The Alpine Wine Framework

Guest contributor

Simon Hardy offers a blueprint for a transnational wine category worthy of recognition.

Wine is usually mapped by country and appellation, boundaries drawn from history and politics. The Alps trace their own lines, shaped by rock, ice and elevation, regardless of national borders. Cross a high pass and the language changes, the flag on the customs post is different, even the currency can vary. But the elevation and the glacially carved valleys remain constant on either side of the border.

This massive mountain range cuts a sweeping arc of more than 1,200 km (750 miles) across the heart of Europe, rising to more than 4,800 m (15,750 ft) at its highest point, with over 80 peaks exceeding 4,000 m (13,123 ft). That vertical dimension drives everything: the climate, the soils, the rivers, the cultures and ultimately the wines. A map flattens all of this into a single curved line; the reality is a landscape where one or more massive mountains often stand between one valley of vines and the next. The Alps straddle the 45th and 47th parallels, the prime band for fine-wine production. Centred on Switzerland, where French, German and Italian wine cultures meet, they occupy a unique place in the geography of wine. Four of the great rivers of European viticulture, the Rhône, Rhine, Po and Adige, trace their origins to the Alpine watershed. Over millennia, advancing and retreating glaciers carved the valleys, deposited moraines and laid down the soils on which Alpine vineyards now stand. Ancient crystalline rock (gneiss, schist and granite) forms the steep valley walls. Limestone, porphyry and glacial alluvium fill the valley floors. In this sense the Alps function as more than a mountain range. They form the geological foundation of a wine culture unlike any other in Europe.



Visperterminen in the Valais boasts some of the Alps' highest vineyards. (© Swiss Wine Valais)

Nevertheless, the vineyards rooted within the Alpine landscape have rarely been treated as a coherent whole. Across France, Switzerland and Italy, a remarkable family of mountain wines has evolved among glacial valleys, steep slopes and lakeside terraces. Long celebrated individually, these regions remain surprisingly under-recognised collectively.

That the Alps divide as much as they connect is no surprise. Mountain ranges routinely mark national boundaries, as the Pyrenees separate French and Spanish wine country and the Andes do the same for Chile and Argentina. What is more striking, however, is that the wine regions of the Alpine arc often have more in common with each other than with the nations that govern them.

This framework makes the case that Alpine wine constitutes a distinct category of viticulture, defined not by political boundaries, but by the natural interaction of mountains, climate, geology, human adaptation and indigenous grape heritage. The challenge is to recognise that this category has always been there.

A category hidden in plain sight

The wines of the Alpine arc, across France, Switzerland and Italy, often display a family resemblance: freshness, tension, moderate alcohol, aromatic precision and a profound sense of place. The evidence is everywhere, yet the category is rarely named. There is seldom any elaboration of the wider Alpine context.



High summer in the high Alps of Alto Adige/Südtirol (© Loren Image via Dreamstime.com)

There is a further explanation which is harder to see from inside the regions themselves. For producers, the terraced slopes, glacial soils and manual harvest read as ordinary; that is how vineyards work there and have done so for generations. The Alpine character of these wines becomes visible only from a vantage point above the arc as a whole, a position that is objective rather than merely external.

No institution currently exists to present the regions as a single wine category. The reason is

structural, not substantive. Wine promotion is organised through national and appellation-based bodies, none of which has a mandate to represent the wider transnational Alpine ecosystem. This framework aims to fill the void.

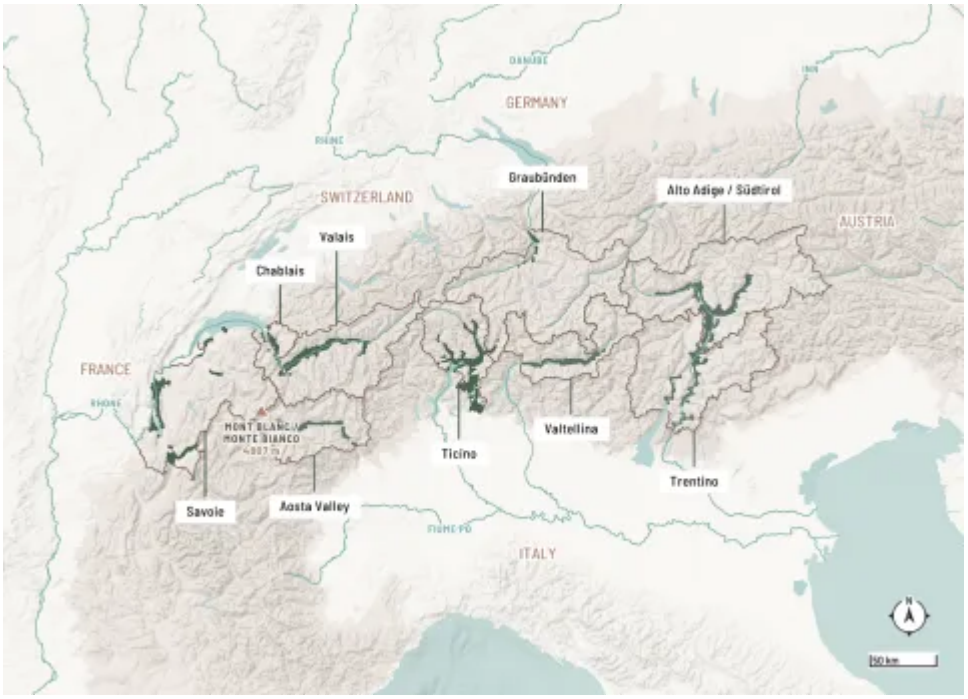
Which regions qualify?

