



Maps: Maggie Nelson; Photograph: swiss-image.ch/Christof Schuerpf



The *Decanter* travel guide to

Valais, Switzerland

FACT FILE

Planted area 4,976 hectares
Grape varieties Pinot Noir, Chasselas, Gamay, (Petite) Arvine, Cornalin, Humagne Rouge, Sylvaner, Syrah, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Merlot, Savagnin Blanc (aka Heida or Päien)
Production in 2012, 380,000 hectolitres
Main soil types limestone, granite, schist, loess

From impossibly picturesque and steep vineyards, the wines from this Alpine canton are booming in quality, discovers Sue Style. And are perfect to enjoy with raclette

THE VALAIS, SWITZERLAND'S southernmost, sunbaked, Alpine canton through which the fledgling Rhône flows, has always been a bit of a law unto itself. In Swiss terms it came late to the Confederation, joining only in 1815 (the core cantons got started in 1291). And although by now fairly firmly woven into the richly textured patchwork that is Switzerland today, it still manages to feel like another world.

Viticulture has deep roots down here. Wine is a way of life, and almost everyone owns and tends a parcel or two of vines. For many of them, known as

les vigneronns du samedi, grape-growing is just a Saturday hobby. But the past 20 years have seen huge changes, a consolidation of tiny, fragmented holdings and a steady ramping up of quality.

If your thrills in the region have been limited thus far to black runs down to Verbier or Zermatt, and the only Valaisan wine to have passed your lips is a jug of après-ski Fendant, get ready for a different kind of white-knuckle ride. Chandra Kurt, Zurich-based wine writer and Valais specialist, likens a wine trip here to a treasure hunt: everywhere you go you will unearth growers who are polishing up little-known gems like Petite Arvine, Cornalin, Humagne and Heida and/or giving new lustre to old-established varieties (Chasselas/Fendant is king here) or classic blends like Dôle, an often undistinguished Pinot Noir-Gamay blend.

At the lower end of the valley in Martigny, Gérald Besse (www.besse.ch) works 18ha of vines from 14 different grape varieties. A good approach is to park

Above: winemaking is a challenge in this Alpine region, where steep vineyards are buttressed by stone walls

Below: enjoy spectacular panoramic views up the valley from the vineyards at Cave la Romaine

in town and walk the vineyard trail designed by daughter (and winemaker) Sarah, which follows the Besse vineyards along steeply stacked terraces buttressed by an impressive array of dry stone walls. By the time you reach the cellar door, you'll have some idea of the particular challenges of winemaking around here and be ready to taste a lip-smacking Petite Arvine or a lively Gamay. ➤



My perfect day in the Valais

Morning

After breakfast at Castel de Daval*, schedule a visit to star producer Robert Taramarcas at Domaine des Muses. Afterwards, leave the car at Sierre station, hop on the train (a three-minute journey) to Salgesch and walk back to Sierre along the vineyard trail (about two hours), which finishes up at Oenothèque* (wine bar and shop) at Château de Villa where you can taste the best of the Valais.

Gourmand, the brasserie side of Didier de Courten's upmarket restaurant* (near the train station).

Afternoon

Take the road up towards Crans-Montana to Cave la Romaine, a new domaine with an impressive cellar, ambitious wines and superb tasting room with panoramic views to the upper valley.

Evening/overnight

From here it's about 25 minutes' drive to Savièse/Chandolin, a dramatically sited south-facing village with views of vineyards and snow-capped peaks high above Sion on the road up to the Col du Sanetsch. Settle down for dinner and overnight at La Grande Maison*, once the home of a local family, now converted into a simple but classy B&B.

For more details on places marked with an asterisk (*), turn to p107

Lunch

Either grab a bite at Oenothèque, or go for the famous raclette tasting menu at Château de Villa's cosy, wood-panelled restaurant next door*: the raclette meister juggles with five grills and five wheels of alp cheese, each from a different alp, sizzled in turn, scraped (*raclé*) onto a plate and served with potatoes, pickles and air-dried meats. Or for more creative/modern fare and a stunning wine list, try L'Atelier





Valais

WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX



Castel de Daval, Sierre

Delicious, turreted, red-shuttered B&B in the vineyards above Sierre owned by wine growers Monique and Bertrand Caloz-Evequoz. A glass of house wine is offered on arrival and you can taste the domaine's full range next door. www.collinededaval.ch

RESTAURANTS

Les Alpes, Orsières

The wow factor is guaranteed at this outstanding table close to Verbier. Good-looking, big-flavoured food from chef Samuel Destaing, with spotlight on a different Valais producer every month, whose wines are offered by the glass. <http://lesalpes.jimdo.com>

Château de Villa, Sierre

Cosy, wood-paneled restaurant inside the 16th-century château serving typical Valaisan specialities (terrific raclette tasting menu and fondue) and a good range of local wines. www.chateauvilla.ch

SHOPPING

Oenothèque, Sierre

Some 600 wines from 102 different local domaines are offered for sampling and purchase, with wines from four producers showcased each week and available by the glass – a crash course in the Valais' finest. www.chateauvilla.ch



Salon Vinea, Sierre

Every year in early September, Vinea, a Swiss-wide association that stages wine competitions and publishes an annual guide, hosts the Salon des Vins Suisses. This wine fair offers a great opportunity to wander the streets of the old town browsing the full range of Swiss wines. www.vinea.ch

Marché de la Vieille Ville, Sion

Locavore heaven at Sion's farmers' market every Friday morning in the old town, come rain or come shine: vegetables, fruit, raclette and alp cheeses, air-dried meats, sausages, bread baked in portable wood-fired ovens, picnic provisions and take-home treats.

