



# sommelier

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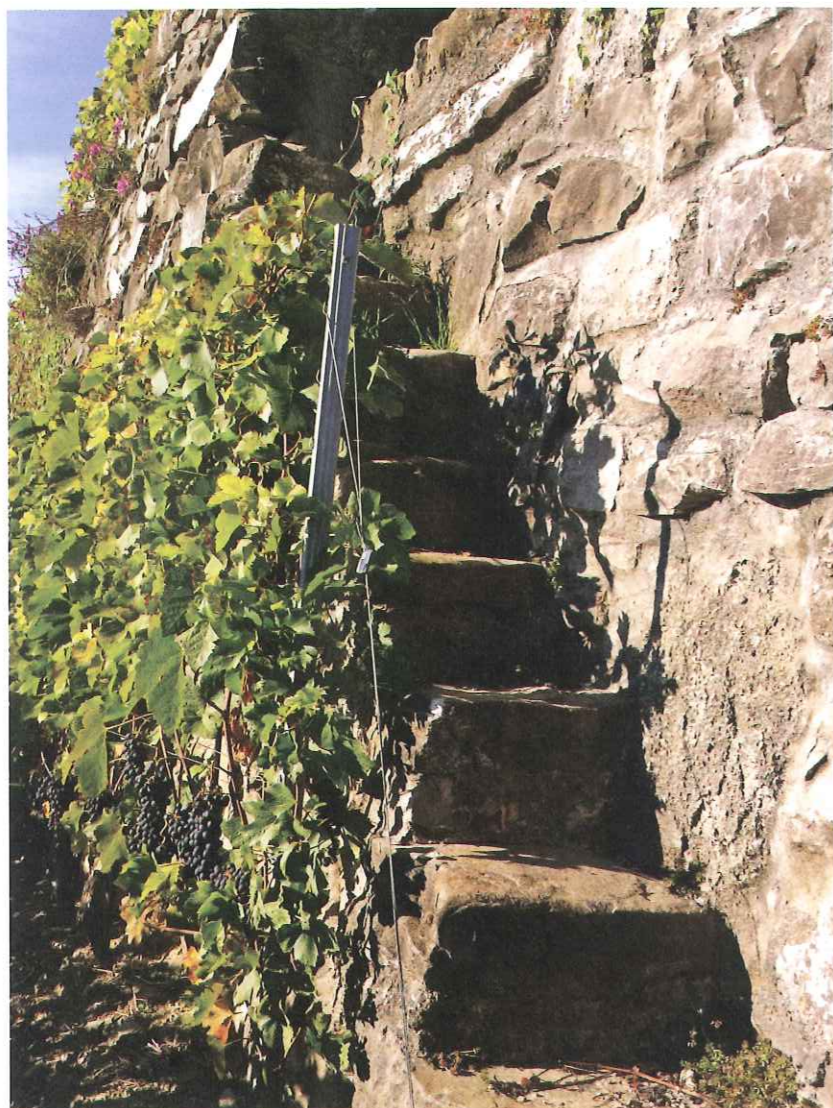
Vino-Tech

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# Blaise Duboux

## Épesses, Switzerland



**IT'S AN UPHILL BATTLE TO MAKE WORLD-CLASS CHASSELAS IN LAVAUX.**

But few consumers outside Switzerland have heard anything about this pocket of the Vaud canton, and even fewer have tasted its wines. Export figures are below 1%, with only an occasional case landing on American shores. "The feeling here has always been, 'We make the wine, we drink it, we sell it locally. So what's the problem?'" says Blaise Duboux, a grape grower and winemaker in Épesses.

To many of those who travel here and encounter the wines, the problem is Chasselas—a white variety planted throughout Switzerland that accounts for more than 70% of Lavaux's production. Genetically nonaromatic, Chasselas gives off no primary odors when vinified. Not surprisingly, the resulting wine often tastes flat or uninteresting, especially when insecticides in the vineyard or commercial yeasts in the winery remove the personality of the soil in the name

of enological sanitation. "We're Swiss, so we always want the purest this and the cleanest that," Duboux says. "But in this case, we need to be a little bit less Swiss. I'm not out to change nature. I'm out to learn from it."

