
WEINGUT DONATSCH

MALANS, GRAUBÜNDEN

Not much of note appears to happen in the solid little Bündner Herrschaft village of Malans. The church clock strikes, the village fountain tinkles, a farmhand equipped with a stout stick pursues an errant Swiss brown cow down the street. We are in the land of Heidi (the famous Swiss tale was set in and around neighbouring Maienfeld), it's true, so a certain rustic simplicity goes with the territory. Yet this tiny, unassuming village is home to one of the country's greatest and best-known wineries, Weingut Donatsch.

Peter Donatsch bought the Zum Ochsen tavern and winery in Malans in 1897. For decades this remained a simple, family affair, where the classic pearl barley soups, cold meats and cheese of the region were served with carafes of house wine. The family still owns and runs the winery and the restaurant, and they have remained remarkably faithful to the same delicious, regional dishes – plenty of star-spangled, off-duty chefs can be found around the cobalt-blue tiled stove which continues to warm the wood-panelled dining room, tucking delightedly into bowls of Bündner Gerstensuppe. What has changed fundamentally are the wines. In place of the jug-wines of Peter Donatsch's time, the wine list at Zum Ochsen today features an eye-rubbing selection of the finest bottles from the three B's – Bündner Herrschaft, where Donatsch is one of the prime producers, as well as Bordeaux and Burgundy.

It was Peter's great-grandson, Thomas, who started to shake things up on the wine front in the 1970s. From his young age, he began to acquire a taste for the finest wines from around the world, notably from Burgundy and Bordeaux.

In today's Swiss winegrowing world, oak barrels and Burgundian aspirations are the norm for any winemaker of ambition, and experimentation with grape varieties not traditionally associated with the country (or region) is commonplace. Back in the seventies, though, when Thomas began ageing his Pinot Noir in oak barrels and planting Chardonnay where formerly the only (white) option was Riesling-Sylvaner, he was treated if not exactly as a criminal, then certainly as a wine revolutionary.

In 2001, Thomas's son Martin, who after his wine studies had travelled the world to work in Tasmania, Bordeaux, Burgundy, Spain and South Africa, took over from his father as chief winemaker. It must have been hard, following such a trailblazer, but Martin has had the wisdom to build on and take forward this tiny enterprise with a huge reputation. He has somewhat sharpened the focus, which today is on Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, as well as on the ancient and extremely rare, highly acidic, long-lived variety Completer. The history of this grape in Graubünden goes back to the 14th century, when it was mentioned as the wine reserved for the Benedictine monks in Chur as a reward at the end of the evening office of compline (*Completorium*). "We're the largest producers of Completer in the world nowadays", jokes Martin – hard to dispute, since barely anyone else makes it.

Above all, and to his great credit, Martin is resisting the temptation to grow: they still farm a mere 4.5 hectares with grapes bought in from a further 1.5 hectares. "We don't want to grow –

that way we can keep tabs on things,” he says, “and it leaves us time to travel, eat well and taste others’ wines!” Donatsch wines are always oversubscribed, and three-quarters of them are sold in Switzerland, mainly to the country’s top restaurants and hotels, with a few lucky private clients. Homeopathic doses are exported, but the quantities are so minute, it’s more of an ambassadorial gesture than a commercial one. It’s clear that Martin relishes sharing his wines with people who have never met them before: “It’s easy to surprise people with Swiss wines because they have no preconceptions – our wine is almost unknown abroad”. One of his best surprises came in 2016 when their top Pinot Noir, 2013 vintage, was named one of the world’s best Pinots outside Burgundy by *Decanter* magazine.

Rather than producing site-specific wines (named for the particular plot on which they are grown), the Donatsch approach, which consciously follows the Burgundian model, is to divide their wines into three categories: Tradition, Passion and Unique. Tradition, explains Martins, would correspond to a village wine; Passion is their equivalent of a Premier Cru, while Unique positions itself in the Grand Cru category. The differences between the three levels are the yields, the sites in which the wines grow and the question of new or used oak. Tradition wines are all aged in used barrels, Passion in a combination of

new and used and Unique in all new barrels. All Donatsch wines are famed for their elegance and longevity; all are mostly sold out.

The most convivial place to taste Donatsch wines is in the cosy *Stube* of Zum Ochsen. But if the chance presents itself to taste a range of these outstanding Swiss wines in the vaulted, 14th-century Completerkeller across the road, recently restored by them, don’t miss it. The name is no coincidence. As Martin suggests, it’s just possible that the ancient Completer may have been made in this cool, pared-down space, before being shipped down the road to the monks in Chur for their evening office of compline.



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WINES TO LOOK OUT FOR:

- Chardonnay Passion
- Chardonnay Unique
- Completer Malanserrebe
- Pinot Noir Tradition
- Pinot Noir Passion
- Pinot Noir Unique

Price range 22 to 40 SFr.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Wines may be bought at the family inn Winzerstube zum Ochsen from Monday to Friday from 12 noon; Saturday and Sunday 10–6, where simple, delicious food is served (with a special mention for their pearl barley soup (*Bündner Gerstensuppe*)).



