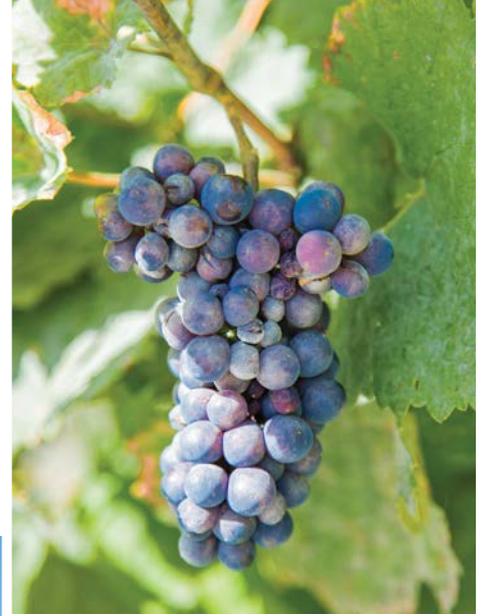


WEEKENDER

RICH LANDS

The lush terroir surrounding Lake Geneva is home to rolling vineyards, historic towns and enough Michelin stars to light up the night sky. Diana Hubbell sets off for a weekend.



Vineyards intertwine along Lake Geneva. Above right: Grapes at the ready. Opposite: A picturesque pour; delicious dishes.



With his puffed, rosy cheeks and rotund figure, Domenico Bovy looks every bit like the feasting friar of so many medieval tales. The man knows his wine. He's leading me through what loosely could be called a tasting, although I've never in my life been to one was so generous or so personal. As the afternoon winds on, Domenico has several tables in stitches telling stories from the region's past, gesturing broadly to the sweeping panorama of glacial valley slopes and Lake Geneva's placid waters.

The wines here aged steps from my table in 50-year-old oak barrels, each hand-painted with a whimsical set of caricatures by Domenico's grandfather Maurice. Although diverse, they all come from grapes that grow on these vertiginous lands. Two identical chasselas vines growing 20 meters apart can produce two different wines.

Welcome to Lavaux, a UNESCO World Heritage cultural landscape and Switzerland's second biggest wine-producing region, a land that's been growing grapes since monks first

tamed it in the 11th century. The area's spectacular scenery has made it a preferred destination of the global elite for decades. With verdant trellised inclines, villages dotted with bloom-bedecked cottages, and that dreamy vision of the Alps in the distance, it's easy to see why. A-listers from Audrey Hepburn to Coco Chanel have owned houses here.

Me? I'm just here for the food. Oh, and the wine, of course. People around here like to say that Lake Geneva's vineyards flourish in the heat of three suns: the direct sunlight and its reflections off of the lake waters and stone terraces. Practically everyone here is or knows someone involved in winemaking and the way of life is still as tethered to growing cycles as it was three

generations ago. Despite the fact that vines from more than 200 independent growers cover just about every piece of land, most of the wine never travels more than a few kilometers down the road. The terrain that renders vintages so varied also makes large yields impossible.

Not that anyone here seems to mind. Each year's crop is just more to share with friends, family and whomever else happens to be passing through.

Lausanne is the urban equivalent of an iceberg: three- and four-story restaurants, bars and shopping centers lurk below the surface, leaving the hilly, cobblestone alleys, sandstone buildings and contemporary art installations above

undisturbed. A quick stroll through these picturesque streets on a Saturday morning reveals that Lavaux is just as passionate about its food as its wine. As the sun rises, vendors crowd the streets hawking autumn's finest. There are fat figs, plump chestnuts, interlocking Hokkaido pumpkins and a whole rainbow of the season's final heirloom tomatoes.

Those same perfect ingredients appear later in my lunch at Auberge de l'Onde, an old favorite of Charlie Chaplin's, where I sample a porcini risotto wrapped in raw-cured ham. They no doubt have something to do with my dinner at Le Côté Jardin, where the plank-grilled seabass rests on a bed of foraged chanterelles and fried zucchini blossoms so light they practically levitate.

The restaurants in this speck of land boast a collective 19 Michelin stars and 1,434 points in the Gault & Millau guides, all from chefs striving to find ever more ingenious ways to use the local embarrassment of culinary riches.

Small wonder then that I still think wistfully about my dinner at La Véranda. With its crystal chandeliers, starched white linens and meticulously decorative interior, the restaurant has an over-the-top grandeur seldom seen these days. Of course, it doesn't hurt that the delicately seared fish with fava bean coulis, artichokes and ricotta gnocchi is practically perfect in every way. Virtually everything on my plate and in my glass came from within 30 kilometers of my table—just another sign of the richness of this land. +



STAY

Lausanne Palace & Spa

Rue du Grand-Chêne 7, 1003 Lausanne; 41-21/331-3131; lausanne-palace.com; doubles from CHF318.

Grand Hotel du Luc

Rue d'Italie 1, 1800 Vevey; 41-21/925-0606; hoteldulac-vevey.ch; doubles from CHF450.

EAT + DRINK

The Côté Jardin

Rue du Grand-Chêne 7, 1003 Lausanne; 41-21/331-3131; lausanne-palace.com; dinner for two CHF180.

La Pomme de Pin

The placemats may be paper, but the food is as good today as it was when Winston Churchill used to frequent the place. Rue Cité Derrière 11-13 1005 Lausanne; 41-21/323-4656; lapomme.depin.ch; dinner for two CHF160.

Auberge de l'Onde

Centre du Village, Chemin Neuf, 1071 Saint-Saphorin; 41-21/925-4900; aubergedelonde.ch; set dinner for two CHF236.

La Véranda

Rue d'Italie 1, 1800 Vevey; 41-21/925-0606; hoteldulac-vevey.ch; dinner for two CHF180.

Domaine Bovy

Rue du Bourg de Plaît 15, 1071 Chexbres; 41-21/946-5125; domainebovy.ch.

Lavaux Vinorama

A showcase of more than 260 wines from the region's vineyards. Route du Lac 2, 1071 Rivaz; 41-21/946-3131; lavaux-vinorama.ch; wine tastings for two CHF26.

