

# **VALAIS** **Switzerland**

**AN UNDISCOVERED SWISS CANTON**

Farrol Kahn



## Acknowledgments

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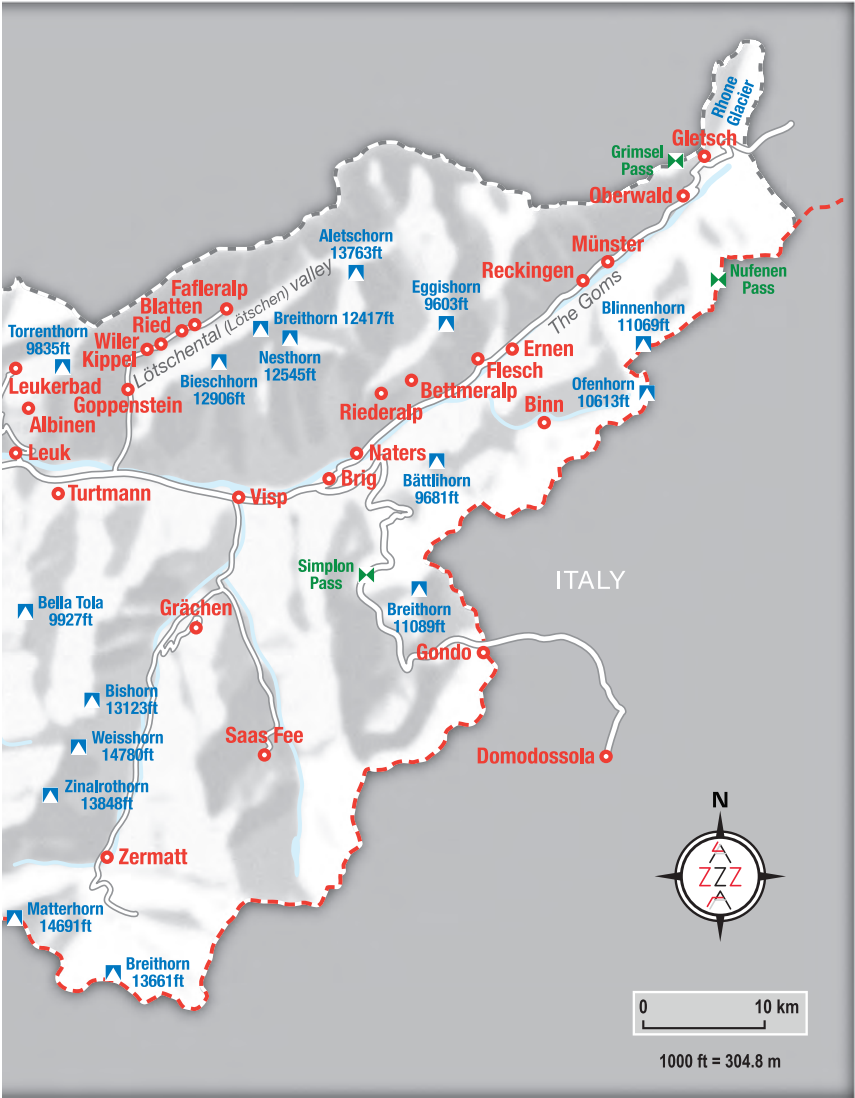
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The Valais



The Valais





## Chapter 1



### The Valais in context

When most people first come to the Valais they are only aware of the famous resorts of Zermatt, Verbier, Crans-Montana and Saas-Fee, and oblivious to its other undiscovered side which is just as interesting. There are historic towns, thermal baths, a Roman amphitheatre, dinosaur footprints, gold mines, minerals, an ancient monastery, many deep rural side valleys of great scenic beauty and just plain wacky things. It's rich in culture and tradition and is great for skiing, climbing and hiking.

#### History

The Valais is Switzerland's third largest canton and it entered the Swiss confederation in 1815. It's the most isolated Alpine district and is predominantly Catholic. Two-thirds of the population are French-speaking, the rest German-speaking. The French area runs from Bouveret on Lake Geneva in the west to Sierre, and the Swiss-German area from Salgesch to Gletsch in the east. The Romans conquered the Celts of the lower Valais, leaving behind them the legacy of Latin civilisation. The Upper Valais was invaded during the 6th century by Germanic peoples, the Walsers, tribes who remained unconquered and spoke a Swiss-German dialect.

One of the first things you discover is the invisible border between the two areas. Neither the French nor the German speakers – who call the canton Wallis – are interested in the culture of the other. The capital, Sion, is in the French part and appears very French.

The river Rhone runs through the Valais fed by glaciers (which cover 20% of the canton). Its dry climate – the surrounding mountains prevent access to rain bearing winds – means it has the most sunshine in the whole of Switzerland. The hot summers and cold winters, with springs tempered by the warm dry föhn blowing up from the Mediterranean, mean the climate is favourable to viniculture. Wines flourish on the rugged, sun-baked ridges of the south-facing slopes.