The Alpine wine arc comprises nine regions whose viticultural identity is fundamentally defined by the Alpine system, where the interaction of mountain topography, Alpine climate, glacial geology and indigenous grape heritage shapes the wines in ways that could not exist outside this landscape:

France Savoie

Switzerland Chablais, the Valais, Graubünden, Ticino

Italy Valle d'Aosta, Valtellina, Alto Adige/Südtirol, Trentino



The nine regions of the Alpine wine arc (© Alpina Vina 2026)

The Alpine wine arc covers approximately 26,000 ha (64,250 acres), the same total area as Marlborough, the region that put New Zealand on the international wine stage. But where Marlborough built its identity on one country, one variety and one appellation, the Alpine arc contains nine regions, multiple appellations, three countries, at least eight linguistic traditions and over a hundred indigenous grape varieties. Where Marlborough's vineyards form a single contiguous block, the Alpine arc is dispersed across nine separate pockets, in places more than 400 km (250 miles) apart by road, divided by high, non-viticultural terrain. White varieties account for 59% of the arc's plantings, red for 41%. Four regions lean white: Trentino, Savoie, Chablais and Alto Adige/Südtirol, while five lean red: Valtellina, Ticino, Graubünden, Valle d'Aosta and the Valais. The two most red-dominant regions, Valtellina and Ticino, are also the two built most heavily around a single variety, Nebbiolo and Merlot respectively; the white-leaning regions carry a broader mix. The arc's leading white variety is Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris (around 4,000 ha/9,900

acres), though almost entirely concentrated in Trentino and Alto Adige/Südtirol. The leading red, Pinot Noir/Pinot Nero, covers less area (under 3,000 ha/7,400 acres) but is far more widely spread, present in eight of the nine regions. Neither is indigenous, a point the next section addresses directly.

Five additional regions come closest to meeting these criteria without yet qualifying: Bugey in France, Lavaux in Switzerland, Alto Piemonte in Italy, Diois in France and Slovenia's Primorska, ranked in that order. Each of them falls short on one or more of the five criteria below.

Defining Alpine wine

Alpine wine is a family of mountain-influenced wines originating from the central and western Alpine arc, characterised by elevation, freshness, indigenous grape heritage, manual viticulture and a strong sense of place. Five pillars define the category.

1 Topography and geology

Steep slopes, glacial formations, narrow valleys and elevated sites characterise the landscape throughout the arc. Vineyard elevations range from around 200 m (*c* 650 ft) on the valley floors of Trentino and Ticino to over 1,100 m (over 3,600 ft) at Visperterminen in the Valais, where ungrafted Heida (Savagnin Blanc) vines still thrive, and approaching 1,200 m (*c* 3,900 ft) at Morgex in Valle d'Aosta, the highest permanently cultivated vineyard in Europe, where elevation alone keeps phylloxera at bay. Beneath these sites lies extraordinary geological diversity: ancient gneiss and schist, glacial moraines, limestone, volcanic porphyry and skeletal sandy soils. That diversity, shaped by glaciation over millions of years, underpins Alpine wine's range of styles.



Winter in St-Séverin in the Valais (© Alpina Vina)

2 Climate

Alpine wine regions share a common climatic driver, the mountain system itself, while expressing it in remarkably different ways. The Valais, sheltered by the Pennine and Bernese Alps, receives less rainfall than almost anywhere else in Switzerland and bakes in intense continental sunshine; Ticino, on the southern side of the same watershed, receives three times as much rain and bends toward the Mediterranean. Yet within Ticino itself the contrast is just as striking: the Sopraceneri to the north is cool, granite-driven and Alpine in character, while the Sottoceneri to the south is warmer, softer and Mediterranean-influenced; two climates divided by a single mountain pass. Trentino presents the same internal range: the high-elevation Cembra Valley, carved into cool porphyry and granite above 700 m (2,300 ft), produces wines of Alpine freshness and tension, while the Rotaliana Plain on the valley floor basks in warmth sufficient to ripen Teroldego to full, structured reds. Alto Adige/Südtirol completes the pattern: Germanic cool dominates the upper valleys to the north, Italian warmth the lower valley floors to the south; two wine cultures coexisting within the same mountain system.



