

Saving Rare Wine Grapes From Extinction

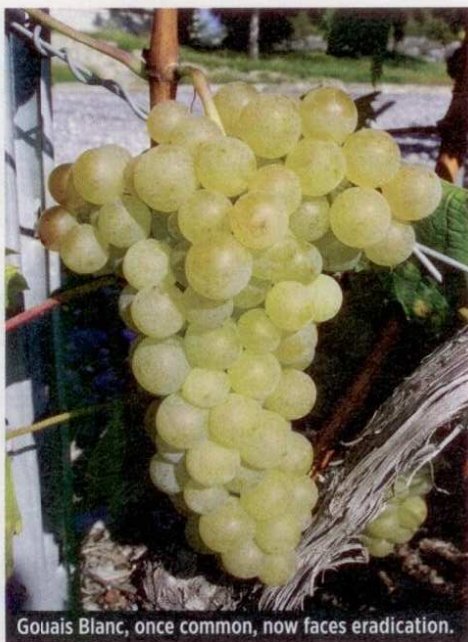
For more than five years, one of the world's foremost grapevine geneticists and a dedicated team of volunteers have been working to halt the destruction of an unwanted vineyard in the mountains of Switzerland, where four incredibly rare grape varieties are planted.

In 2010, Swiss winemaker Josef-Marie Chanton, a pioneer in grapevine preservation, contacted grapevine geneticist and fellow countryman José Vouillamoz about a terraced vineyard in the Haut Valais region. Some of the vines are upwards of 80 years old, and the entire parcel was scheduled to be ripped up. But among the 12 planted varieties in the vineyard, four were rare: Gwäss, Completer, Himbertscha and a previously undiscovered grape.

Gwäss, more commonly known as Gouais Blanc, is a white grape variety that was once widely planted in northern France and Germany. Despite a reputation for producing low-quality wines, it parented a surprising number of "noble" grape varieties. Crosses with Pinot, for instance, gave rise to Chardonnay, Aligoté and Gamay Noir, while crosses with Traminer produced Riesling. Because of its propensity for high yields, Gouais Blanc often made uninteresting wines, and was eventually replaced with other grapes or even banned in some regions. "Valais is one of the only places on earth where Gouais Blanc has been continuously cultivated since the Middle Ages," said Vouillamoz. As for the unknown variety, they believe it is native to the region and have dubbed it VinEsch Roter after the nearby village of Esch.

It took the two men a few weeks to find enough people to pitch in for the purchase of the vineyard. Since 2011, bands of volunteers have spent weekends rebuilding the stone walls of the 27 vineyard terraces. The half-acre parcel is accessible only on foot. Volunteers receive a bottle of wine made from the vineyard for their efforts.

—Lynn Alley



Gouais Blanc, once common, now faces eradication.