The paucity of rain and the torrents of water in the inaccessible gorges led to the development of an irrigation system that showed the tenacity and inventive spirit of the Valaisians. The network of narrow channels, 'bisses' in French and 'suonen' in Swiss-German, weave a cat's cradle over the foothills of the high mountains.

Two traditions predominate in Valaisian communities. The first is the annual trek

Petite Arvine.



Cow fighting in Val d'Hérens.

of cows, sheep or goats to the summer pastures high in the Alps, and then in the winter down to the sheltered barns of the villages. Cow fights developed from this custom. It's not as gory as Spanish bullfighting as the aim is to see which cow is best suited to lead the herds in the summer pastures. Without these fights cows would fight among themselves, leading to serious injuries or even death. Herens or Eringer (German) breeds of cattle are sturdy and muscular with curved horns and a lively, belligerent character. They are good for both milk and meat.

The springtime contests which decide the leader are tame affairs. Heads are lowered and horns locked before the struggle begins. The weaker cow finally retreats, chased by the winner. Organised fights are arranged to determine regional

and cantonal winners. The final contest is called Combats des Reines and is held in the Roman amphitheatre in Martigny. The winner means big money for the farmer as he can be assured of a head price of 60,000 – 80,000 francs.

The second important tradition is the sacred festival. The Corpus Christi pageant is the highlight of the festive calendar. It's devoted to the Eucharist which is held on the second Thursday after Pentecost. The occasion is celebrated by the whole village. There's a ritualistic procession led by the men dressed as 'red' soldiers. Wearing old uniforms and carrying ancient rifles, they are followed by women in their traditional village or cantonal costumes and finally, the village band and choir.



Guggenmusik, Chimbilagos from Visperterminen.

The carnival is also celebrated in the Valais and each village has its own version. In Lötschental there is the Tschägäggä (masked people), in Evolène the Peluches (soft cuddly toys) and the modern urban equivalent, Guggenmusik, in which members of a band dress up.

It's worth exploring villages on both sides of the Valais – the effort will be rewarded by the natural beauty, the roaring torrents of pure glacier water, the unforgettable alpine landscapes dotted with chalets or small barns, some perched on stilts. It's also common to come across wayside cavalries set up to protect hikers and locals from the dark dangers of the mountains.

The old habits of isolation die hard in many villages. Many villagers are wary of strangers. Even if the woman from the

next hamlet marries a man she will remain a stranger in his village for the rest of her life. Their children, however, are accepted on birth. The reason for this is that the peasants practiced an intense, largely self-sufficient mixed farming economy and they could ill-afford to share the paucity of their holdings with strangers. The key institution was the household and the extended family. Celibacy was common, households were constrained by the limit of resources. It was not unusual to find intermarriage and over a period of several hundred years, a predominance of people with the same family names appeared.

### Culture Music

The Valaisian valleys have always reverberated with music. On Sundays, you can hear the carillon of the church bells



echoing along the valleys; on festival days the choirs sing and the brass bands play; and high up on the mountains you can hear the mournful sound of alphorns or joyful yodelling.

Over the years, the Church has played a significant role in music and the first known performance was in the Abbey of St Maurice (515 AD) where five choirs of



Carlen Organ, Reckingen Church.

monks, each in turn, sang the perpetual praise over a period of 24 hours. In Sion, on the top of Valere hill, there is the 13th century Notre Dame church that has the oldest organ in the world still in use.

By the end of the medieval period, there were many priories in the Valais spawning a tradition of singing. Today, choirs proliferate the villages and if you want to

socialise, it's best to join one. Brass bands are also popular and it's not unusual to find two or even three in some villages. In the Val d'Anniviers, there was a tradition for musicians to accompany whole villages down to Sierre to work on the vineyards in the summer.

The roots of Swiss folk music are based on the ancient customs of Alpine herdsmen of which the alphorn, yodelling and the Gregorian chant of the evening benediction or Alpsegen is part. The alphorn is about 9 ft long and when it's blown produces natural tones. Yodelling is a singing style characterised by frequent and rapid shifts from normal voice to falsetto and back again, interspersed with a few syllables like yo-lolo-dee-uuh. The Alpine shepherd chants a classical catholic litany in which he asks God, the Virgin Mary and various Saints for protection against danger. His voice is amplified by his all-purpose wooden funnel which he carries around with him.

The foundation of the Cantonal Conservatory of Music in Sion in 1947 has stimulated the interest in classical music. Part of the conservatory's responsibility has been to visit the various valleys to note the texts and melodies of old songs, some of which were brought back from France or Italy by mercenaries.

Every year in summer there are several music festivals. Sion has both the International Music festival and the Violin Competition. Ernen is well-known for its Piano Week, the Baroque Music Festival and the Festival of the Future. The programmes are always refreshing as the members of the orchestra do not belong



Alphorns at lake Tracouet.

to fixed groups but perform together as part of their music courses. Regular music events are also held at the Giannada Foundation, Martigny and La Poste, Visp. The resorts of Verbier, Saas-Fee and Zermatt also have annual events.

