



Swiss wine country excursions

Rolling over the hills of five cantons and overlooking three lakes, the *Trois Lacs* wine area of Switzerland includes 1,000 hectares of vineyards. Though small, this winemaking wonderland stretching through Cantons Neuchâtel, Jura, Bern, Fribourg and Vaud is certainly beautiful.

By Gail Mangold-Vine | The *Trois Lacs* or Three Lakes is the smallest of Switzerland's six wine-producing regions, spanning from the Lac de Neuchâtel (Neuenburgersee) to the west, the Lac de Biemme (Bielersee) to the northeast, and the Lac de Morat (Murtensee) to the southeast. Yet, since most of the vineyards

are located on these lakes' western flanks, the bulk of this wine region lies within a 25-kilometre radius of Neuchâtel City.

Switzerland's largest wine-growing cantons, in order of size, are Valais, Vaud, Geneva and Ticino. They account for about 11,500 of the country's 15,000 hectares of vineyards.

The fifth largest region is the group of ten German-speaking winemaking cantons, including Graubünden, which have such small wine-growing areas that they are grouped together as one region. However, at around 2,600 hectares, it is still nearly three times the size of the *Trois Lacs*.



Tasting a Chasselas wine

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Château Boudry, site of Neuchâtel's wine museum

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The Abbey at Bevaix

When to go

Whether you opt for a day trip, weekend jaunt or longer holiday, the area's road, boat and rail network is excellent, and information in English is readily available.

Spring and summer, when the weather is typically good, and wines from the previous year are just coming onto the market, are obvious times to plan a trip to this region straddling the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland.

But in early autumn there's a good chance for an Indian summer; the grapes are ripening to picking point, and the vineyard is buzzing as everyone gears up for harvest. For winery hoppers that may mean less individual attention from vintners, but compensation comes in the form of harvest festivals (a few are listed at the end of this article), where wide selections of local wines can be tasted.

Heading out

For the wine tourist the main attraction is discovering new information, whether it is unusual grape varieties or different winemaking methods – but more on that later.

Aside from over 100 wineries in the area – usually open on Friday evenings, Saturday mornings and by appointment – *caveaux* or cellars are good bets for wine tastings. They are open for a few hours each week and provide selections of local wines for both tasting and buying.

Also, be on the lookout for events at other times of the year, such as the launches of new wines that can start as early as January. Other ideas include visiting a wine museum or losing yourself in the to-die-for landscapes on a sign-posted walk through a vineyard.

Neuchâtel (600 hectares)

With over 60 winemakers, the bulk of this canton's vineyards are located to the east (Le Landeron to Hauterive) and west (Auvornier to Vaumarcus) of Neuchâtel City.

"Overwhelmingly, we produce Pinot Noir and Chasselas," says Edmée Rembault-Necker, head of Neuchâtel's wine promotion office (OVPT). "Those are the two most dominant varieties in the whole *Trois Lacs* area."

Neuchâtel also produces Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Charmont, along with reds such as Garanoir and Gamaret.

A typical winery palette throughout the region consists of reds, whites, rosés, sparkling wines and sweet wines, alongside brandies like *bérudge* (plum.) Ballpark figures for 75 cl bottles of still wine are SFr 10-18.

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OUT-N-ABOUT

ends) and vineyard walks with sumptuous lake views. It takes about four hours to walk the whole wine country stretch from Alfermée/Tüscherz (adjacent to Biel) to La Neuveville.

Not to be missed on the dining front, although available only in the winter months, is the sausage dish, *saucisse au marc*, cooked in an alembic still so as to absorb the flavour of *marc*, which is distilled from grape skins and seeds.

Le Vully and La Broye (167 hectares)

There are over 25 wineries in this area. The Vully vineyards span two cantons (Vaud and Fribourg) and are located on a thin strip of land separating the Neuchâtel and Morat lakes.

The varietal to try here is Freiburger, sometimes called Freisamer, which also can be found in Biel. This grape – a cross between Sylvaner and Pinot Gris – yields a white wine both fruity and spicy that tastes lovely with lake fish.

