Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 73 (2007)
Heft: [8]

Artikel: Vendange - Vintage Festival - Winzerfest
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944346

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HELVETIA

Magazine for the members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc
Helvetia is in its 73rd year

October 2007

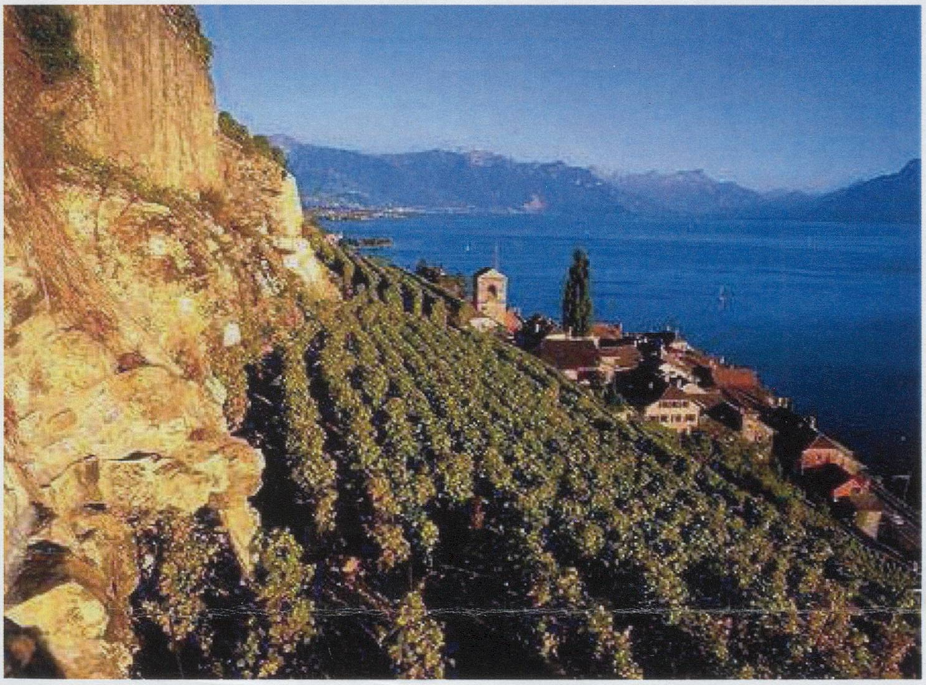
Vendange - Vintage Festival - Winzerfest

Vendange – Vintage Festival- is a highlight in the year, not only for the winegrowers, but for a much wider community.

Vineyards have been cultivated in Western Switzerland since the tenth century, and extensive vineyards are also found in Tessin, Schaffhausen, along the lakes of Zürich, Biel, Thun and in Eastern Switzerland, the Rhine Valley, where the Föhn "cooks the grapes".

In the Middle Ages, a monk is reported to have told a farmer's daughter who did not want to be a nun: "If you think working is such a good life, then go and tend your vines." The implication, of course, is that a wine-grower's life is not an easy one, neither for him nor his family. To ensure a good yield, the soil must always be tended, aerated, fertilized and weeded, the vines attended to throughout almost the whole year and protected against maraudering.

But between the hard work there are the Lesesonntage from late September to late October when colourful festivals take place with dancing, entertainments and processions.



Vineyards in Lavaux VD above lake Geneva

In winter the sloping vineyards look exceedingly strange, nothing but cracked, grey-black stumps rising just above the soil, with three or four gnarled fingers clawing the air. Soon, however – but not before 2nd February – the vines must be pruned and all superfluous shoots removed. Suddenly they will begin to sprout and the shoots to grow, and before they bloom they will have to be thinned. Then the bundles of stakes which were stacked against the vineyard walls will be fetched, and the shoots that have already grown to arm's length will be tied up.

In autumn, in the wine month October, the ripe grapes are picked – a moment that has been anticipated eagerly. Colourful groups of pickers, under expert supervision, flock up into the vineyards, and strong men collect the grapes from their buckets to fill large containers which they then carry on their backs down narrow steep paths to the large collecting troughs.

Among imported wines, the Swiss prefer those from Italy and France. Their sales topped 60 million and 50 million litres respectively last year. Spanish wines are in third place with 30 million litres. And New Zealand wines? They aren't even mentioned! Let's keep quiet about their quality and drink them ourselves. *tb*

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Secretaries: Please send in your notices for the November edition of Helvetia by October 15, 2007