## Art Léonard Gianadda, Genius of Art

The Pierre Gianadda Foundation in Martigny is the major showcase for art. The Foundation has a sculpture garden and holds international exhibitions. Léonard Gianadda is the genius of culture in the Valais. What he has achieved since the establishment the Pierre Gianadda Foundation in 1978 is incredible. When his younger brother Pierre died as a result of a plane crash, Gianadda created a foundation in his memory. In the past three decades, he has mounted over 30

world-class exhibitions and musical events. Exhibitions have included Kees van Dongen, Bonnard, Turner, Manet, Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, among others, as well as showcasing collections from prominent museums like the Tretyakov Gallery, the Phillips Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Pushkin Gallery. He has also focused on female artists such as Berthe Morisot and Frida Kahlo and Swiss artists like Albert Anker and Alberto Giacometti.

The sculpture park features 45 works that include Henry Moore and Rodin. You will also find at the Foundation, the Gallo-Roman ruins, a splendid automobile collection and an exhibition of Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions. In all, Gianadda has brought a veritable feast of international art to the Valais where, previously, the

most popular form of culture was the cow fights. It was a big risk but he is not a man to balk at great challenges. “When you have something of quality,” he said, “people will come from all over the world to see it.” So far he has had almost 9 million visitors over the past 30 years, with an average of 700 a day.



Léonard Gianadda and Cecilia Bartoli.

Gianadda has consorted with British artists too. Dined with Francis Bacon and lunched with Lucian Freud, who turned up at the famous Colombe d’Or, St Paul de Vence, dressed in paint-splattered work clothes. The concerts at the Pierre Gianadda also have an international flavour with performers from the New York Opera and famous soloists like Murray Perahia, Daniel Barenboim and

Cecilia Bartoli. He is in awe of the diva whom he likens to singing like a bird when she vocalises Vivaldi’s *Agitata de due venti*. He also has an anecdote about Isaac Stern. “When he played an encore at a concert, he turned his back to the audience and played it solely for Renoir’s *Venus*. Utterly remarkable!” The concerts at the Foundation are renowned and usually have audiences of some 800 people.

A veritable Maecenas, Gianadda has donated many sculptures to Martigny, but has an uneasy relationship with the town. When the ruins of a Gallo-Roman temple were found on the site of the Foundation, he was angry when told to demolish it – now it’s a big tourist attraction. He has been honoured with decorations from Italy, Russia and particularly France where he was made a Chevalier, Officier and Commander of the Légion d’honneur and an Academician of the Beaux-Arts. It took Martigny 30 years to award him a prize for culture. But then that is how the Valaisians treat its great sons like Stockalper and Gianadda.

What is surprising about Léonard Gianadda is that prior to the Foundation, he had a distinguished career as a reporter, cameraman and photographer. One of his first coups, was to photograph Georges Simenon, the Belgium author and creator of Inspector Maigret, who, in 1957, was on a visit to Lausanne. Simenon was so impressed with the results that his editor spent 5,000 CHF on the photos – equivalent then to an engineer’s annual salary. He met his charming wife, Annette Pavid, in the same city, whose boss at Lausanne’s Tourist Office also bought

the Simenon photos. But in between this career and the establishment of the Foundation, Gianadda received a degree in civil engineering and for 15 years constructed over a 1,000 apartments in Martigny. And although he has never mentioned it, the accomplishment would have made his grandfather, Baptiste

Gianadda, proud – a labourer who had walked all the way from Piedmont, Italy in order to find work on a Martigny building site because he was tired of hearing his parents crying that they did not have enough money to buy salt.



Esther Waeber-Kalbermatten with a Renato Jordan painting.

Esther Waeber-Kalbermatten is a Valaisian politician. When she was elected to office on the Statsrat, Sion, she bought her first painting from Renato Jordan. It was based on Rainer Maria Rilke’s text “I see you, rose, half-open book...” (Rose poem II.) What appealed to her about Jordan’s work was the tension between the text and the composition of the red and grey shapes. It is a double-layered work. One layer consists of all the signatures and the other the text of the declaration. The work stimulates reflection and hangs on the wall opposite her desk – when she looks up she sees it.

Waeber-Kalbermatten had come across Jordan’s enormous decadal canvases at the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in Geneva.



## Literature

**Rainer Maria Rilke** (1875-1926), the German poet who was born in Prague, spent the last years of his life from 1921 to 1926 in Veyras, Sierre. It was there that he wrote his masterpieces, *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets of Orpheus*. When Rilke had first set eyes on the Valais, it had reminded him of Provence and Spain. “And this echo, this family likeness is not imaginary,” he wrote to friends. “Only the other day, I read in a treatise on the plant world that certain flowers appear here which are otherwise found only in Provence and Spain. It’s the same with the butterflies.” It seemed to him that the spirit of the great river, the Rhone, carried such gifts and affinities through country after country.

But, what he desired most was an Elegy-place where he could be quiet, enjoy nature and solitude – he found it at an old tower called Muzot (pronounced ‘Muzotte’) whose walls dated back to the 13th century. “It lies some 20 minutes above Sierre, set pretty steeply in a less arid but happy countryside, gushing with many springs and with views of the valley, of the mountain slopes and far into the most marvellous depths of the sky.”

