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Winemakers mount barricades over oak chips

Several Swiss winegrowing regions have banned the use of oak chips to flavour premium wines, overruling a new law enabling them to do so. They say the practice is alien to the country's centuries-old winemaking tradition and threatens to undermine the quality of Swiss wines. On January 1 this year the Swiss government followed the European Union in allowing the addition of wood chips to wine. This cost-saving practice has been popular in the United States, South America, Australia and South Africa because it speeds the ageing process and removes the need for long and expensive storage in oak barrels.

But several winegrowing cantons are refusing to play ball and have outlawed oak chips for wines bearing the AOC quality label, which account for three-quarters of Swiss production. They include Valais, the country's leading wine region, Geneva, Ticino and Neuchatel. Using wood chips is at least ten times cheaper than barrel ageing, but the wine growers state that their culture and expertise are more important. Under the new legislation winemakers who use oak chips are not allowed to label their wines "aged in oak barrels" but they do not have to stipulate the fact that chips have been used during the winemaking process.

In the "Manual of Winemaking Practice for Australia and New Zealand - Making Good Wine", the author Bryce Rankine states "During fermentation, winemakers sometimes add oak chips or shavings to impart oak complexity. This must be carefully done since harsh flavour and oxidation can result ... Such addition is never a satisfactory replacement for oak-cask maturation." *There you have it; the Swiss are not just old-fashioned traditionalists...*

Wine in Switzerland

The consumption of wine in Switzerland fell again slightly last year, to just over 270 million litres, of which just over 50 million litres were Swiss white and 51 million litres were Swiss red. One of the main reasons for the decline is the reduction of the blood alcohol limit for drivers to 0,5 promil. Another trend is for people to drink wines that are of higher quality.

Vineyards with the Pinot noir grapes continue to be the most popular in Switzerland, covering

an area of almost 4'500 hectares, while those with Chasselas and Müller-Thurgau grapes are on the decline.

Valais is the main wine-producing region of Switzerland with vines covering more than 5'000 ha. Vaud is second with almost 4'000 ha, followed by Geneva (almost 1'300 ha), Ticino (over 1'000 ha), Zurich (over 600 ha), Neuchatel (almost 600 ha) and Schaffhausen (470 ha). *tb*



No one possesses the truth - Anabaptist Year

One of Switzerland's oldest yet nearly forgotten Protestant churches has been thrust into the spotlight this year. The decision by the authorities of canton Bern to support the commemorative events of Anabaptist Year 2007 was bold since it puts the accent on the injustices done by their predecessors to Anabaptists, today mainly known as Mennonites.

Among the highlights are historical exhibitions on the most radical wing of the Reformation, plays, presentations, an international gathering and tours of the two Swiss regions where Anabaptism once flourished, the Emmental and the Jura.

What sets the visitors apart this year, is that they are not North American Mennonites or Amish wishing to learn about the hard life of their ancestors, but people from Switzerland's recognized Protestant church.

Until the 1970s the Mennonite congregations remained so fearful of persecution that they refused to allow a membership list to be drawn. Swiss Mennonite congregations do not stand out as some free churches do with controversial positions on issues such as creationism or through proselytising. As

members of the Mennonite World Conference, they share common beliefs such as renouncing violence and being committed to their communities through charity work.

"Our position is that no one possesses the truth. The Bible was laid out to one and all by the Holy Ghost and therefore we have to live with the fact that there are many interpretations. We don't expect that there is someone above us in the church who has the last word", one of the leaders said.

In 1525, former associates of Ulrich Zwingli began to baptise adults. These "Swiss brethren" as they became known rejected the new reformed church and founded congregations independent of the state. Similar movements soon developed across western Europe. Followers, who would be called Mennonites after Menno Simmons, an Anabaptist leader from the Netherlands, were persecuted for refusing to participate in the state-run church. Internal divisions led a radical faction, the Amish, to split in 1693. Members took their name from Anabaptist leader Jakob Ammann, who came from the Simmental. There are believed to be around 600'000 descendants of Swiss Anabaptists living in North