



Gilles Besse (left) and Sébastien Fabbi aptly toasting the takeoff of Swiss wines at Altitude, restaurant overlooking the perpetual motion of flights in and out of Genève Aéroport

ELLEN WALLACE / HANS-PETER SIFFERT

SWISS WINE TAKES OFF

An interview with the two faces behind Swiss Wine Promotion: Gilles Besse, president of Swiss Wine Promotion and Sébastien Fabbi, secretary general

The best place to catch up with the two men, perpetual travelers, who have been leading Switzerland's wine marketing board since 2012 is at a crossroads. Geneva airport's "Altitude" restaurant overlooks the intersection of France and Switzerland. Light streams in through the high glass windows that give onto the tarmac. A nicely chilled white wine from indigenous Swiss grapes is just right as the sun beats down outside in this exceptionally hot summer of 2015.

Gilles Besse, president of Swiss Wine Promotion, Sébastien Fabbi, secretary general, and I talk about the latest news, a dip in Swiss wine consumption, and we debate how much truth there is in clichés about Swiss wine.

The new phase of the SWP "Observatoire" is reviewed: solid data about wine sales is crucial to achieving the association's goals. Educating the world about Swiss wine, not just selling it, is one of these. Another is spending available promotion funds "optimally".

Raising the profile of Swiss wines is a slow and steady tight-rope walk, I deduct, one that requires money, of course, but also information, focus, concentration and an exquisite sense of balance. Diplomacy through compromise is a Swiss strength whose downside is slowness. Trying to please all the country's diverse and proud wine regions while helping the world at large understand "Swiss" wines will take time.

August figures show declining consumption of wine. Should the wine industry be worried?

SÉBASTIEN FABBI - Demand is strong. The drop is linked to the franc – you have to think about cross-border shopping.

GILLES BESSE - Those figures aren't included in the report, so you don't see real consumption. Wineries' shelves are empty. If we'd had more wine we would have sold it. The figures just show volume, not value. In Switzerland, the volume went down a bit, but not the value – this has gone up.

SÉBASTIEN FABBI - People are drinking less at lunch and in the evening during the week. They are waiting for the weekend, when they drink good quality wines that cost more.

Shifting lifestyles are part of the change. People want to be fit, to eat more sensibly, drink less alcohol but maybe better wine. What are producers doing to adapt? Your role?

GILLES BESSE - We enter the picture for the part of the business that makes CHF 10 wines and on up. Habits are changing. We need to be aware of these changes and we need to support the market. For 50 years Swiss cellars focused on producing more and more wine, but then about 20 years

Ellen Wallace
is an international writer, journalist and editor in St. Prex.

ago we started to emphasize quality. At that time Ljubljana (Slovenia) was the only established wine competition. Now there are a lot of them and producers know they must be able to show silver or gold medals.

They understand the need to have quality wines. Schools, Changins for example, will have to teach them how to re-orient their products.

SÉBASTIEN FABBI - The wine regions are also working on developing this. Our role is purely promotional. We analyze the market and what's happening, which is why we have set up the "Observatoire". We need three years to build it. This year we're in phase one, concentrating on supermarkets – large wine outlets – to collect their sales data. Next year we'll be working with a representative group of all types of wineries and we'll track who they've sold wine to. We'll be gathering data on vintages, prices, and more. It's a marketing tool. Canton Vaud was a pioneer in this. The IVVS (Interprofession de la Vigne et du Vin Suisse) then asked us to coordinate it for the country as a whole.

There was great enthusiasm when you both joined SWP in 2012. The dust had settled from the 2006 bankruptcy of the first attempt at a national marketing board, Swiss Wine Communication. Today?

SÉBASTIEN FABBI - Each region was doing its own promotion, and competition between regions was stiff. Today, producers realize they need to work together. But like a vine, it takes time. A new momentum began in 2011. We started by focusing on the big distributors but also the final client, then the restaurant business, developing promotional products aimed at each, working with partners – B2B and education.