On the surface, Duboux is an unlikely revolutionary. Now 45, he represents the 17th generation of a family that has been making wine in the same place since the Middle Ages. Only 2% of the 3,200-case production of Domaine Blaise Duboux leaves Switzerland, and most of that barely crosses the border into France. His small winery looks very much like all the others nestled in these almost preternaturally immaculate dollhouse towns outside Lausanne. But Duboux is one of perhaps a dozen producers in the region who understand that today's competition for their Chasselas isn't just their neighbors' wines, but those from the wider world. "Tell me one grand cru from anywhere in the world that

isn't imported into Switzerland, and I will buy you a case of it," he offers.

If Duboux is to continue the family wine business into an 18th generation, he believes he'll need to find broader markets and create a more intriguing product for his existing customers. Either way, that means making better Chasselas. "For us, Chasselas is more than a custom, more than a habit," he says. "It's part of our society, part of our history, and that means more here than maybe some other places. Growing the grape isn't easy. You have to dig deep to find the terroir, and most people don't bother. But if you do it right, I believe the wine is worth the trouble."

Almost every substantive conversation in Switzerland involves some kind of history lesson. Of course, a long and well-chronicled past helps make Swiss villages resonant, Swiss banks reliable, and the Swiss response to most

## WINERY SPOTLIGHT



Blaise Duboux (left); Lavaux hillside vineyard (far left); view of Lake Geneva and the French Alps (above).

The wine and spirits editor of *Travel + Leisure* magazine, Bruce Schoenfeld is a former contributing editor of *Wine Spectator* who has also written for *Gourmet*, *GQ*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and many other publications. He has received two Emmy Awards for television writing, and his most recent book, *The Match: Althea Gibson & Angela Buxton*, was published by HarperCollins/Amistad. He lives in Colorado.

### BRUCE SCHOENFELD

By any measure, this is wine country. The terraced slopes that rise precipitously from the north shore of Switzerland's Lake Geneva are blanketed with vines. Grapes have been growing on them since the 12th century, planted—as in Burgundy—by the Cistercian monks. Eight communes of the Lavaux region have been delineated as appellations, with two designated as grands crus. Grape clusters adorn the street signs. Local restaurants celebrate a "vigneron of the month." A wine-education and tasting center called Vinorama has opened recently.

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Vineyards on the coast of Lake Geneva.

situations thoughtful and measured. But it can also be stultifying. Those who would change the world, or their corner of it, must contend with centuries of precedent.

Standing on a narrow road that threads between two terraced vineyards, looking out over the blue of Lake Geneva and the French Alps beyond, Duboux explains local viticulture by invoking the Romans, who planted on the shores of the lake, but not its slopes. Then come the Cistercians, the bishop of Lausanne, and the Bernaise. It takes Duboux half an hour and two more stops of the car to get to 2007. In that year, the vineyards of Lavaux were designated a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site because of this long viticultural legacy—and because of hillside vineyards so steep that a funicular has been carved into the stony soil to transport equipment during harvest. Duboux sings me a line from a traditional song of Lavaux: “The vintner goes up to the sky.”

Into such terroir comes Chasselas, which can be an almost perfect transmitter of the flavors inherent in the soil. “It’s a totally neutral grape, so it responds to whatever you do to it,” says Jerome Ake, a sommelier at the Michelin-starred Auberge de l’Onde in Saint-Saphorin, whose carefully constructed list is studded with Burgundies, Bordeaux, and other great wines of the world. “You could say it symbolizes Swiss neutrality.”

So why do nearly all the region’s producers overwhelm their subtle geographic differences

## OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

<b>Épesses</b>	2009	\$14
A broader, less focused wine than the Saint-Saphorin or Villette, with a softer mouthfeel and some Riesling notes. Very drinkable. 420 cases made.		
<b>Saint-Saphorin Es Plantaz</b>	2008	\$14
A crystalline single-vineyard cuvée; there’s nothing soft about it. Good with whitefish. 350 cases made.		
<b>Villette Les Murets</b>	2008	\$13
Sharp and tangy, with jangly acidity and limestone on the finish. 800 cases made.		
<b>Calamin Grand Cru Cuvée Vincent</b>	2008	\$17
Great purity and length, showing limestone and slate like a Chablis, but with none of the roundness. Even better with food. 300 cases made.		
<b>Calamin Grand Cru Cuvée Vincent</b>	2009	\$17
An intellectual wine, all mineral, with just a hint of lemon; jagged, flinty, and unyielding in the mouth. Needs food, but what could match it? 320 cases made.		
<b>Dézaley Grand Cru Corniche</b>	2009	\$19
More fruit than the rest of the appellations combined: strong melon and peach flavors and an ample mouthfeel. A complete wine. 420 cases made.		
<b>Dézaley Grand Cru Haut de Pierre</b>	2009	\$26
Complex and mineral, this single-vineyard bottling becomes more approachable with time in the glass. It could certainly use a year in the cellar. 290 cases made.		
<b>Épesses Plant Robez</b>	2008	\$25
A remarkable red wine. Crisp and refreshing, with more minerality than fruit, it lies somewhere near the intersection of Gamay, Pinot Noir, and Nebbiolo. 280 cases made.		