By 1926, Rilke’s health had deteriorated and he spent time at the Valmont clinic in Glion above Lake Geneva. But on his return, his illness made living in the little tower more difficult than in former days, so he lived alternately at the Hotel Bellevue in Sierre. (Now the town hall.) Another cycle of French poems, *Orchards or Vergers*, was published. They cheered him up and he added a cycle on *Roses*.

In October, he pricked two fingers while cutting the same flowers in his garden at Muzot. The cuts turned septic, began to suppurate and become intensely painful. It was soon apparent that these were symptoms of an acute leukemia. Rilke died early in the morning of Wednesday, December 29th, 1926. On Sunday, January 2nd, 1927, four men carried the coffin up the steep icy footpath to the Burgkirche in Raron while in front of them walked the local magistrate with a wooden cross. After the service, according to local custom, children formed a circle around the open grave. They held up heavy wreaths, their hands blue with cold during the stranger’s interment. Not a soul in Raron knew the poet, yet reverence surrounded him. Rilke is buried in the graveyard beside the old Burgkirche on the hill in Raron. It was there that he had first espied the Valaisian landscape.

**Katherine Mansfield.** Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp Murray (1888-1923) was born into a prominent colonial family in Wellington, New Zealand. At the age of 18, she went to England where she fell in love with a young musician, became pregnant and rashly married her singing teacher – all within seven months of her arrival. She had courage and talent and became one of the best short story writers of her period. She was deeply disappointed by her family and friends and her weak and selfish husband, John Middleton Murray. Yet, she understood him and even mooted the idea that he should divorce her as she would never be a wife to him and marry a healthy, young creature and have children. He betrayed her with her close friend, Dorothy Brett, and couldn’t help her when she was

dying because she insisted that she had to discover her true self on her own. Her “desire to learn to work in the right way and to live as a conscious human being.”

During the last years of her life (1921 to 1922) she lived for periods in Montana-sur-Sierre. By New Year 1922, Katherine Mansfield and her husband had been at the Chalet des Sapins for almost six months. Some of her best stories were written during that time, *At the Bay*, *The Garden Party*, *The Voyage* and the uncompleted *A Man’s Story*. But, life in the chalet was isolated and the winter months severe. Sometimes, 7 ft of snow would lie outside their door and in her letters she would either rail against the snow or be comforted by it. In a letter to her husband’s brother (January 2nd, 1922) she wrote: “Yes, the snow is terrific. It is like living on the moon. Trees are crashing to the earth and lamp posts are falling and there is no electric light, no little mountain railway!”

Mansfield had come to the Valais following a diagnosis of tuberculosis in 1917. She decided to spend the English winters abroad and, in her last years, to seek unorthodox cures. Her father, a wealthy banker who gave her a regular allowance, would not pay for expensive tuberculosis treatments and anyway, she rejected the idea of a sanatorium as such a confinement would cut her off from writing.

In February, 1922, she left for Paris to undertake the revolutionary treatment of the Russian physician, Ivan Manoukhine. It consisted of bombarding her spleen with x-rays which caused her to be “hotted up

inside like a furnace and one’s very bones seem to be melting.” Manoukhine had first assured her that she had no cavities in her lungs which meant that she was curable. But, a disbelief held her back about the treatment’s effectiveness. She was confident but she was divided. Her instincts finally proved right and the dark secret unbelief won over. She became terribly ill and the treatment weakened her heart.

Mansfield returned to Montana-sur-Sierre for three months and then again made a trip to London before she surrendered herself to the mystic George Gurdjieff at his institute outside Paris. It was in a beautiful old chateau which was formerly a Carmelite monastery and she joined a colony of some 50 people, mainly Russians. Everyone was working at every kind of possible thing. There was outdoor work, animal husbandry, gardening, indoor work, music and dancing. And Mansfield made up her mind to live by what she believed in. Up until then, she had felt disunited as she had lived one way and thought another. During the first week of the new year, she already found signs of spring. There were Christmas roses under the Espalier pear trees which reminded her of Switzerland. When her husband came to visit her on January 9th, 1923 she ran upstairs to show him how well she was and died of a fatal pulmonary haemorrhage later that evening. She was only 34.

**Stéphanie Corinna Bille** (known as S. Corinna Bille) was a writer who won the Prix Goncourt in 1975 for a short story. As such she was quite a phenomenon in the peasant culture of the Valais where in

ancient times people would tie corpses to mules to take them across the mountains.

Bille was the eldest daughter of the Swiss artist Edmond Bille and his second wife, Catherine Tapparel. Her childhood was spent in her father's Baroque mansion overlooking Sierre. Her father was a painter, engraver and stained glass artist and became renowned for his stained glass windows in various churches like the Abbaye in St Maurice and the Town Hall in Martigny – where he created the largest stained glass window in Switzerland. Bille assisted her father in the studio and posed for him. He guided her first attempts at writing and by the age of 16, she vowed to become a writer, collecting material for her work from the local newspaper and from her mother's peasant relatives in the villages, Corin and Lower Corin near Sierre. One of her short stories, *The Grape Harvest*, tells of a seasonal labourer on the vineyards, a young woman who like most of her characters was an outsider. In spite of her success, little of Bille's life and work has been published in English.