GILLES BESSE - The Gault&Millau awards for gastronomy, Swiss Wine Week. Training sommeliers, taking them on educational trips. The DWCC event for journalists and bloggers in Montreux. The website, where we'll be publishing a calendar of all events in the country. We're working on a brochure that will be useful for anyone who is talking about wine and about Swiss wine. Education is one of the main pillars that we're developing.

“We want to make the Swiss proud of Swiss wines.”

GILLES BESSE, PRESIDENT SWP

The country doesn't export much wine – 1.8% according to the federal agriculture office's latest figures. Where do exports fit into the bigger picture and is it only the largest wineries who can consider this?

GILLES BESSE - I would love to have more of the smaller wineries export, but it's expensive for them. It does work for some. Gantenbein in Graubünden and Marie-Thérèse Chappaz in Valais do this. It could account for 15–20% of a cellar's turnover.

It's true that we drink our wine – we sell more or less all of it at home. A first goal with exports is to showcase our wines, get media abroad interested. We often talk about our wines as Switzerland's hidden treasure. Swiss wines are seen as something rare and this isn't going to change. We're a small wine-producing area with exceptional quality products.



“Today, producers realize they have to work together. But like a vine, this needs time.”

SÉBASTIEN FABBI, SECRETARY GENERAL SWP

We have to convince producers that we're not a cash cow and we have to convince the regions we can market "Swiss wines". We're already doing it with the new branding and label. It's working. But we can do a lot better.

Optimal use of the money: that's what we'd like to achieve, and that's what the Federal Office of Agriculture and Parliament would like, too. If you put together all the budgets for marketing, from SWP and from all of the regions, it's about CHF 11 million. Compare that to Austria, which spends about CHF 9 million!

Wine tourism has become a buzz term. Your office and the Swiss Secretariat for the Economy have earmarked funds for it. What does it really mean?

GILLES BESSE - Winery open house days are a good example. We want to continue along the same lines, bring people into the wineries, develop packages that get them to stay overnight, visit other wineries, restaurants. A lot of people don't know that cellars are open all year.

SÉBASTIEN FABBI - A platform to study wine tourism is now in place, with a charter for Geneva, Valais and the Three Lakes region. Vaud already has its own; these are moving in the same direction. The Swiss Germans are starting to come along, developing their open house days. Ticino as well. We're working with the Swiss tourism office – but we need to develop this more. It's important to get a start now because it takes time. We would also like to see more happening at the local level. The Vully area is a good example of this.

Where can Switzerland look for inspiration – examples of good practice in wine tourism?

GILLES BESSE - Italy. Burgundy, Bordeaux, Alsace. California and New Zealand. They all have strong wine tourism industries. You have to remember that in New World countries, winemaking started out as a business. We inherited a long, old and very different wine culture – today we're all learning a new culture.



SWISS WINE PROMOTION'S ACTIVITIES

SWP promotes Swiss wines through a complex web of relations: **Co-financing** Vinea (wine competitions, Swiss wines app), Vitiswiss/Vinatura label, APC Mondial du Chasselas competition, Wyschiff Association, Mémoire des Vins Suisses, Swiss Wine Connection, Export SWEA, ASVEI wine fair (Bern), the six Swiss wine regions. **Export** die grüne Woche Berlin, Prowein Düsseldorf, Presence Switzerland/Expo Milano. **B2B** tasting events, training and information for major Swiss firms including multinationals. **Education** with Changins, die Weinakademie (Österreich Wein Marketing and Swiss Wine Promotion), professional Swiss sommeliers. **Gastronomy (examples)** Gault&Millau (Top 100), best Swiss wines menu, G&M sommelier of the year, Best of Swiss Gastro, Swiss Wine Week, Grandes Tables de Suisse. **Public relations** ambassadors Chandra Kurt, José Vouillamoz and Paolo Basso for the Décanter competitions for Switzerland, visits from The Wine Advocate (R. Parker) and Jancis Robinson. **Media promotion** ad campaigns, SWP website, social media, press relations, posters, TV, media partnering such as Meilleures caves de suisse romande, Vinum top 100. **Major distributors** Coop, Denner, Manor, Aldi.