

Nick Malgieri
SWISS International Air Lines

EXPLORING THE VALAIS

Third largest of the Swiss cantons, the Valais was called *Vallis Peonina* (Upper Rhone Valley) by the Romans. The ancient valley passed into the hands of the kingdom of Burgundy in the ninth century and was ceded to the Bishop of Sion about a hundred years later. Though the Valais was associated with the Swiss Confederation as early as 1529, it didn't become a full-fledged canton until 1815.

Composed of 13 separate municipalities, the Valais is the home of the Matterhorn, that majestically pointy mountain peak that has become a symbol of the canton and even of Switzerland in general. The picture postcard mountain scenery, winter sports, and summer hiking draw visitors from all over the world, yet the Valais has remained as pristine and untouched as possible – you won't see the mountains and valleys dotted with high-rises and factories when you arrive.

The Valais is major wine country and indisputably produces the best wines in Switzerland, the rivals of any of the best of France or Italy. The good news is that they are widely available when you visit, though very few of the best are ever exported.

Most of my suggestions below are cantered around the major towns of the Valais: Sion, the capital, Sierre, and Martigny. I've included a little about Grimentz, Verbier, and the Fafleralp, all worthy destinations if you have time for a day trip into the mountains.

GETTING THERE AND GETTING AROUND

Sion is a 1 1/2-hour direct train ride from Geneva, and about twice that from Zurich. If you go via Zurich, one change of train is necessary, and the connection through Lausanne is a little faster than the one through Brig. Once you're there, you can easily get around by train, though a trip to one of the mountain destinations will have to be by Postauto (bus), which also leaves from the train station.

I've visited different areas in the Valais about half a dozen times in the past few years. My guide for some of those visits was Melchior Kalbermatten, the guiding light of the Ordre de la Channe du Valais. The Channe, as it's commonly referred to, is an honorary society of wine growers and enthusiasts of which I was made a Chevalier (knight!) in March of 2004, a happy moment for me.

Sion

Capital of the Valais since the tenth century, Sion is a lively town in which wine practically runs through the streets. There are ample opportunities for tasting and buying, as well as fine tables to enjoy the best of Valais food accompanied by its native wines.

Tasting in Sion: Here are a couple of places that offer wine tastings on site.

Le Verre a Pied

Grand-Pont 29

Phone from the US: 011 4127 321 1380

Open 7 days a week (but closed from 1PM to 4:30PM), you can have a tasting of 5 different wines from the Valais for CHF10 to 15. A quick walk from the Sion train station, it's an easy and pleasant stop.

Provins Valais

Rue de l'Industrie 22

Phone from the US: 011 4127 328 6666

Website: www.provins.ch

Another great place to taste the local wines, this tasting room is closed Sundays and also from noon to 1:30PM. Tastings of 6 wines are available for around CHF10.

Dining in Sion

I recently enjoyed a fine meal at l'Enclos de Valere, a traditional restaurant in Sion. Focusing on seasonal cuisine, the restaurant has a beautiful outdoor garden, some of it under a protective bamboo canopy, just in case there is a sprinkle of rain during your meal. Summertime brings excellent local asparagus, wild mushrooms and a host of fish and meat dishes, some simply grilled and others in more elaborate preparations with excellent sauces and garnishes. During the colder months local game stars on the menu and there is also a continuation of fish and seafood dishes. Among the fine dishes I tasted there were a salad with rare duck breast and a puff pastry case with a ragout of wild mushrooms – show me a pastry menu item and I always order it! Owner Christoph Picard and chef Antoine Bornet are natives of the Valais and have been running the restaurant for over twelve years with overwhelming success.

During the summer they are open every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, from 9AM to midnight, closed only Sunday dinner in May, June and September. From October 1 to April 30, they are open from 10AM to 2PM and from 6PM to midnight, closed Sunday and Monday.

L'Enclos de Valere

Rue des Chateaux

Sion

Phone from the US: 011 4127 323 3230

Fax from the US: 011 4127 323 3203

A Raclette Lunch Near Sion

The Valais is also the home of that totally original cheese specialty, raclette. Originally made by holding the cut side of a half-wheel of cheese up to an open fire so that the exposed area melted, nowadays raclette is usually made on a special horizontal grill with a stand at its base to hold the wheel of cheese. No matter what method is used to melt the cheese, it is then scraped onto a hot plate and rushed to your table, so that you can enjoy the warm, still-melted texture of the cheese. Already at the table you'll have a small napkin-lined basket of boiled new potatoes in their skins and a bowl of pickled gherkins and onions, all of which accompany the lush melted cheese. Wash this down with a perfect white Valais wine such as a Fendant and you'll go on eating raclette (you can have as many portions of the melted cheese as you like) until the cows literally come home.