Death's cheese.



## A Wacky List

Isolated and protected by the Alps, the Valais has always been a strange Canton. Below is a list of its many idiosyncrasies:

### 1. Death's cheese, glacier wine and a table for the dead

The Val d'Anniviers is a most unusual place and there are many strange customs. The most important event in a person's life is the celebration of their death. On their marriage, a large cheese is set aside which will be eaten on the day of their funeral. Originally poor, they wanted to ensure that their relatives and friends had something to eat on their death, at their funeral. But by then the cheese was so hard that slices had to be sawn off.

Glacier wine is kept in the cellar of the Maison de la Bourgeoisie in Grimentz. Another oddity, it is at least 125 years old and originates from the white grape variety, *rèze*. The wine is self-sustaining and whenever the barrel reaches the halfway mark, it is topped up with the new vintage. The wine from the 1888 barrel tops up the 1886 barrel and the 1934 refills the 1888, while the 1969 which replenishes the 1934 will receive the new wine. Moniseur Jean Vouardoux, who is the master of ceremonies in Grimentz, is in charge of wine tasting. You are given a small glass and a thin sliver of 50-year-old death's cheese. The glacier wine tastes like sherry. Afterwards, he opens the visitor's book to show a photo of himself and Cherie Blair! On a tour of the house you are taken into the hall which is decorated with several rows of silver and pewter tankards on the wall. Each was a gift from the villagers over the past three hundred years. The room has several tables



Jean Vouardoux with Glacier wine.

reserved for specific groups. The largest is for members of the council; another is for those doing community jobs; three are for villagers according to their age; and the last one is for the 'dead' – old men who can no longer work and therefore are designated the 'dead' of the community.

### 2. The Mountain Ridges Train or Gratzug

There is a legend in the Upper Valais that the sinners never come to rest. They are condemned to return to the place where they committed the treachery. These crimes could be little transgressions like dancing or working on Sunday. The sinners live on the glaciers and twice a year join the ghost train that runs along the ridges of the mountains. If you are out at night on November 2nd, All Souls day, or on January 14th, St Hilary of Poitiers' feast day, you might see the poor souls.

Should you meet the eyes of the last one in the procession, you could save them if you say, "I'll give you part of my breath, but the first and the last word is mine." But you must speak of God at the beginning.

### 3. Cholera

Cholera is neither the disease nor an antidote to it. It's a pie found in the Goms valley and is made from raclette cheese, onions, leek, potatoes, pears and apples and a strip of thin bacon or petit lard. It originated during an outbreak of cholera in the 1830's when it was safer to stay indoors and live off food you normally kept in your cellar. Recipes are passed from mother to daughter and are jealously guarded.

### 4. Albinen's Ladders

The shortest route to Leukerbad for the

people in Albinen was to scale a cliff face 328 ft high via ladders. There were eight ladders of various sizes placed at different levels which enabled you to ascend or descend with produce or animals carried on your back. But you had to have a head for heights!

### 5. The Blackneck Goat

The forequarters of the blackneck goat are black while the hindquarters are white. The hair is long and wavy and the medium-length horns are arched. It has never been quite established whether the origins of this ancient Valaisian species can be traced back to Africa or if they are descended from the Italian 'Kupferziege' goats. Originally, they were mostly found in the Lower Valais and almost became an extinct breed. Now the 'glacier goat' is protected by the Pro Specie Rara organisation.

### 6. The Blacknosed Sheep

The breed originates in the Valais and was first mentioned in 1400. The blacknosed sheep is a docile mountain species which was first recognised in 1962. It has adapted particularly well to life at high altitude and grazes even on the steepest, stoniest slopes. It has black patches on its nose, eyes, ears, knees, hocks and feet. The wool is coarse and both rams and ewes have horns.



## Wine

"If you dig deep enough you will find that most people in the Valais have some connection with wine production." Claude-Alain Margelisch, Chief Executive Officer, Swiss Bankers Association

The Valais is the most famous wine growing region in Switzerland. What sets it apart from the rest of the wine world is



Cornalin.

Blacknosed sheep.

the terroir and the unusual grape varieties which can titillate the palate in unfamiliar ways. A remarkable feature of the Valais is the extraordinary mixture of soil types, sun exposure and microclimate. You find the old native varieties which are

unknown elsewhere such as Amigne, Arvine, Cornalin, Humagne and Rèze. Vines are grown along a 50 mile strip of the Rhône valley, mainly on the sunny steep slopes of the south facing Bernese Alps which extends from Martigny to Brig. It's a glacial valley with a relatively flat floor and some vineyards are on slopes as steep as 70°. The construction and maintenance of these are labour intensive and hence, costly. Much wine here is grown at high altitudes from around 2,132 ft to 3,772 ft at Visperterminen in the Upper Valais – one of the highest in Europe. The Valais is characterised by the presence of 59 grape varieties with 26 red and 33 white. However, three varieties such as Fendant, Pinot Noir and Gamay alone account for over 70% of the growing area. The powerful reds from indigenous and international grape varieties rival anything produced elsewhere in Europe, and a range of whites which are among the great sweet wines of Europe.

