



Savoie



PETER DRY

Vineyards of the World

SAVOIE is that corner of France, tucked up under Lake Geneva, where France meets Switzerland and Italy. In many respects the culture of Savoie is an amalgam of those countries. At one time Savoie and much of northern Italy was part of the same kingdom. In fact, Savoie did not become part of France until 1860. This may be one reason why the main grape varieties grown here are not found elsewhere in France. Savoie—or Savoy as it is known in the English speaking world—is an alpine region where the freshness of the mountain air is matched by crispness of the local wines. Tourists are mainly attracted to the region by the many ski slopes. For example, Albertville—location of the 1992 Winter Olympics—is just up the Isère Valley from Chambéry.

The scenery is spectacular and relatively unspoilt by industrial development. As a consequence of the mountainous terrain, there are limited areas of land suitable for vineyards, which are widely dispersed on the flattest and most sheltered sites. The main land-use is dairy farming which goes some way towards explaining the local preoccupation with cheese-based cuisine. The fondue is definitely alive and well here.

The total vineyard area is relatively small and spans two départements: Savoie and Haut-Savoie. Vineyards stretch from east of Geneva (Switzerland) in the north to just south of Chambéry, a distance of 115 km. Production is mainly white wine as Vin de Savoie, which can be produced from several varieties, and will typically be dominated by Chasselas if from the north, or Jacquère if from the south. Vin de Savoie is said to be produced from around 1,700 ha. Crépy, Seyssel and Roussette de Savoie have their own appellations—the first two are specific geographical locations whereas the latter refers to a specific variety Roussette (syn. Altesse) and may be produced from anywhere within the Vin de Savoie zone. The largest area of vineyards lies to the south of Chambéry—the capital of Savoie before it became part of France—on the south-facing, lower slopes of Mt Granier (1,933 m). Here are the crus of Abymes, Apremont, Arbin, Chignin, Cruet and Montmélian.

The climate is characterised by cool summers and very cold winters. The annual precipitation at Chambéry (230 m above sea level) is 1,220 mm, much of this falling as snow. Choice of site is critical here, not only for avoidance of frost but also to ensure adequate ripening. The presence of lakes has a moderating effect on climate in parts of the region. For example, Pinot Noir and Gamay may ripen well when grown near to Lake Bourget, the largest lake in France. The vineyard soils are mostly based on lime-rich glacial material.

While Jacquère is the main variety of the region, the best wines come from Roussette—the superiority of this variety is recognised in the nomenclature of the appellation. For



example, if Roussette de Savoie is also followed by the name of commune in which it is grown, the wine will have been made from 100% Roussette—if not, it may comprise up to 50% Chardonnay. Roussette is said to be almost identical to the Furmint of Hungary—the main variety of the famous Tokaj wines of that country. It has low yield and ripens relatively late with good tolerance of bunch rot. The wines are crisp, very perfumed and age well. There is also a very small amount of Roussanne (known locally as Bergeron). For red wines, the main varieties—typically used for varietal wines—are Mondeuse, Pinot Noir and Gamay. Mondeuse is the most important but it will only ripen successfully on the warmest sites, for example, the south-facing slopes of Chignin and Arbin. Mondeuse is known as Refosco in California but it does not appear to be identical to the variety of the same name from north east Italy¹. It has good yield, better than average tolerance of fungal diseases and rain damage at harvest, and ripens late. Wines can have good colour and tannin when yield is sufficiently controlled to permit optimal ripening.

The vineyards on the gentle-to-steep, south-facing slopes

near the village of Chignin (see photographs) are typical of southern Savoie. The newer plantings have row \times vine spacing of 1.3 m \times 0.7 m and 1.1 m \times 0.9 m. The trellis is a VSP with fruiting wire at 50 cm, single fixed foliage wires at 85 cm and 115 cm, and a pair of moveable foliage wires at 100 cm. Pruning is to one, 8-node cane plus one, 2-node spur per vine. Shoot number is reduced to 8 per vine in late spring, and yield is further controlled by bunch thinning. Older plantings have 2.7 m \times 1.1 m spacing, with slightly higher VSP trellis (e.g. fruiting wire at 80 cm) and two canes per vine. Harvest is normally in late September/early October, but in the hot season of 2003 it was three weeks earlier than normal. Mechanical harvesting is used on the flatter sites. Maximum permitted yield for Vin de Savoie is approximately 9 t/ha.

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¹ Kerridge, G. and Antcliff, A. (1999) Winegrape Varieties. CSIRO.

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