You'll want to sample the local speciality *Gâteau du Vully*, both the sweet cream pie and the savoury version with *lardons* (diced, thick-cut bacon) and cumin. You can work it off walking one of three vineyard trails – the five-kilometre 'La Riviera' roughly spanning Sugiez-Môtier, the four-kilometre 'Pinot Noir' in the Vallamand area, or the five-kilometre 'Chasselas' around Bellerive.



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This parade is part of Neuchâtel's annual September wine grower's festival

Wineries and wine events are listed on wine promotion office sites:

- www.ovpt.ch
- www.vinsdulacdebienne.ch
- Vully vaudois: www.vins-vaudois.com and www.avenches.ch
- Vully fribourgeois: www.vin-vully.ch

Caveaux, wine cellars

- Entre Deux Lacs, Cressier: www.caveaudesvins.ch
- Auvernier (Tel. 038 31 21 08)
- Boudry (Tel. 032 842 59 16)

- Biel, Vinothèque, Douanne/Twann: www.viniterra-bielерsee.ch
- du Vully, Guévaux: www.caveaux-du-vully.ch

Coming up

- September 12-14, 2008: Fête du Vin at La Neuveville, www.feteduvin.net
- September 26-28, 2008: Neuchâtel Harvest Festival, www.fete-des-vendanges.ch
- September 27-28, 2008: Vully Harvest / Festival in Praz, www.drei-seen-land.ch



Jura

With just less than seven hectares of vineyards under cultivation, the Swiss Jura wine scene (www.clodescantons.ch and www.vin-du-jura.ch) is still emerging. The canton is home to one of Switzerland's top eateries run by chef Georges Wenger in Le Noirmont, 50 kilometres from Neuchâtel. It boasts two Michelin stars and a sumptuous wine list heavy on Swiss wines, not least from Neuchâtel and Jura (www.georges-wenger.ch). Also see www.juratourisme.ch.

Where to stay, where to eat... and other sights to see

Accommodation? All tastes and budgets are catered for, from sleeping on straw and farm guestrooms to campsites, hostels and B'n'Bs. At the upper end, five-star hotels beckon: in Neuchâtel, the Beau Rivage offers palatial lakeside luxury (www.beau-rivage-hotel.ch), or try the hi-tech Palafitte, built on the lake (www.palafitte.ch).

If country charm is your thing, there's the three-star Hôtel de l'Ours in Sugiez, Le Vully. Part of the Romantik chain, this is one of Switzerland's most appealing small hotels (www.hotel-ours.ch). And the five-star Vieux Manoir in Morat, in a park-style garden right by the water, is not to be sneezed at either (www.vieuxmanoir.ch).

A similarly wide range of eateries provides everything from rustic specialities to gourmet cuisine – for the latter try Maison du Prussien in Neuchâtel (www.hotel-prussien.ch). Au Boccalino in St. Blaise is renowned for food and wine, with some 25,000 bottles in stock (Tel. 032 753 36 80).

For the freshest market cuisines and local wines, try Auberge des Clefs in Lugnorre, Le Vully (www.aubergedesclefs.ch) and Villa Lindeneegg in Biel (www.lindeneegg.ch).

Picnics are a great option as local shops burst with *terroir* produce like fresh fruit and vegetables, charcuterie, sausages and cheeses, breads, cakes and chocolates.

For the culturally hungry, there's the Laténium, a stunningly located, interactive archaeological museum (www.latenium.ch), and the Roman ruins with museum at Avenches (www.avenches.ch). Or try Neuchâtel's hip Museum of Art and History (www.mahn.ch) or the first-rate International Timepiece Museum in La Chaux-de-Fonds (www.mih.ch) – after all, this is the heart of watch country (www.watchvalley.ch).

www.drei-seen-land.ch
www.bielерsee.ch (April–October, day cruise on all three lakes)
www.neuchatel-tourisme.ch
www.biel-seeland.ch
www.levully.ch