

## **Savoie: The Wines and Foods of the French Alps**

**By Wink Lorch**

*Wink Lorch is the author of Jura Wine, winner of the André Simon Food & Drink Book Awards Best Drinks Book 2014. Her second book will focus on the wines of the French Alps.*

The imagination runs riot and words lapse into metaphor when thinking about wine and food from Alpine regions, and those from Savoie in the French Alps are no exception. Pristine snow-capped mountains, crystal clear mountain lakes and rivers, and lush meadows of wild flowers give rise to images of delicate fresh and floral wines, tender trout and creamy-rich cheeses. These images hold more than a grain of truth, but the region offers much more than the mountain metaphor implies.

Historically the Savoie Alps, especially around Mont Blanc, have been a crossroads, where people from different origins have settled and political borders have shifted regularly. Savoie only became annexed by France in 1860. Before this date the Duchy of Savoie (or Savoy, in English) had been much larger, incorporating parts of today's northwest Italy (mostly Aosta, Turin and Piedmont) and at one point even Sardinia.

The harshness of the climate meant that most of the region's inhabitants were extremely poor until the tourist industry, in particular the ski industry, brought massive economic advantages. If you find yourself wondering about the ugly pylons and ski lifts blotting the landscape in summer, consider that without them you would not have today's wonderful variety and ever-increasing quality of both wines and gastronomy here – simply put, the local products would not have survived.

### **A New Dynamism in Savoie wines**

Today Savoie wines are easing into a third great era. Their history is as ancient as any in France appearing in the writings of Pliny and Columella; later, as elsewhere, vineyards were widely established by the Church. In this first era, up until 1860 when Savoie became annexed to France, the wines were simple, local tipples whose virtues were rarely extolled by those pioneering Alpine tourists, taking the cure in the sulphurous waters of Aix-les-Bains or resting after scaling the peaks.

Savoie boasted 20,000 hectares of scattered vineyards in those days, planted up to 1,000m altitude. The Savoie annexation to France coincided with the arrival of the railway bringing cheap wines from the South of France. This coupled with the deadly phylloxera, devastated the industry, and its decline continued as did the population, with many farmers moving to the cities to find work.

The second great era began after the Second World War when the ski industry took off. The vineyards had never disappeared completely, but they had been massively reduced. With a potential growth in demand for their local wines, winegrowers revitalized their production and achieved the Vin de Savoie appellation contrôlée (AOC) designation in 1973. The region gained a reputation as a supplier of light whites and reds to quench the thirst of skiers in winter and hikers in summer. One problem was that despite the AOC, quality remained varied as sales were easy. By the latter part of the 1980s there were just a handful of good producers doing something extra special, making Savoie wines that could be termed fine with the ability to age – these modern pioneers included Michel Grisard and Louis Magnin (for Mondeuse) , Noël Dupasquier (Marestel Roussette de Savoie) and Michel Quenard (Chignin Bergeron).

In the past decade the third era has evolved. New and second or third generation vigneron are pushing the boundaries way beyond 'skiing wines' employing better vineyard management (often organic) and thoughtful cellar techniques. Attention has turned to rare, almost extinct grape varieties and steep, previously abandoned vineyards have been revived, such as that at Cevins, managed by Domaines des Ardoisières. Today, altitudes are much lower than before, rarely above 600 meters, but some vineyards are impressively steep.

Traditionally, Savoie wines have been sold almost exclusively locally, but the top producers have attracted a growing interest in Paris and abroad (5% is exported). The region's increasing wealth has encouraged high-level gastronomy, with several top-rated restaurants in and around Annecy, the Lac de Bourget and in the famous mountain resorts of Chamonix and the Tarentaise. The chefs have encouraged the top winemakers as well as the best producers of local cheeses and other regional specialities.

### **Vineyards, wine flavours and food**

Today, Savoie's 2,000 hectares of vineyards are scattered in disparate valleys south of Geneva towards Grenoble and along the Isère valley. The largest concentration lies near Chambéry and in the Combe de Savoie, between Albertville and Montmélian, east of Chambéry.

The region has a treasure-trove of grape varieties, partly due to a legacy of important vine nurseries established after phylloxera. The Centre d'Ampélographie Alpine Pierre Galet, founded in 2007, aims to discover, identify and preserve some of the rarest varieties. Recently the red Persan and the white Verdesse and Malvoisie (Red Veltliner) have been revived, joining the other main indigenous varieties (*see box below*). While Gamay, Pinot Noir, and to a lesser extent Chardonnay still grow, the indigenous grapes have more to offer an increasingly homogenized world.