The first traces of viticulture appeared in the Valais even before the Roman era but viticulture really got underway in the Middle Ages. By 1300, the vineyards of the upper Rhone valley already had the dimensions that corresponded with those known in the second half of the 19th century. The cultivation of the vineyards was in the hands of peasant families who paid an annual rent to the landowners. Wine was considered to be a food and its production was essentially to satisfy the needs of the family or the congregation during the year. Commercial exchanges were unknown. It was only towards the end of the Middle Ages around, 1500, that wine was bought and sold.

The commercial development of the wine growing industry began in 1850 after the civil war, the Sonderbund (1847), when the plundered properties were bought by wealthy Valaisian families and by investors from the canton of Vaud who created the first wine businesses. There were two other factors which stimulated the growth of the industry. The containment of the Rhone which freed up land for viticulture and the construction of the railways that opened up new commercial opportunities. Wine became the most important crop in Valaisian agriculture.

During the 1920s, wine growers could not make a living from their vineyards and the first cooperative Provins was founded. The Federal government played a greater role in the industry and introduced oenological studies for the peasants so that a professional level could be attained. By 1957, the Valais was the top wine growing canton in Switzerland. More and more land was turned over to cultivation of vineyards and the record level of 3,550 hectares was reached in 1980. This led to a serious crisis of overproduction and the bottom fell out of the market. A change in direction was necessary and quality took precedence over quantity. To ensure that there was an increase in the quality of wines, the AOC (appellation d'origine contrôlée) certificate was established and enabled checks to be carried out in the vineyards. Native varieties were re-introduced, the quality of soils improved and the safeguard of the scenic landscape were set as goals of the wine growing policy.





Containing the Rhone by Raphael Ritz 1888.

To encourage visitors to get to know Valais wines, the winegrowers have created 'the wine route' which runs from Martigny to Leuk. It's some 41 miles long and consists mostly of nature trails which

vary from 1,476-2,624 ft. The route has been chosen with care so that it can easily be walked, biked or driven and is lined with restaurants and vineyards where you can taste wine.

**Guerite of Maurice Gay for workers and equipment.**



A view of Sion.

### Wine Growers

There are many outstanding wineries in the Valais and in fact you are spoilt for choice. However, I have selected two exemplars, Marie-Thérèse Chappaz and Diego Mathier.



A walk along 'the wine route'.







Marie-Thérèse Chappaz.

### Queen of Valaisian Wine.

Marie-Thérèse Chappaz was introduced to vintages as a child when she sipped wine from her father Claude's spoon. His wine cellar was filled with the best wines and she remembers decanting the premier Côtes de Bordeaux from the barrel into bottles. She liked the very tannic taste unlike the Valaisian reds which are easier on the palate. Although her father always wanted her to become a winegrower she resisted at first and

became a midwife. But, when at the age of 18 he gave her a small vineyard in Charraz, she decided to try her hand at viticulture and soon found that she liked the outdoor life better than the indoor life of a hospital. She trained as an oenologist at Changins and later, worked at the research centre in Fribourg.

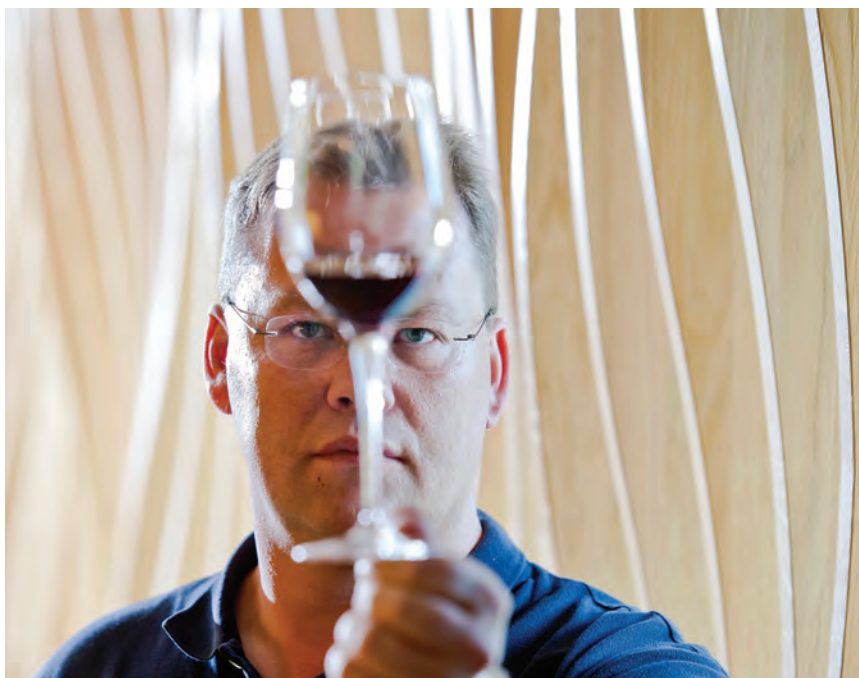
As a winemaker of over two decades, she now nurtures vines to birth their best in the environment of biodynamic agriculture in 14 hectares of vineyards. Her steep slopes are covered with weeds and wild plants like marjoram, oregano, hyssop, St John's wort and thyme. Her speciality is the sweet noble rot wines which are made from petite arvine grapes that are covered with a beneficial form of grey fungus, *botrytis cinerea*. She decries the activities of others who pander to the tastes of consumers. "It's a dangerous course to take," she says, "to add shavings and aromas. The wine should be an expression of the Valais. It should reflect the grape variety, the terroir, the climate, the area and the *mettre en valeur*."

