

LAVAUX & BEHOLD

*The mineral-rich wines of **Switzerland** are largely unknown elsewhere in the world. But the country's vineyard varietals, including Chasselas and other grapes of Lavaux, are far too interesting to ignore. To taste them, just follow our writer straight to the source.*

By Adam H. Graham Photography by Mirjam Bleeker

These pages:
Alpine light
enhances the
graceful geometry
of the vines.

“DAD, WHAT WAS LAST summer like?” “Son, you’re too young to remember.”

Switzerland has a reputation for lacking a sense of humour, but I find just the opposite sitting with Jacques Potterat, a 16th-generation winemaker whose humour is as stony and dry as the Chasselas white wine we’re sipping in the long-awaited sunshine. We’re perched on a picnic table in his outdoor tasting room in the 10th-century village of Cully on the scenic shores of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva). The glossy, rounded cobblestones under our feet were laid a millennium ago, and from my chair I spy the toothy pink and ivory French Alps cresting over a tangle of a wisteria in the Potterats’ backyard. Jacques snickers, refills my glass with a Courseboux 2012 Grand Cru from nearby Villette, and sounds another quip: “Dad, when did summer arrive last year?” “Son, I think it was a Wednesday afternoon.”

I laugh and take a sip. I know something is lost in the translation of these *bons mots*, but I get the gist. You constantly have to think in multiple languages when you live in Switzerland, as Jacques and I both do at opposite linguistic ends. And if forgiving language mistakes is the golden rule here, commiserating about the long winters must take the silver. Perhaps the combo of the two is how Switzerland’s humourless reputation started.

To be honest, Jacques and I talk very little about the wine, which is fine by me. I’ve been sipping and scrutinizing Swiss wines non-stop for a few days now and have run out of adjectives to describe the wide array of minerally flavours. Many oenophiles describe Swiss whites as having flinty characteristics, and even notes of gunpowder. The French call it *pierre à fusil*—sucking a pebble. If that sounds like a joke, it’s not. Axe blades made of flint were found in nearby Neolithic graves, and rubble containing charcoal (a gunpowder ingredient) is ubiquitous in local soil. And pebbles? Pebbles galore. So it’s no surprise the terroir features these qualities. In fact, stones are somewhat sacred here in the Swiss wine country of Lavaux, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Canton Vaud. Carved into a wide green and rocky ridge, it’s lined with stone walls, dotted with slate-roofed churches and overlooked by the granitic Alps.

Why should anyone care about the rocky world of Swiss wines? Quite simply, they’re about to have a moment. *Wine Advocate* reviewer David Schildknecht gave the Helvetic grapes a big boost by including four Swiss wines in his personal Best of 2012 collection, including two from estates in Canton Vaud:

Blaise Duboux in the charming village of Épesses, and Pierre-Luc Leyvraz in Chexbres, a village overlooking Lake Geneva. But for now, Swiss wines are still largely under the radar, as the country only exports 1 to 2 percent of its production. So the best place—in some cases, the *only* place—to taste them is at the source.

In AD 800, monks began planting grapevines here in Canton Vaud, and the walls they built still stand. The grapes themselves are incomparable—whites like Ermitage, Chasselas and Doral, rarely grown elsewhere, and ancient Lémanic reds like Plant Robert. It’s only a 2.5-hour train ride from my home in Zürich, but it couldn’t be more exotic to me. Like many of my fellow expats and native Swiss German friends in Zürich, I seldom cross the *röstigraben* (the invisible border that divides German and French speakers) into the Romandie (Switzerland’s French-speaking region). But when I mentioned I was going for wine, everyone instantly understood. “Bring some back” was a popular response.

However, you don’t need to love wine to enjoy Lavaux, which stretches for 30 kilometres (18 miles) from Montreux to Lausanne. True, it’s a wine lover’s storybook dream come true, but the strands of villages connected by train and trail are ideal for activities apart from wine tasting: scenic drives, walks, cycling

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EUROPE SWITZERLAND, LAVAUX WINE REGION
Many Lavaux wines are starting to gain fame throughout Switzerland, so the journey is worthwhile if you want to learn more about them. A train ride from Geneva to Lausanne takes just 30 minutes.