I've enjoyed raclette many times in Switzerland, but my most memorable recent lunch was at the Chalet Binii in Saviese, near Sion. My host was Melchior Kalbermatten, a living encyclopedia of Swiss wines of all regions, especially those of his beloved Valais. He had chosen the Chalet Binii because of the excellence of its kitchen and wine cellar and neither proved to be a disappointment. We started lunch with a selection of cured meats including air-dried beef, raw ham and dried sausage, often referred to as an asiette valaisanne (Valais plate), a perfect beginning to a meal of raclette. After that I have to admit I lost count of how many plates of raclette we actually consumed – the clean, cool mountain air sharpens the appetite and makes it easy to enjoy large amounts of this wonderful cheese specialty. The setting, the excellent wine and the delicious meats and cheese made a memorable country lunch.

Chalet Binii (Closed Tuesday and Wednesday)

Chez Jean-Claude

CH 1965 Saviese

Phone from the US: 011 4127 395 1217

Fax from the US: 011 4127 395 4029

Fine Food and Drink in the Loetschental

Last spring I had a wonderful visit to the Hotel Fafleralp in the Loetschental, about an hour from Sion by car. Before I get any further, let me tell you that it's also accessible in warm weather by train from Brig or Bern to Goppenstein, then a change to a post bus from Goppenstein to Fafleralp.

The hotel is built in typical Swiss rustic style, but there is nothing rustic about the food. Kitchen chef Christian Henzen who has manned the stoves there for over 10 years now, produces a hearty, yet delicate regional food, based largely on the culinary traditions of the Valais. One of the specialties I enjoyed was Loetschentaler Fleischsuppe, a hearty broth with bits of ham and beef, barley, leeks, and carrots, and croutons covered with a local mountain cheese. I also tasted some delicious locally-raised lamb served with a melting potato gratin, and concluded the excellent meal with a delicate apple tart. With the soup came a local wine, a Petite Arvine 2001, and with the lamb a unique blended red wine known as La Corsee – it is made from a combination of Pinot Noir, Gamay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Rouge du Pays.

Excellent and simple rustic rooms are available for overnights, and the hotel also has a casual self-service restaurant for hikers, on the ground floor.

Hotel Fafleralp

CH-3919 Fafleralp-Loetschental

Phone from the US: 011 4127 939 1451

Fax from the US: 011 4127 939 1453

Website: www.fafleralp.ch

E-mail: welcome@fafleralp.ch

Wine in Sierre

Here's a perfect recipe for one-stop travel fun: The wine museum, tasting room and restaurant at the Chateau de Villa in Sierre. The 17th century chateau houses a museum of wine and wine making in the Valais, including a giant press that dates from 1756.

The tasting room or oenotheque, is open daily from 10:30AM to 1:00PM and again from 4:30PM to 8:30PM. It features the wines of several makers each week by the glass, as well as many other wines of the region. Of course it's possible to buy single bottles or cases to take away, also.

Finally, the restaurant serves an excellent raclette. When I was there they were featuring three different local cheeses in succession for the raclette – of course you could also stop at any cheese and have multiple portions of just one as you went along.

When you arrive in Sierre, stop in at the tourist office which is right at the train station. There are brochures and maps about the vineyard areas, and schedules for different wine-centered events that take place throughout the year. If you arrive in late summer, you may be in time for an open-vineyard tasting, where several wine makers offer tastes of their best vintages in a festival atmosphere.

Valais Wine Museum
Chateau de Villa
Rue Sainte-Catherine 4
CH 3960 Sierre
Phone from the US: 011 4127 455 1896
Fax from the US: 011 4127 456 2429

Casual Dining in Martigny

Almost everyone who visits Martigny is there to see the Fondation Pierre Gianadda, a wonderful museum built at the site of some of the most important ruins of Martigny's Roman past. Aside from the museum's collections, it also hosts a musical series that attracts such luminaries as Ruggero Raimondi, I Solisti Veneti, and Cecilia Bartoli every year. With all this high culture and beautiful music, I sometimes yearn for a simple meal, and found just that right in the center of town, at a casual bistro called La Vache Qui Vole (The Flying Cow). The ground floor is a pleasant wine bar with over 20 selections available by the glass – this is the Valais don't forget, where some of Switzerland's best wine is made. Upstairs in the dining room, a simple menu of pastas, salads, risotto, and vegetable dishes is available. I started with an enormous mixed salad and went on to demolish a really good dish of eggplant baked with cheese and tomato sauce, similar to eggplant Parmigiana, but the eggplant had not been fried first. A good glass of Dole completed this simple but satisfying lunch. There are any number of little casual restaurants right on the same street as La Vache Qui Vole, but this one is the best for my money.

