



# Tim's Wine Market

**June 2025**  
**By Tim Varan**

For several years I have tried to assemble an offering for this club focused on wines produced in Alpine climates. I am fascinated with this category because of the diversity and style of the wines produced across several countries. This collection will show you differences and similarities that make this a category worth discovering.

## **2020 Claudy Clavier Petite Arvine "Perles du Soleil" | \$65**

For several years I have felt like Herman Melville's Captain Ahab on an unsuccessful quest to hunt and kill the great white whale, Moby Dick. However, now I feel vindicated that my years long quest for a Swiss wine for this club is complete. Yes, they make wine in Switzerland and if you are surprised that is warranted. Unless you travel there it is unlikely to find Swiss wines as they do not produce much, and it is almost entirely consumed in country. Our feature shows that what they do produce is quite good and when you taste this wine you will understand the obsession I have with the category.

While hard to find, Switzerland has a long history of wine production that begins at the time of the Roman occupation during the first century AD. There is archeological evidence that wine was produced even earlier in the Valais region, two centuries earlier, with the discovery of a ceramic wine bottle in the tomb of a Celtic woman dated to that time. There have also been older examples of wine found in Switzerland, though not production, dating to the Iron Age (1300-550BC). Then as now the valleys of the Alps were the common trade paths between the tribes of present day France, Germany and Italy. Perhaps Ötzi the iceman, a 3000 year old mummy discovered in 1991, was really just a wine salesman who got tragically lost during a delivery.

Like France, Switzerland refers to their wine regions as AOPs, Appellation d'Origine Protégée, which are established based on distinctive climates and soils. There are 37,000 acres of vines in Switzerland, located in 6 wine regions that are divided into 62 AOP's. Due to diverse climate differences between the zones most areas specialize in different grape varieties. The most planted grape is Pinot Noir which makes up 30% of the national production, followed by Chasselas, a white variety that makes up 27%. For our feature I found a rare example of Petite Arvine, a native of the Valais region, where all of the country's 380 acres are planted.

The Valais region is the largest of the Swiss wine zones, with vineyards primarily planted on terraces that look down on the Rhône River. Terraces are necessary because the hills of this valley are extremely steep, carved out by receding glaciers 50,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age. The climate of the Valais is the warmest and driest in Switzerland, which allows for the growers to work with 55 different varieties including several, like Petite Arvine which require a longer growing season. Thanks to the vineyards being planted at high elevation many of these late ripening varieties retain surprising levels of acidity, creating some interesting examples of full bodied whites with freshness.

Our feature comes from Claudy & Joëlle Clavier, one of the top producers in the region. Claudy was born in the Valais to parents who farmed seven acres of vines. When Claudy returned to the region after winemaking school he founded the Le Caves des Champs in 1986 and has now grown to farm almost 20 acres. Claudy practices biodynamic farming and is a champion for indigenous varieties, producing as many as 22 different wines each season from more than a dozen different grapes. For this wine the grapes are whole cluster pressed to tank, allowed to settle then fermented the next day with indigenous yeasts. Once dry the wine is racked to another tank and allowed to rest for a year before bottling.

When serving you want to let this wine rise from refrigerator temperature to cellar temperature, 55 degrees and even decant it. The nose is an enticing mix of lemon oil, green apple, honeydew melon, lemon verbena and orange blossom honey. Texturally this wine is sheer and nicely focused, with a fine vein of minerality framing the fruit deep into the finish. Drink 2025-2027 with grouper sautéed with lemon and butter, or of course fondue!

## **2023 Cantina Tramin “Stoan” | \$55**

For this wine we climb high into the Dolomites where the snow covered Alps dominate the background of vineyards clinging to steep valley hillsides. Being the northernmost region of Italy there is something of a mental disconnect because the people are fair skinned, the cuisine is very Germanic and the wines are frequently bottled and labeled as single varieties. All of this points to the centuries of rule by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, before the Risorgimento in 1861, that unified this part of the country with the rest of Italy. Thanks to this unique history the wines are some of the most interesting, both white and red, that are found in Italy.

Most of the wines we feature are made by family wineries, but in the Alto Adige the vast majority are made by co-operatives. These are a collection of growers who pool their resources to make wine that is then sold with the profits distributed to the members. In this part of Italy most growers farm relatively small parcels, often split with fruit trees, so it does not make sense to build a winery for such small production. By combining their efforts they can afford better equipment and technical help, which raises the quality for all. The Cantina Tramin is the oldest co-operative in the Alto Adige, established in 1893, with 160 member families. Collectively they farm 670 acres across the region and produce roughly 1.9 million bottles per year.

The wines of the Alto Adige are quite exciting and there is something for everyone. Many different grape varieties are grown including well know ones like Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir. Typically the variety is determined by the growing conditions, with help from the technical director Willi Stürz, who has guided Cantina Tramin since the 1990s. The terraced hillsides of this region are often granite or limestone, with the valley floor dominated by gravel and sandy soils. Stoan is considered one of the reserve wines of Cantina Tramin, with the components selected from some of the best harvested lots of the members. While it is always based on Chardonnay the other components are added to show the incredible range of the region. For the 2023 the blend is 65% Chardonnay, 20% Sauvignon, 10% Pinot Blanc and 5% Gewürztraminer. All of the components are fermented in 300-400L oak casks, then blended and aged in the same size wood for at least 14 months. The result is a wine with superb richness, fantastic aromatics and incredible tension.

Make sure to decant this wine for a half hour before serving and again we suggest cellar temperature around 55 degrees. The nose is an exotic mix of canned pears, grapefruit peel, dried apricot, juniper berry and lychee that really whets the palate. Then when you take a sip this wine shows a real yin-yang of rich texture restrained by both minerality and acidity. This is a serious food wine that works well with braised or smoked pork shoulder, coquille Saint-Jacques or even schnitzel.

## **2022 Prager Riesling Steinriegl | \$55**

We finish our wine tour of the Alpine region with a visit to Austria and the legendary wine region of Wachau. In 2020 we featured the same wine from the 2018 vintage and during my tastings to find the components of this offering it again stood out. The wines of the Prager estate are some of the most esteemed in all of Austria and some of the most impressive expressions of dry Riesling in the world.

Franz Prager was already a legend when Toni Bodenstern married his daughter Ilse in the 1990s. Toni is a biologist, geologist, and historian who spent years studying the geology of the region. He was most interested in preserving the old clones of Riesling and Gruner Veltliner, which he exclusively uses today. Toni also introduced high density plantings, up to 15,000 vines per hectare, which intensifies the character of his grapes through competition of the vines for nutrients. To further accentuate the clarity of varietal character this estate only ferments and ages in stainless steel tanks so nothing is lost or hidden. While there are many very good producers in the Wachau you will rarely ever encounter wines with such impressive intensity.

For this bottling Toni only uses grapes from the Steinriegl vineyard, planted to the old clones of Riesling from 1949 to 1990. This site is a mix of calcareous and gneiss, with little organic material, so the wines display a wild level of minerality that slices through the fruit like a Shun knife. Serve this wine a little cooler, 45 degrees, but again we recommend decanting before serving. The nose is a laser focused mix of fresh granny smith apples, underripe Anjou pear, kumquats, gun flint and a touch of petrol. On the palate, this wine is the sharpest of the set, with a lean expression of fruit that is very sheer and quite mineral driven. This wine is insanely long and persistent but never gives you any sense of richness so serve with delicate dishes like crab cakes, langoustine pasta or blackened fish.