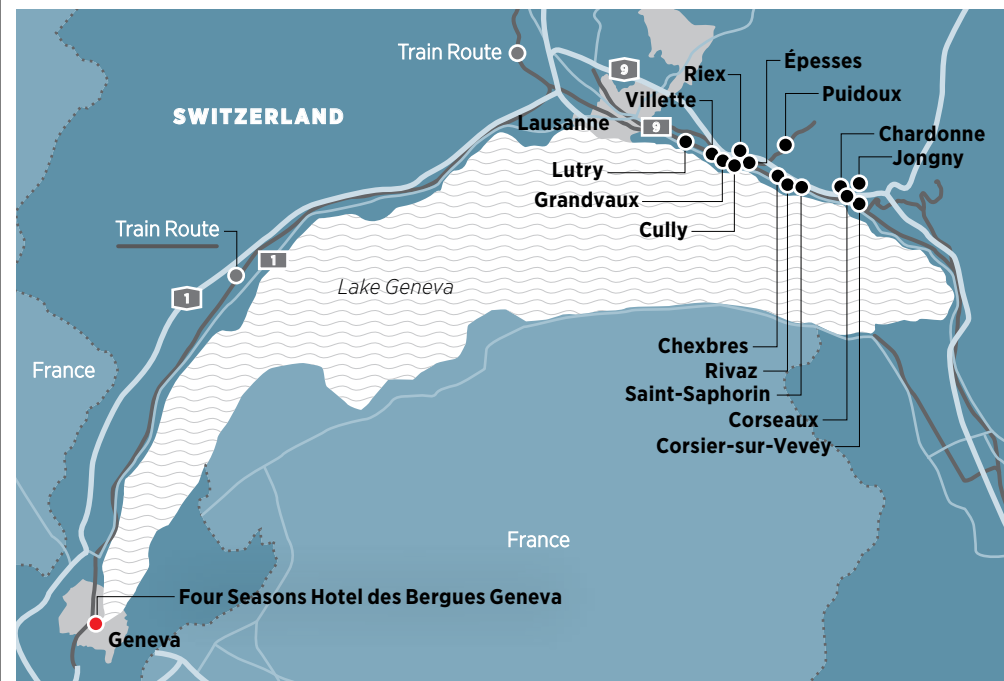
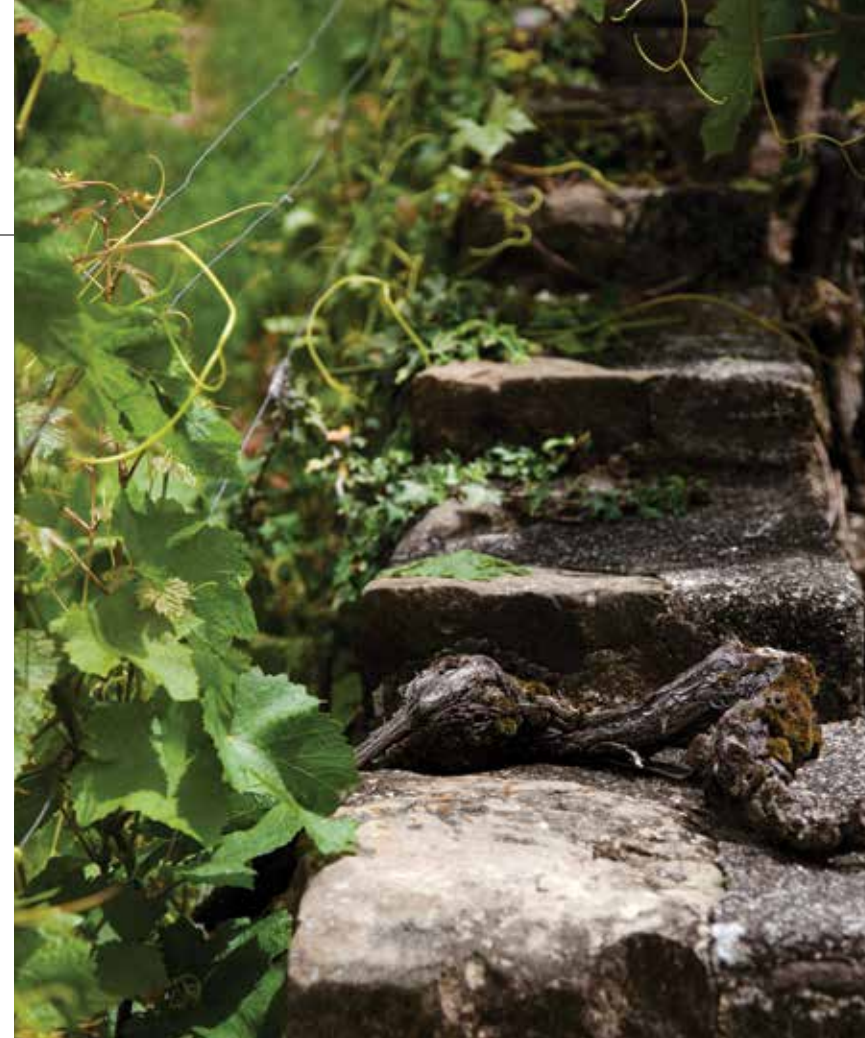