Nearly 70 percent of Savoie's plantings are white. Jacquère is the most widely planted and the key grape for the Aymes and Apremont crus. These are the largest among the 20 crus appended to the Savoie appellation and located at the foot of the distinctively-shaped Mont Granier at the northern end of the Chartreuse mountain range. A terrible landslide back in 1248 knocked the top off this mountain, burying villages below, but creating an ideal soil for vine-growing, a mix of limestone and rock debris. Jacquère whites are the archetypical Savoie wine - light in alcohol (11-11.5%) with a delicate floral aroma and a fresh, apple or citrus fruit character, perfect as an aperitif with a nibble of the local mountain charcuterie. Along with whites from the Chasselas grape, grown on the south-side of Lac Léman not far from Thonon and Evian, they are also the ideal choice with the quintessential cooked cheese dishes like Fondue Savoyard, Raclette or Tartiflette (made with Reblochon).

The more surprising, fuller dry whites are from either Roussanne or the rare Altesse variety. The Rhône Valley's Roussanne is named Bergeron here, and grown in the pretty village of Chignin, known for its several ruined towers scattered through the vineyards, from where there is a spectacular view across the valley to Mont Granier. Chignin Bergeron is a golden colour with honeyed aromas and a taste full of ripe fruit and lightly nutty flavours; it can match quite rich dishes, even foie gras.

The Altesse variety is unique to Savoie and its wines are labelled with the Roussette de Savoie appellation. It does particularly well near the village of Jongieux on the slope of Marestel. Its steep

vineyard slopes are away from the big Alpine mountains, above the river Rhône which flows south from Lac Léman towards Lyon. The river moderates the climate, allowing high ripeness levels.

Altesse white wines have characteristic Alpine freshness and a minerality along with delicious yellow fruit character that makes them a great match with the tasty Alpine lake fish such as perch fillets (*filets de perche*), Alpine char (*omble chevalier*) and the unusual *féra* (named *laveret* when from Lac du Bourget). The best examples of Altesse age really well.

Savoie is considered one of France's finest cow cheese producing regions with Beaufort, Abondance, Tomme de Savoie and Reblochon among the best known. Increasingly goat's and sheep's cheeses are made too, and all partner well with the white wines, as well as with the lighter reds from Gamay and Pinot Noir.

Beaufort is the most noble of the cheeses, a gruyère style, the most prized is Beaufort d'été – from the summer milkings. If you travel in summer then try to find one at least 24 months old. The mature cheeses are also tasty with Savoie's signature red grape, the rustic Mondeuse. A distant relative of Syrah, it has a similar deep red colour, with aromas of violets and red fruits, but with a much more rustic and earthy character. Mondeuse performs particularly well around the village of Arbin in the Combe de Savoie.

Mondeuse also gives wines of relatively low alcohol, but it packs a punch with its firm structure and is definitely a food wine. It works brilliantly with Savoie pork sausages (named *diots*) accompanied by the local polenta, mixed with Beaufort cheese. Polenta was originally considered a Savoyard dish, from maize grown in the valleys near Turin, once Savoie's capital city. Game and big rustic pork stews are also lovely matches with Mondeuse.

Whereas, in simple mountain restaurants Alpine food can seem rustic and heavy, designed for eating after a long day working in the fields, the top modern chefs use local ingredients creatively to make lighter dishes, more appropriate for today's gourmet. And the times seem just right today to discover the generally lighter-styled Savoie wines, with their elegant structure and delicate flavours.

## **SAVOIE WINE APPELLATIONS AND GRAPE VARIETIES [BOX]**

**Savoie** or **Vin de Savoie**, sometimes followed by the name of a cru including:

**For white:** Apremont, Abymes, Chignin, Cruet, Jongieux, Chautagne (Jacquère grape); Chignin Bergeron (Roussanne grape); Ripaille, Crépy, Marignan, Marin (Chasselas grape); Ayze (Gringet grape and also sparkling)

**For red:** Chautagne (Gamay grape); Arbin, St-Jean-de-la-Porte, Chignin (Mondeuse grape)

Other grapes used include Malvoisie (Veltliner Rouge or sometimes Pinot Gris), Mondeuse Blanche and Chardonnay for whites; Pinot Noir and Persan for reds.

**Roussette de Savoie**, sometimes followed by the name of a 'cru':

Marestel, Frangy, Monterminod and Monthoux

White wines from the Altesse grape variety

**Seysse:** white or sparkling, from the Altesse and Molette varieties