Prices are current estimated retail.

with chemicals in the vineyard or with residual sugar or extensive new oak in the winery? If the grape itself doesn’t really taste like anything, site specificity is all you have. “Chasselas depends on how you work,” says Cyril Severin of Domaine du Daley, a winery that dates back to 1392 and is the oldest registered company of any kind in Switzerland. “Most of the producers blend the grapes from one soil and another, they have residual sugar, they age in new oak, and the result is mostly undrinkable. Blaise and a few others are making authentic wines in a biologic way, respecting nature. That’s the only way to make Chasselas great.”

Duboux doesn’t spray pesticides; he allows weeds and other crops to grow between the rows and plots his vineyard cycles by the tides and phases of the moon, in biodynamic fashion. In the winery, he uses natural yeasts, minimal sulfites, and no chemical sanitation products.

The resulting wines are funkier than some of the squeaky-clean examples on display at Vinorama, but full of personality. Each is markedly different from the next: the Saint-Saphorin is flinty, crystalline; the grand cru Calamin austere, metallic; the grand cru Dézaley richer, with a faint note of white melon, but still sharper and stonier than any Chablis.

The attraction of these bottlings is almost entirely intellectual, but with time and consideration, they come to be curiously compelling, direct, and pure—somehow more serious than most wines. When Duboux pours me a glass of Chardonnay after I’ve spent an hour with his Chasselas, it tastes as overpoweringly fruity and unexciting as apple juice.

Duboux would love to get his Chasselas out into the world, both to promote his winery and to refashion the image of the variety. But to make wines the way he does, the yields have to be woefully low. Vineyard land in the area is scarce and expensive, and Duboux refuses to blend grapes from various sites. So he makes 3,800 bottles of this, 5,000 bottles of that—almost nothing—and he puts off finding an American importer for another year. He simply doesn’t have the wine.

With all that, Chasselas isn’t even the quirkiest, most fascinating story to emerge from the Lavaux. At some point over the last millennium, a mutation of Gamay resulted in a new and different red variety called Plant Robert (plahn ro-BAIR), or sometimes Plant Robez or Plant Robaz. Its fortunes have waxed and waned—mostly waned—over the generations. Today, the total area under vine in the entire world is 12 acres, the size of a good county fairgrounds. Only 14 producers bottle it, all in Lavaux; total production is about 14,000 bottles. In cooperation with several colleagues, Duboux has worked to isolate the variants of the grape that show the most complexity and structure in the bottle and has experimented with various winemaking techniques and types of barrels.

I’m not alone in believing that his Plant Robez is even better than his Chasselas. The nose shows redcurrant and cherry, with a bit of rhubarb. It tastes like Beaujolais with muscle, or perhaps Pinot Noir blended with Sangiovese, but far crisper. “Some that Blaise and a few others are making can be really, really interesting,” says Severin. “Elegant—that little cherry taste, maybe even some strawberry, and quite a lot of different aromas in the wine.”

## WINERY SPOTLIGHT



Terraced Lavaux vineyards.

Duboux’s group has a logo and a pamphlet and a set of principles, but precious few bottles to sell. They have tried to find ways to grow more Plant Robert, perhaps even by replacing some of the Chasselas that grows on the stoniest of the area’s soils, but such an abrupt shift in emphasis is not the way things are done in Switzerland. Chasselas has been the defining grape of the region for 900 years. What would make today’s viticulturists think they’re smarter than all those ancestors?

For now, Duboux makes about 280 cases of Plant Robez, and he sells it all between Lausanne and Geneva. In my cellar, I have a single bottle that he gave me. I keep it in the special-occasion corner, with a Vega Sicilia and some Penfolds Granges and Haut-Brions. It isn’t as exalted as those wines, to be sure, but it would be far more difficult to replace. ♡