The consumers, too, have to take their role seriously. "They should not drink something they don't like, it's not etiquette. Train your palate, take time to taste," she said. "Find something you like. The wine speaks, listen to what it says. Above all, it provokes an emotion."

She arranged a wine tasting for me at her home. Present were cheeses like Tomme, Vacherin Fribourgeois, Bagnes, Brillat Saverin, Stilton and Gruyère. There were only two wines, Grain Noble (2006), a noble rot wine, and a Dôle de la Liaudisaz. The purpose was to find an explosion between the cheese and the wine. Put in another way, it was to find the perfect marriage between the two, where the combination brings out the best in the wine and the cheese. We first tried the Grain Noble or Marsanne Blanche, which was a thick nectar unlike any other sweet wine I've ever tasted. It's distinguished by aromas of rhubarb, wisteria, violet, grapefruit and lychee.

The Tomme was too young; the Vacherin Fribourgeois was a month too old; the Gruyère brought the worst out in the wine; the Bagnes which on a previous occasion had caused an explosion, just did not perform; and the Stilton, which was the best match, was too grainy in texture and not creamy enough. The cherry red Dôle, which had a darkness and depth with aromas of myrtle and cassis was not happy with the choice of cheeses.

La Liaudisaz, Fully is a good place to stop and taste Madame Chappaz's biological range of whites and reds. For those who like Beaujolais, try her Gamay of which she has seven Grand Cru. For a superb red, the Grain Mariage, a mixture of Cornalin and Humagne Rouge which has an aroma of damp forest and deep cherry. The Grain Cornalin has an aroma of toast and has a sensual animal aftertaste. A last word about the Marsanne Blanc – it's silky with a complex palate that can accompany most dishes from delicate poultry to strong Breton lobsters.



Diego Mathier.

### The Crown Prince of Valasian Wine

When Diego Mathier one day realises his vision of the perfect vintage, he will become the king. Already, he is on the right track – it's paved with hundreds of gold and silver medals from both international and Swiss competitions. He will do it on his own terms because, as he says, "I'm the biggest critic of my own wines." He learnt about criticism at first hand when he asked the aristocrats of the great wines of Bordeaux to comment on his vintages. Now, after ten grape harvests, he admits that he's only beginning to understand what perfect wines are all about. He tells you that it took him four years to be calibrated on the same scale with Cédric Leyat, his oenologist.

Diego is the fourth generation of winemakers in Salgesch and he remembers with pride when, on his sixth birthday, his parents served sweet wine at his party for his thirteen young guests. He describes himself as a gourmet, or gniesser in the local patois, who enjoys good food and wine. Then he admits that he has some 7,000 bottles of wine in his private cellar.

Our wine tasting takes place in his vast cellar because he likes to move around the big stainless steel vats and heaped oak barrels where maceration and alcoholic fermentation occur. It's an inspiration to be present, in his own words: "The future is in the barrel." I'm eager to taste his wines which are approaching the peak of perfection. He is armed

with three wine glasses as Leyat will join us. We start with the whites – Chasselas, Petite Arvine, Marsanne (dry) and Chardonnay, and then move on to the reds. What I find is that all his wines have a good balance that he describes as the backbone of vintages. But it's the charisma and character that can be elusive. If there are wines that are high on Diego's percentage scale, it's the Ambassador des Domaines Diego Mathier (Pinot Noir) which is 90%, the red Folissimo which is 90-92%, the Gemma Ermitage Smaragd which is 90% and lastly, Petite Arvine de Molignon which is 88%.

When it comes to the accompaniment to his wines, Diego is an iconoclast. He breaks the rules! A wine like Pinot Noir which is the gentleman of reds can be drunk with fish. A Gamay with raclette. It would be remiss not to mention other members of his family who are also experienced winemakers. His mother Rosmarie whose Cuvée rouge and Cuvée white won awards and his wife, Nadia's superb Merlot. The winery, Adrian Mathier, in Salgesch (or Salquenen in French) is a must for any connoisseur as is the village which is renowned for its vintages.

### Irrigation in the Valais

There are over 200 watercourses ('bisse' in French, 'suonen' in German) in the Valais which funnel the glacial waters

Ojintse) and then into a large meadow. The bisses vary in length and include the longest – the Saxon at 21 miles and the

along the mountain slopes. When a rocky wall blocks their path, they run through wooden troughs suspended over vertiginous drops. The maintenance of the bisses and the careful distribution of their water plays an essential role in the lives of the peasants in the small mountain communities. Their water supply is supplemented by six of the tallest and highest dams in the world.

