



# TERRACED TERRIOR

EXTRACTING THE BEST OUT OF  
EXTREME ENVIRONMENTS

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OPPOSITE: The rocky coastline of Cinque Terre  
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
Women chatting outside Bar Vernazzo, Cinque  
Terre; harvest time at Cinque Terre; Looking  
out into the Ligurian Sea; Chasselas grapes  
from Lake Geneva; Patrick Fonjallez; Vineyards  
and terraces of The Wachau

**M**ention vineyards and the layperson will conjure in their heads, images of verdant wine estates sweeping off into the distance. Dangerously steep cliffs don't normally come to mind. In fact, they aren't even on the minds of most winemakers — after all, one has to first survive in the environment before he can even contemplate planting vines.

Yet, in some parts of Europe, grapes are grown under conditions of extreme terrior to produce desirable wines. Three examples come to mind and they all have the most dramatic landscapes that appeal just as much to wine connoisseurs as they would to the casual tourist. Austria's Wachau, the slopes of the Cinque Terre in northern Italy, and Lavaux by the northern shores

of Switzerland's Lake Geneva should all be added to your wine-touring list.

## WINES FROM THE FIVE LANDS

Cinque Terre translates as 'five lands', but this is misleading as it actually refers to five small ports fronting the Ligurian Sea along the northwestern Italian coast. Stand on the near-vertical ridge above Vernazza and the mesmerising combination of cliffs, olive orchards, vines and sea make it easy to appreciate why this is one of the world's most spectacular coastlines.

The ports of Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore are linked by paths that meander from ridge top to sands and attract walkers from around the globe who take up the challenge of the five hour-trek. A rail line traverses the high land via a

series of tunnels and provides an alternate link to the coast as well as major Italian Riviera cities of Genoa and La Spezia.

Centuries ago, terraces were carved into the near-vertical slopes principally for grape production. Restoration efforts are in place to ensure that these vineyards remain productive. These Roman terraces are complex structures that have no binding cement and it's been reported that to rebuild them would take 2,500 people, working daily for two centuries.

Wines have been made here since the 14th century and today, Vermentino grape is king in Liguria, but Bosco and Albarola varieties are also grown. The most famous wine produced is a white called Cinque Terre DOC with Costa da Posa being more expensive and sourced from some of the coast's best historic sites. The DOC



FOR THE LOVE OF WINES, THE PEOPLE CONSTRUCTED STONE TERRACE WALLS TO ENSURE THE SURVIVAL OF THE VINES — AND SURVIVE THEY DID.



wines have a perfumed nose and dry palate and make superb accompaniments to the local fish.

The most expensive wine is called Sciacchetra which has been described as 'antique gold, flavoured by the cool sea breeze and dried by the sun's warm kiss.' It's a sweet wine usually sold in half bottles and comprises of 70 percent late-harvested Bosco, 20 percent Vermentino and 10 percent Albarola grapes. You will be able to find the wine in shops along the walk, but expect to pay around €40 for the privilege of a taste.

#### ANCIENT SWISS TERRACES

Some 800 years ago, the French monks from Burgundy introduced grapevines to the people on the northern foreshore of Switzerland's Lake Geneva. For the love of wines, the people constructed stone terrace walls to ensure the survival of the vines — and survive they did. Today, the terraced vineyards of Lavaux — stretching from Lausanne to Montreux — makes the area the most famous amongst Switzerland's 19 wine regions. This 35km long network of 10,000

terraces, 830ha of vines, and 400km of stone walls was recognised in 2007 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Walking trails dissect the slopes and these are popular throughout the year. Visitors can combine parts of the journey with train and ferry rides to explore the area more thoroughly. Come harvest season, one can even see pickers collecting grapes with the aid of an intricate network of small cable and rail cars.

The terraces slopes may look as if they are about to slide into Lake Geneva, but the vine roots and stone-walled terraces hold everything in place. It is difficult imagining anything growing on the steep terrain, but grape vines can be surprisingly adaptable. In fact, the stress placed upon the vines adds to the complexity of the fruit grown and in turn, the wines produced.

From the 200 winegrowers within Lavaux — most of which are small estates between 6ha to 8ha, with those of 15ha being considered large — come wines produced from local grape varieties such as Cornalin or Amigne. The best known Swiss white variety, Chasselas, produced

in the cradle of Lavaux, is a wine of low acidity, spicy palate and subdued aromas. At Epesses within the district of Lavaux, Patrick Fonjallaz produces Chasselas (labeled as La République Epesses) that hint of lime and spiciness on the palate. Fonjallaz also blends Gamay with a little Merlot in one of his best selling reds called Les Silènes. For something sweet, enjoy half bottles of Passerillé produced by placing white grapes in the sun for three months to concentrate the sugar content. The remaining sweet juice is then aged in oak for eight months to produce a golden dessert wine bursting with flavours of stone fruits and quince.

#### WACHAU BY THE DANUBE

The oldest wine-producing region in Austria and UNESCO World Heritage Site, Wachau is home to 1,400ha of vines grown mostly on steep slopes and feature white varieties of Grüner Veltliner and Riesling. This narrow stretch of valley is located in Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) and extends from Melk to Krems. Its wine categories of Steinfeder, Federspiel and Smaragd are used

respectively for light, medium and full-bodied wines.

Wine production is influenced by a terrior dominated by ancient loess soils with gneiss primary rock, steep slopes (some vines are grown on 56° slopes), and aspect to the sun. Wind is a major factor which affects the microclimate of the Wachau with the eastern areas around Krems being affected by hot Pannonian air that blows in from the Hungarian Plains. Mid-way along the Wachau in historic Dürnstein, this dissipates and by Melk, the locals suggest that conditions have attained Arctic proportions and no wines of substance are produced. Hot days and cool nights are distinct characteristics of the Wachau and the stone terraces which absorb and retain the heat contribute to the unique qualities of the wines.

The special mineral composition of the parent soil/rock also contributes to distinctive flavours throughout the Wachau and the flinty minerality that is characteristic of the region's Grüner Veltiners (especially those produced on soils with primary rocks of schist and gneiss). This is no more apparent than in a F.X. Pichler Grüner Veltliner from the Dürnsteiner Kellerberg grown on steep terraces of weathered primary rock that produces a style of great depth, elegance and mineral character. This site is considered by some to be one of the world's best vine growing areas. Other fine producers within this region include: Alzinger, Domäne Wachau, Franz Hirtzberger, Josef Jamek, Knoll, Rudi Pichler, Prager and Schmelz.

The quintessential experience is to take a train from Vienna to Melk, the ferry from Melk to Krems (April to October) and the train back to Vienna. Cycling along the 38km route offers the best winery experience. **E**



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Terraces above Lake Geneva; Entrance of Domäne Wachau; St-Saphorin La Rionde 2008 by Patrick Fonjallaz; French wine barrels in an Austrian winery; Vernazza Harbour, Cinque Terre