How to get there ✈

During winter, the Eurostar from London links up with the TGV via Lille to serve main stations in the Valais like Martigny, Visp and Brig. Or you can fly to Geneva then go by car or train along Lake Geneva to the Valais.



Photographs: Valais Promotion - Denis Emery photo-genic.ch; Denis Emery - photo-genic.ch; archives VINEA, www.photogenic.ch; Dr José Vouillamoz; André Jenny/Alamy.

Vertiginous vineyards

If you thought the Besse vineyards were steep, then step across to Fully, raise your eyes to the mountain that rears up behind Marie-Thérèse Chappaz's property (www.chappaz.ch) and marvel that anyone could ever consider planting and working vines here. The domaine is biodynamic, yields are restricted both by geography and by choice, and the wines – which are measured out by the drop to faithful followers – sell out at a dismaying pace. To be sure of an allocation, try and attend one of the tastings scheduled throughout April and May, informal gatherings around wildflower-decked trestle tables, where Chappaz describes in lyrical language her range of whites and reds, both single varietals and blends.

Heading east up the valley, the cantonal road runs parallel with both the motorway and the silver-greenish-grey ribbon of the Rhône. The show-stopping scenery – dramatic mountain peaks to right and left, many of them topping the 4,000m mark, and wave upon wave of vineyards surfing steeply at their feet – is the same, but the non-motorway option is more leisurely and leads you through some of the Valais' most celebrated vineyard villages.

Schedule a stop in St-Pierre-de-Clages, where Simon Maye & Fils (www.simonmaye.ch) have quietly established themselves over decades as one of the region's premier growers. Always ahead of the curve, they started bottling all their own wine back in the mid-1970s, a rarity in the Valais at the time.

Today they make around 20 different wines, ranging from terroir-driven Chasselas to an outstanding, highly prized Syrah Vieilles Vignes.

Almost next door in Chamossion is Didier Joris (www.didierjoris.ch) and visits to his tiny domaine are by appointment only. This uniquely Valaisan wine personality is a flying winemaker and as likely to be dispensing wine wisdom in Spain as tending his own 3ha of vines here in Switzerland. Regard any visit as a fabulously enriching tasting exercise – with trenchantly expressed views on the world of wine thrown in. Revel in Joris' remarkable Syrahs and swallow your disappointment if others (notably the country's top restaurateurs) have beaten you to the draw.

Dramatic views – and wines

In Flanthey, on the way up to Crans-Montana, Cave La Romaine (www.cavelaromaine.ch) has just opened a spectacular wine cellar for visitors, a cross between a church, an amphitheatre, a terraced vineyard (the barriques are arranged on various levels) and a grand stage. Upstairs in the state-of-the-art tasting room, you'll have your work cut out to give proper attention to the wines (the Cornalin and Humagne Rouge grapes are the stars here) on account of the spectacularly distracting views up the valley.

Sierre, at the heart of the Valais, is home to Robert Taramaraz, one of the new generation of young winemakers who has recently returned to the family fold at Domaine des Muses

Clockwise from top left: the Maya Guesthouse ecohotel; delicious alp cheeses are everywhere; the farmers' market in Sion's old town; enjoy wines made from Gwass grapes, among others, at the Vinea wine fair; raclette – a Valais specialty; dining at La Grande Maison

HOTELS

Maya Guesthouse, Nax

Unique, warmly welcoming, eight-bedroom ecohotel on a sunny plateau above Sion, built from straw bales, wood, glass and stone. Dine seated on chairs from recycled wine barrel staves at the huge communal oak refectory table, as the sun sinks behind the Alps across the valley.

www.maya-guesthouse.ch

La Grande Maison, Savièse/Chandolin

Imposing sunflower-yellow village house built in 1812, and transformed five years ago into a stylish, quirky B&B. Mediterranean-French-Swiss food is served in the atmospheric barrel-vaulted dining room in winter, and on the terrace(s) in summer.

www.lagrandemaison.ch

LeCrans Hotel & Spa, Plans Mayens/Crans-Montana

Understated luxury at this 14-room, chalet-style hotel. Restaurant with stellar wine list, wine bar and a table d'hôte in the kitchen where you can dine while watching chef Pierre Crepau and his brigade in action. www.lecrans.com

(www.domainedesmuses.ch) after spells in Burgundy and New Zealand. His range of thrillingly original wines (whites from the north-facing left bank of the Rhône for maximum freshness, reds from the right bank for maximum ripeness) are prized alike by Swiss wine cognoscenti and by global wine critics.

By the time you reach Visp in the upper reaches of the valley, it's easy to see why an 1876 British traveller described the region as 'fearsomely wild'. Here Chanton Weine (www.chanton.ch) practises extreme wine growing at its most challenging best.



Restaurant Didier de Courten, Sierre

Star chef Didier de Courten combines a gourmet restaurant, the Atelier Gourmand brasserie and L'Ampelos wine bar under one roof at the Hotel Terminus, close to the station. Classy food at every level and excellent wine selection, big on the Valais. www.hotel-terminus.ch

The reputation of this 8ha family winery rests on its tireless championing of rarities like Gwass – described by Dr José Vouillamoz, joint author of the award-winning reference work *Wine Grapes*, as the 'Casanova of the vine world', since, with the help of Pinot (and other varieties), it has spawned almost all the worthwhile wine grapes extant today – as well as the exotically named Lafnetscha, Himbertscha and Rèze. Take a parting sip of its Heida, a prized golden drop grown 800m up on the vertiginous slopes of Visperterminen. **D**

Sue Style is a wine, food and travel writer. Her most recent book is Cheese: Slices of Swiss Culture (Bergli Books, 2011)