La Vache Qui Vole
Place Centrale 2B
CH-1920 Martigny
Phone from the US: 011 4127 722 3833
Fax from the US: 011 4127 722 3834
Website: www.lavachequivole.ch
E-mail: info@lavachequivole.ch

Grimentz

I have to admit that until recently I wasn't familiar with this jewel of a village tucked high up in the Val d'Anniviers in the Valais canton. Easily reached by a less than 30-minute bus ride from Sierre, Grimentz is a charming village with a section of sixteenth century wooden houses, including the Maison Bourgeoisiale (c. 1550), a semi-public building that houses a wine cellar, meeting and banquet rooms for the town's elders, or bourgeoisie.

A walk through the oldest part of Grimentz will reveal houses and granaries all built on posts surmounted by immense round pieces of slate to keep mice from climbing up the posts and arriving for a visit. Many houses have a cave or wine cellar with barrels of the family's wines, usually including a barrel or two of the famous "vin de glacier" or glacier wine, made by drawing off some of the wine for special occasions and adding new wine to the barrel every year, to keep the supply intact.

Grimentz also has a communal oven, the "Four Banal," where demonstrations of bread making are occasionally given. The oven used to be fired up four times a year when each family baked about 120 loaves at a time – enough to tide them over to the next baking day 3 months later. The current oven was built in 1880 and is still used to bake the rye and whole wheat bread of the region.

PS: I tasted a tomato fondue in Grimentz: Half the wine in the fondue recipe is replaced with a highly-seasoned, not too thick tomato sauce. Aside from dunking bread cubes into the fondue the standard way, you may also ladle it over boiled potatoes on your plate – a great hearty lunch before or after hiking through those hills covered with the ancient wooden houses.

For more information about Grimentz contact:

Office du Tourisme
CH-3961 Grimentz
Telephone from the US: 011 4127 475 1493
Fax from the US: 011 4127 475 2891
Website: www.grimentz.ch
E-mail: grimentz@sierre-anniviers.ch

Hotel Rosalp, Verbier Superstar Chef Roland Pierroz

One of the great culinary stars of the Valais (and all of Europe, for that matter) holds forth at a lovely family-owned hotel in the ski resort of Verbier. Home to the Hotel Rosalp, the Pierroz family business since 1946, Verbier has gone from a 116-bed sleepy mountain town to a world class resort in the intervening years.

Roland Pierroz' parents had a pastry shop in Martigny, not far away, and were enchanted with Verbier after a short vacation visit there. So they pulled up roots and decided to open the Rosalp, then a small café and tea room, in 1946. Within ten years, the tea room had transformed into a restaurant serving casual family meals, and of course all that changed, when son Roland returned to the family business after stints in luxury hotels and restaurants in Switzerland, France, Germany and England. From 1961 to 1969 the current concept of the gastronomic restaurant at the Rosalp developed gradually. Then a casual restaurant, La Pinte (bistro), overseen by Pierroz' wife Mimi was opened in 1977 and a full renovation of the gastronomic restaurant took place a few years later.

Most recently, Pierroz' daughter Valerie entered the kitchens, reassuring a continuation of the family-run business well into the 21st century.

I visited Verbier in late summer – there was no snow, but the cool mountain weather was a welcome change from the hot temperatures at lower elevations. My room at the Rosalp was the picture of country chalet charm – it was all paneled in light wood and the floral curtains and bed clothes completed a perfect rustic effect. The highlight of my visit was the Sunday night dinner prepared by Chef Pierroz – and it was worth waiting (and traveling) for.

We began with a spinach ravioli with a light shellfish filling in a slightly spicy butter sauce. After that was an escalope of perfectly sautéed foie gras with warm vegetables a la grecque (stewed in olive oil and herbs) and a crisp potato trellis. Lobster with zucchini, fried zucchini flowers and a saffron sauce was followed by a poached chicken with black truffles in an ivory-colored cream sauce. Of course there was chocolate soufflé for dessert – and I did finish my portion of it – it was too good not to!

We enjoyed excellent Swiss wines, among them an Opale Barrique 1998 from Giroud in Chamoson, a Syrah 1998 from Phillipoz in Leytron, and a Johannisberg 1999 from St. Martin, Domaine du Mont d'Or.