Illustration: Olia Hantschke

Right: (clockwise from top left) the stones the area is known for; Jacques Potterat; L'Auberge du Raisin; Pierre-Luc Leyvraz



and even ebiking, a popular new way to ascend some of the steeper hills. If you want to try it, ebikes are for hire at the SBB Train Station in Lausanne, just 30 minutes by train from Geneva. Keep in mind that the ebike is only battery-enhanced, so getting up any especially steep inclines will still require strenuous pedalling. The train stops at eight Lavaux villages: Lutry, Villette, Grandvaux, Cully, Épesses, Chexbres, Rivaz and Saint-Saphorin. You can take it *sans velo* or haul your bike on and off, as long as you don't mind the daily CHF18 bike fee in addition to your fare. There is also a scenic Train-des-Vignes that runs from Vevey to Puidoux.

If time allows, walking Lavaux is the best way to see its wine-village tableaux. The hills are criss-crossed with trails ideal for post-lunch or -dinner strolls. They're even more glorious in the morning when the pure Alpine light enhances the graceful geometry of the vines.

A good place to start a tour of Lavaux is the 11th-century town of Lutry, known for its 14th-century Rôdeurs Castle and not far from the archaeological site where those flint axe tips were discovered in stone Neolithic coffins. In the time of the Roman Empire, Romans built fortresses and aqueducts in Lutry. If that surprises you, keep in mind that the border to Italy (via the ancient Great Saint Bernard pass) is only 100 kilometres (62 miles) away, and its *passants célèbres* include Charlemagne, Napoleon, Alexandre Dumas and Saint Bernard himself, who in 1050 founded a hospice for travellers (still open to visitors today) at the junction of Switzerland, Italy and France. In other words, these roads are historically well-travelled. The 10th-century Temple de Lutry was a main stop on the road for pilgrims following the Saint James Way. Today the town's bustling Saturday market draws pilgrims of another sort, in search of soft gooey wheels of *tomme vaudoise* (a local cheese), cork-shaped and praline-filled confections called *bouchons vaudois*, and of course local wine. Should the medieval charm start to wear, duck into Le Bourg 7's plush micro-lounge, where Lutry's smart set sip local wines and munch on tapas.

