeal, of both the wines and the vineyards in the neighboring cantons of Vaud and Neuchâtel, it's only a matter of time before word gets out. Both areas are dotted with villages such as Auvignier and Mont-sur-Rolle, their ancient streets lined with gingerbread cottages. In Vaud, where 600 producers offer a variety of wines, the patchwork of microclimates is warmed by winds

from the Rhône Valley, while the vintages from Neuchâtel's 75 wineries are more consistent, with heavy limestone deposits in the soil adding a reliably crisp, mineral kick. Most visitors would recognize several of the grape varieties—pinot noir is popular here—but the local favorites, namely chasselas and gamaret, are hardly known, much less tasted, across the Swiss border.

The first, chasselas, is a white made from the namesake grape, a vigorous plant with juicy, voluptuous fruit. Elsewhere, it's snifflily dismissed as a table grape. In Switzerland, though, there is a centuries-long tradition of turning chasselas into a delicate, ethereal wine that pairs well with the fondue that's so popular in the area or with freshwater fish from nearby Lake Geneva. Low in alcohol and with a light natural carbonation, it's also considered the perfect aperitif, an Alpine answer to prosecco. **Domaine de la Maison Carrée**, run by Christine and Jean-Denis Perrochet, the sixth-generation winemaker in his family, makes a particularly impressive chasselas (lamaisoncarree.ch).

Then there's the gamaret, a rising star among reds. A cross between the gamay grape, a longtime Swiss staple, and Germany's little-known Reichensteiner, it was developed in the

The view of
Lake Neuchâtel
from the
Beau-Rivage
hotel.



1970s by a laboratory in Vaud and was intended to beef up the flavor profile of gamay or pinot noir in blends. Rarely cultivated outside Switzerland, this hardy grape also has ideal conditions in Vaud and Neuchâtel. At **Domaine Nicolas Ruedin**—which offers samples in its tasting room, dug into the limestone bedrock—winemaker Nicolas Ruedin notes that gamaret ages well, too, with a richness that he likens to a classic Bordeaux (ruedinvins.ch).

AS DELIGHTFUL and surprising as Swiss wines may be, vineyard-hopping through Vaud and Neuchâtel is a treat in its own right. There are no mass-market tasting rooms here. At the 25-acre **Chateau de Mont**, in Vaud, the tightly stepped vines surround a ramshackle centuries-old mansion, more hunting lodge than castle, its winding drive cobbled with well-worn stones. Visitors are guided to a clutch of old barrels that act as impromptu tables, where you can sample some of the vintages. This cozy cave is known in the local patois as a *car-notzet*, and it's typical in the old homes of the area. As much a social center as a tasting room, it's a place for friends and fondue (chateaudemont.ch).

Indeed, socializing is just as important as sipping here,

which makes the area a particularly nice place to linger for a night or two, especially if you book a room at the palatial nineteenth-century **Beau-Rivage** hotel, perched on the shore of Lake Neuchâtel (41-32-723-1515; beau-rivage-hotel.ch; doubles from \$375). And for a break from all the fondue, you might try the restaurant at another Neuchâtel hotel, **La Maison du Prussien**, which serves modern takes on lesser-known Swiss Alp specialties such as *papet vaudois* (saucisson atop a slow-cooked mash of leek and potato) and has an impressive selection of local wines (rue des Tunnels 11; 41-32-730-5454; prix fixes from \$108).

Given all the precision and the care that these winemakers take with their small-batch vintages, it seems appropriate that their most appreciative customers may be their neighbors, the finicky artisans of Watch Valley. Piaget also maintains workshops in the area, and CEO Philippe Léopold-Metzger, who is passionate about serving Swiss wine at every event he hosts, sees a parallel between the two local luxury industries: Both are all about time. “Drink a wine from 1982 and you’re going to remember what happened in that year,” he says. “A watch measures time, while the wine is a memory of time.” —**Mark Ellwood**