It was an unforgettable experience, and one where the beautiful accommodations were the equal of the magnificent meal.

Hotel Rosalp

Route du Medran

CH-1936 Verbier

Phone from the US: 011 4127 771 6323

Fax from the US: 011 4127 771 1059

Website: www.rosalp.ch

E-mail: rosalp@relaischateaux.com

Wines of the Valais

Bordeaux, move over – here comes the Valais with some of the best wines to be encountered anywhere. The Valais (Wallis in German) is Switzerland's most prolific wine-growing area – the production there amounts to 40% of the country's annual wine. It has the distinction of producing excellent table wines in prodigious quantities (Fendant is its most popular white and Dole its most plentiful red). But the Valais also makes "connoisseur's" wines, small vintages that rival the best wines produced by any other country.

There are three main regions of wine growing in the Valais:

1. The right bank of the Rhone between Loeche and Martigny, responsible for 85% of the vineyard area;
2. The Haut-Valais, notably the vineyards at Visperterminen -- at around 3,500 feet this is the highest commercial vineyard in Europe;
3. The left bank of the Rhone from Sierre to Lake Geneva.

White grape varieties abound and Chasselas is used to make the white Fendant which accounts for almost half the white wine produced. Sylvaner is used for the white wine called Johannisberg. Specialty grapes used to make unique white wines are Amigne, Arvine, Humagne Blanc, and Reze, grapes native to the Valais and found nowhere else.

Red grape growth is dominated by Pinot Noir and Gamay but native grapes such as Humagne Rouge and Cornalin also have a place in the vineyards. Continued experimentation with grape varieties has led to the development of Diolinoir, a new grape crossbred at the Federal Research Center in Changins

Besides its popular white and red wines, the Valais produces excellent rose wines, notably Oeil de Perdrix (eye of the partridge), made from Pinot Noir, and Rose de Gamay.

How does the pear get into the bottle?

Martigny in the Valais is famous for its exquisite pear brandy, Williamine, made by the Morand company. Like all clear, colorless eaux-de-vie, or fruit brandies, pear eau de vie is made from a mash of fermented fruit that is distilled but not aged in wood, to help preserve the fresh perfume of the fruit. Morand is reputed to be the first company of distillers to bottle the brandy with a fresh pear in the bottle. This is how it works: After the pear trees blossom and the pears begin to form, a bottle is slipped over a pear on almost every branch of the tree. The bottles are supported by wire or plastic cages and are placed upside down over the pears to avoid collecting rainwater and possibly causing the pears in the bottles to rot. The other pears are removed from the branches containing bottles to channel all the tree's nutrients to the pears that are growing in the bottles. When the pears are mature, the bottles (and pears) are given a quick washing and drying and the bottles are filled with the pear brandy. A wonderful gift or a fun conversation piece, pear brandy with the pear in the bottle will astound everyone who sees it. Besides that, it is the perfect after-dinner drink, especially if it is sipped chilled from chilled glasses – the low temperature cuts down on the perception of the alcohol and brings out the fruit's perfume.

If you visit Martigny for a look at the museum, or to attend one of its frequent summertime outdoor concerts, don't neglect to pick up a bottle or two of pear eau de vie – you won't regret it.

Distillerie Morand

CH-1920 Martigny

Phone from the US: 011 4127 722 2036

Fax from the US: 011 4127 722 7530

E-mail: info@morand.ch

Website: www.morand.ch

Recipe: Baked Tomatoes and Eggs from the Valais

This is a perfect lunch or brunch dish. Serve the tomatoes with a tossed salad or some warm rice.

Makes 4 servings

8 small tomatoes

Salt and pepper

Fresh basil, if available

Dried oregano if basil is not available

8 large eggs

1 cup Swiss Gruyere, coarsely grated

One 1 1/2-quart gratin dish or other shallow baking dish, buttered

1. Set a rack in the middle level of the oven and preheat to 350 degrees.
2. Cut the top third from each tomato and gently hollow them out using a small spoon.
3. Place the hollowed out tomatoes in the prepared pan and bake them for about 10 minutes, just to cook them partially. This can be done earlier in the day or even the day before. Cover and refrigerate the tomatoes and bring them to room temperature before continuing.
4. Season the tomato shells with salt, pepper, and torn fresh basil or a pinch of dried oregano.
5. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Break an egg into each tomato and sprinkle with some of the cheese.
6. Bake for about 10 to 15 minutes, or until the whites of the eggs are set and the yolks are still liquid.

Serve immediately.

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