Besides the wine, some of Switzerland's best food can be found in Lavaux, where Old World auberges beg for your indulgence. L'Auberge du Raisin in Cully is a favourite, not to mention the site of one of my top five meals in Switzerland. The dining room is accented by rough-hewn wainscoting, plaster walls festooned with vintage wine presses, and an impressive parquet ceiling marinated in

decades of fondue steam. Aged flanks of steak dripping with fat are charred fireside in the dining room as waiters whisk to and fro. The wines I had here were standouts: a Calamin Grand Cru from Louis Bovard and a Viticole de Lutry Chardonnay. The food was even more sublime—fresh morels and white asparagus tips frothing it up together in a rich cream sauce, and medallions of lake perch dressed in a buttery truffle sauce with a hot, crunchy heap of *pommes frites* to soak up any extra puddles. If you don't have at least one long, boozy meal like this, you haven't experienced the essence of Lavaux.

Just down the road is Vinorama, an excellent hybrid of wine museum and tasting room where visitors can sample and learn more about Lavaux wines. Pay it a visit even if a local advises against it: Many locals, even younger well-travelled types, find Vinorama unnecessary and scoff at its modern architecture and earnest education of visitors. Locals don't always understand or agree with the fetishization of wine. To them, grapes are just another regional crop.

The very best of Lavaux is found in hill-clinging hamlets like Chardonne, Grandvaux and Épesses, where the vineyards become vertical and ancient terrace walls snake onto the roads to become banks overflowing with nasturtiums and purple-flowered succulents that push through 1,200-year-old cracks. The cafés are sprinkled sparingly with tourists, and the local way of life is locked in time. Mysterious brigades of silver-haired winemakers dressed in tweed and berets gather in open courtyards to knock back a few unlabelled bottles and probably commiserate about the weather. By the grins on their faces, they're sharing lots of jokes, too.

Come here to end a day in Lavaux, as the surrounding Alps in both France and Switzerland are visible from several spots, and the glint of sun on the vines gives a reassuring feeling. Find a café with a good terrace, and settle in for an aperitif. I opted for an AOC Oeil de Perdrix de Villette at the Restaurant du Monde, behind Grandvaux's stone clock tower. In the back I found a particularly panoramic terrace, where I watched the pinkish *alpenglüh* sunset glow on the jagged Dents du Midi. If you time it right, as all Swiss naturally do, the pink in your glass and the pink in the sky will disappear simultaneously. ■

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“The landscape is as unusual as the wine, an earthy patchwork of vineyard terrace walls plunging down the mountain towards the sapphire lake.”

TRAINS, BIKES & WALKS

How to See Lavaux

There are dozens of charming Lavaux villages to visit; a few of my favourites are **Cully, Chardonne, Lutry, Grandvaux** and **Épesses**. Lavaux includes the appellations of Lutry, Villette, Épesses, Calamin grand cru, Dézaley grand cru (vignoble de la commune de Puidoux), Saint-Saphorin, Chardonne and Vevey-Montreux. Download the free Vins Vaudois app for information on local grapes, open wineries, festivals (of which there are many, especially during fall harvest season), restaurants and news, or visit www.lavaux.com for additional information.

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Walks through Lavaux are an oenophile's dream, and an ideal way to channel your inner *flâneur* and watch daily vineyard life unfold. There are several walking maps online, but meandering the corkscrew roads from village to village is just as much fun.

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If you get tired of walking, **hop aboard a train**; several villages are reachable by rail, including Lutry, Villette, Grandvaux, Cully, Épesses, Chexbres, Rivaz and Saint-Saphorin. There's also the Train-des-Vignes, a scenic wine train from Vevey to Puidoux (www.montreuxriviera.com), and a slightly more touristy wine trolley called the Lavaux Express (www.lavauxexpress.ch/fr).

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Cycling to Lavaux from Lausanne can take as little as 30 minutes, but a pass allowing bikes to be brought on the train to avoid steeper stretches is available. Lausanne's SBB Train Station offers an assortment of bike rentals, including comfort, country, mountain, ebikes and kids' bikes (www.sbb.ch).

