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WINE

Going to Great Heights for a Taste of Alpine Wine



Members of the Heida Zunft winemaking guild in Visperterminen, Switzerland, enjoying the fruits of their labors.

Christoph Bangert for the International Herald Tribune

VISPERTERMINEN, SWITZERLAND — As I hiked up a narrow track through the vineyard outside this Alpine village, the altimeter strapped to my wrist ticked steadily higher. 1,100 meters. 1,110. 1,120. At about 1,150 meters I stopped and looked around.

[Alpine Wines](#) (June 9, 2012)



Members of the Heida Zunft wine guild, a group of hobby wine growers, working on their vines in Visperterminen, Switzerland. The grapes that the guild produces are made into wine by the St. Jodern Kellerei, a cooperative nearby.

Christoph Bangert for the International Herald Tribune

Above me there was only forest. Below me, the vineyard stair-stepped its way down a steep, terraced slope, ending in a sea of fog that enveloped the Valais, the Swiss portion of the Rhone Valley.

To the south, in the direction of the ski resort of Zermatt, glaciers shimmered in the springtime sun.

According to the St. Jodern Kellerei, the local winery that bottles much of the produce of the Visperterminen vineyard, I was standing atop “der höchste Weinberg Europas” — the highest vineyard in Europe.

Really?

Just across those glaciers, beyond the Matterhorn and the other 4,000-meter, or about 13,000-foot, peaks that mark the border with Italy, lies the Aosta Valley. A short way up the valley, toward the highest peak in the Alps, Mont Blanc, lies the winemaking village of Morgex.

A few days after visiting Visperterminen, I drove on to Morgex. As I pulled into the parking lot of La Cave du Vin Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle, a sign welcomed me to the “vigneti piu alti d’Europa” — the highest vineyards in Europe.

I decided to get the bottom — er, top — of these competing claims. Mauro Jaccod, president of the Cave du Vin Blanc, joined me for a look around the vineyards. We walked up to what appeared to be the culminating point — an old, terraced site that clung to the edge of a cliff. 1,050 meters, my altimeter read.

“The Swiss seem to have won,” I told Mr. Jaccod.

But he wasn’t finished. We got into his car, drove out from the village and up a winding mountain road. After rounding a tight bend, a couple rows of vines came into view. I got out and checked the altitude: 1,210 meters. Maybe the Italian vines were the highest, after all.

I called Alex Stoffel, who heads a wine growers’ guild that planted the highest portion of the Visperterminen vineyard, to get the Swiss side of the story.

“They might have one or two parcels that are higher, but ours is a contiguous vineyard,” he said. “We have a few stragglers that reach up to 1,300 meters. If we counted them, ours would be higher.”

As with other things in wine — critics’ scores, for example — the height of a vineyard can be subjective. Yet Mr. Stoffel and Mr. Jaccod, along with other mountain winemakers, do at least agree on the benefits of altitude, those that extend beyond bragging rights.

At high altitudes, the air is dry, the weather often sunny and breezy; this helps keep pests at bay, so growers can cut back on the use of nasty chemicals. Steep slopes increase exposure to the sun, helping the grapes ripen. Wide temperature variations between day and night help raise acidity levels, making the wines taste fresher.

There is beauty, too. In places like Visperterminen and Morgex, where viticulture is said to date to Roman times, the terraces, supported by dry-stone walls, are an intrinsic feature of the landscape.

Then there are the dangers. The snowy winter that has just ended sent [avalanches](#) crashing down right near the vineyards of Morgex, while an unusually cold spell threatened the vines of Visperterminen.

Because of their isolation, mountain vineyards are precious repositories of indigenous grape varieties — welcome finds in a wine world populated with taste-alike merlots and chardonnays.

In Morgex, the vigneron who supply the Cave du Vin Blanc grow a single variety, called prié blanc, that is native to these hills. (The French name reflects the Aosta Valley's historic ties to Savoie, just across the mountains in France; a French patois is still spoken.)

Prié blanc is a survivor. Perhaps because of the remote location or the extreme climate, these vineyards resisted the phylloxera plague that wiped out many European vineyards in the 19th century. As a result, some of the vines in Morgex date to 1850; old vines are prized for the richness and character they give to wine.

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The variety produces a white wine with high acidity and grassy, rustic notes. It is not overly complex, but it is versatile; the Cave du Vin Blanc makes still and sparkling whites. In their bracing freshness and linear directness, they reminded me a bit of other northern Italian whites, like those of Soave or Gavi, even though they are not as rich or powerful.

[Enlarge This Image](#)


Mauro Jaccod, president of the Cave du Vin Blanc in Morgex, Italy. Morgex and a nearby wine-growing area in Switzerland, Visperterminen, have a playful competition over whose vines grow at the highest altitude.

Eric Pfanner for the International Herald Tribune

Alpine Wines (June 9, 2012)



Despite the similar altitude and Alpine backdrop, the vineyards of Visperterminen yield a very different wine. The featured grape in this German-speaking region is Heida, a white variety that is related to the savagnin blanc of the Jura vineyards of France.

Compared with the wines of Morgex, those of Visperterminen are more aromatic, almost exotic. They are powerful wines of considerable substance, yet lively acidity gives them a clean, lingering finish. Heida slips down easily, perhaps too easily; the locals call it “ein böser Wein” — an ornery wine.

“It’s a wine that doesn’t go to your head, it goes to your legs,” Mr. Stoffel said. “We Alpine people say it doesn’t affect you if you try to speak, but if you try to get up, you won’t be able to.”

The vineyards of Visperterminen, which span a vertical drop of more than 500 meters, are not easy on the legs, either. After going fallow, the upper portions were replanted over the past two decades by the guild, which has more than 200 members. From time to time they gather to work in the vineyard.

One can see how these growers, after a hard day’s work and, perhaps, a drop or two of Heida, might feel entitled to make lofty claims. But those in Morgex think they have a strong case, too. So, which of the two vineyards is the highest in Europe? Neither, as it turns out. According to the Center for the Research, Study and Advancement of Mountain Viticulture, based in the Aosta Valley, several vineyards in Spain and in Cyprus reach more than 1,300 meters.

Closer to Visperterminen and Morgex, a group of growers last year planted vines outside the Italian ski resort of Cortina d’Ampezzo, at about 1,350 meters. They said they planned to test the site, which lies amid spectacular scenery in the Dolomite Alps, before beginning commercial operations.

(Even these heights are nothing like the lofty altitudes of some vineyards elsewhere in the world. In Argentina, for example, grapes are grown at more than 3,000 meters. But that is different; despite the nosebleed heights, the vines are mostly planted on plateaus, bearing little resemblance to the vertiginous terraces of Europe.)

For now, no matter how tenuous their claims may be, Visperterminen and Morgex are still taking their rivalry seriously. Well, sort of.

Not long ago, several members of the Visperterminen growers’ guild traveled to Morgex to investigate.

“They came with their altimeters and measured very carefully,” Mr. Jaccod recalled. “They also brought some wine. Once they had finished, we had a party together.”