Nendaz, in the region of Sion, has the largest network in Europe – eight man-made watercourses run on terraces at altitudes of between 2,624 ft and 7,217 ft. The Bisse de Salins, which dates from 1435, is the oldest in the commune and provides water for the meadows, orchards and crops of three villages including Salins. The route travels through a forest, over a metal footbridge (which is suspended over the torrent of

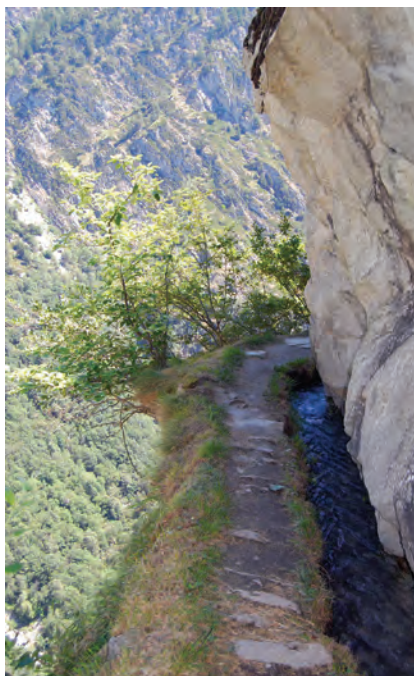
Baar, which has a magnificent view over the Rhône valley and irrigates apricot orchards for which Nendaz is well-known.

### Mountaineering

The Golden Age of mountaineering began with the founding of the Alpine Club, London, in 1857, and within a short period of eight years until 1865, the vast majority of the great alpine peaks were conquered. It was an epoch that was to culminate in the ascent by Edward Whymper of the most striking and the most inaccessible of them all, the Matterhorn, in the Valais.

The members of the Alpine Club were predominantly graduates of Oxford and Cambridge and belonged to the professions that demanded intellectual qualities such as university dons, civil servants, lawyers, clergymen and diplomats. An exception was Charles





Suonen of Baltschiederthal.

Barrington, an all-round sportsman and jockey, who on his first visit to Switzerland and with no experience of mountaineering, climbed the 13,025-ft Eiger in the Bernese Alps. His party set off in the evening and at 3 am they were on the slopes. His plan was to tackle the north-west face, whose cliffs appeared precipitous. Later, when they were confronted by an exceedingly steep, rocky climb, the guides declared the route impossible. "I said I would try," he wrote to his brother afterwards. "So with the rope coiled over my shoulders, I scrambled up, sticking like a cat to the rocks, which cut my fingers and at last got up say, 50 or 60 feet. I lowered the rope and the guides followed with its assistance." By noon, Barrington was proudly planting a British flag on the Eiger's summit and by early evening, he



had returned to the Wengern Alp hotel. The hotel owner fired off a large gun and he was lionized that evening. The insouciant Barrington capped his ascent of the Eiger with, "Thus ended my first and only visit to Switzerland."

Sir Leslie Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf, was another intrepid mountaineer and his enquiring mind was matched by athletic prowess. He was a Cambridge man who thought nothing of walking the 60 miles to London for dinner and then back the next day. If you could walk horizontally, he had reasoned, why not vertically. Between 1858 and 1871, he conquered nine peaks including the 12,021 ft. Blümlisalphorn in the Bernese Oberland, the nearby 13,375 ft Schreckhorn, the 13,848 ft Zinalrothorn and the rocky 12,900 ft Bietschhorn. He



Mont Blanc Massif from the Clochetons of Pierre Avoi.

once said of the Jungfrau Pass that it was "a pass which cannot be climbed, so we have to do it."

The list of the conquerors of the Valaisian Alps is endless: In 1861, Professor John Tyndall mastered one of the highest peaks, the 14,780 ft Weisshorn and one of the most beautiful; J.C. Davies climbed the nearby 14,757-ft Täschhorn; Thomas Stuart Kennedy had beaten the 14,295-ft Dent Blanche, a few miles west; and D.C. McDonald and F.C. Grove conquered the 13,684-ft Dent d'Hérens, to the west of the Matterhorn. But the biggest prize was taken by a young engraver, Edward Whymper, who at the age of 25 was an experienced climber.

Towering over the village of Zermatt at the head of St Nicholas valley, the 14,780-

ft Matterhorn was the last great alpine peak which remained unscaled. It was reputed by the locals to be inhabited by demons, dragons in fact, who would resist all human approaches. As the leader of the expedition, Whymper wrote, "There seemed to be a cordon drawn around it, up to which one might go but no farther." The guides also discouraged him, "Anything but Matterhorn, dear sir! Anything but Matterhorn."

Whymper reached the summit, writing: "At 1.40 pm the world was at our feet and the Matterhorn was conquered! Hurrah! Not a footstep could be seen." But tragedy would mar the expedition. Four members of his team died on the descent, making headline news throughout Europe.