Fog hanging over the vines on a sunny autumn day in Chamoson in the Valais (© Alpina Vina)

This internal cooler-to-warmer gradient, repeated across three neighbouring regions on the southern side of the Alpine range, is one of the most distinctive climatic signatures of the arc. Graubünden relies on the foehn, the warm, dry wind that descends from the Alpine passes, to ripen Pinot Noir at a latitude where it would otherwise struggle. The great Alpine lakes (Geneva, Maggiore, Garda and Como) function as thermal reservoirs, absorbing summer heat and releasing it slowly through the autumn, moderating frost risk in winter and extending the growing season. Savoie is moderated by lakes Bourget and Annecy.

What unites all of these is a shared set of Alpine forces: elevation moderating heat, diurnal

temperature variation preserving acidity and aromatic complexity, mountain topography creating shelter from cold winds and frost, exposure and mesoclimate in patterns that no lowland wine region can readily replicate.

3 Viticultural adaptation

Mountain viticulture demands an annual act of physical commitment that few other wine regions require. This is heroic viticulture: cultivation on extreme slopes, at extreme elevations and in extreme terrain, where machines cannot operate and every task must be performed by hand, season after season, on ground that the mountain is always trying to reclaim. CERVIM, the international Centre for Research, Studies, Preservation, Coordination and Enhancement of Mountain Viticulture, defines heroic viticulture using four measures: vineyards at elevations above 500 m (1,640 ft), slopes greater than 30%, terraced or embanked cultivation and extreme island conditions. The Alpine arc qualifies on the first three across the regions it envelops.



Terraced vineyards in Pont-St-Martin in Valle d'Aosta (© Camille, Depositphotos.com)

4 Indigenous grape heritage

The Alps hold one of Europe's most extraordinary, and one of its most fragile, reservoirs of indigenous grape varieties. Chasselas, Schiava, Jacquère, Lagrein, Teroldego, Petit Rouge, Altesse, Petite Arvine, Completer and scores of others each carry a story beyond their names. Many came within a generation of disappearing entirely. The phylloxera epidemic, the catastrophic vineyard restructuring that followed it, the economics of the twentieth century and the relentless pressure toward internationally recognisable varieties all pushed several Alpine grapes toward extinction. Indigenous varieties collectively account for a quarter of the arc's plantings, ranging from 69% in Savoie, the highest share anywhere in the arc, down to just 2% in Ticino and Graubünden. No single variety dominates that total. Even Chasselas, the most planted indigenous grape at over

1,200 ha (2,970 acres) (less than 5% of the arc's plantings) needs four separate regions to reach that share. What emerges instead is a distinct signature for each region: Teroldego for Trentino; Jacquère, Altesse and Mondeuse Noire for Savoie; Petite Arvine, Cornalin and Humagne Blanche for the Valais; Petit Rouge, Prié and Fumin for Valle d'Aosta; Completer for Graubünden; Bondola for Ticino. Some survived in handfuls of hectares: Amigne in barely a few plots above Vétroz in Valais; Completer in fewer than ten hectares around Malans in Graubünden; Gringet clinging to 23 ha (57 acres) of granite above Ayze in Savoie. Many of these surviving parcels are old-vine plantings, some decades old, some over a century, whose root systems reach deep into Alpine rock and whose yields are tiny and concentrated.

5 Cultural connectivity

This pillar may come last in this sequence, but its influence on what makes these wines distinctly Alpine runs as deep as any of the other four pillars. The relationship between Alpine communities and wine reaches back millennia, cultivated in these valleys by Rhaeto-Romansh and Celtic peoples long before Rome arrived. Roman legions relied on Alpine wine as food, caloric staple and medicine, a necessity long before it became a drink for pure pleasure, and that history of purposeful cultivation shaped the varieties, landscapes and cultures inherited today. The great Alpine passes carried trade routes, ideas and grape varieties across what are now national borders, creating a landscape of cultural overlap, French, Italian and Germanic influences intersecting within the same mountain terrain.



Vineyards along Graubünden's Maienfeld trail (© Alpina Vina)

This connectivity is nowhere more vivid than between Graubünden and Valtellina. Between 1512 and 1797, the Swiss canton of Graubünden (back then, the independent Three Leagues) governed Valtellina, establishing a wine trade that gave Nebbiolo its local name, Chiavennasca, after the

town of Chiavenna through which it passed north. Today the Rhaetian Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage line, connects the same territories. The political borders may have changed but the connection did not.

The same connectivity survives in language: bilingual signage is unremarkable in several regions, Romansh remains official in Graubünden, Walser German is native to the upper Valais and still reaches into parts of Valle d'Aosta and Ticino, and Arpitan patois is still spoken in Savoie, the visible residue of Savoyard rule that pre-dates today's national borders by centuries.

That depth of connection is further confirmed by a concentration of UNESCO World Heritage sites in or near these regions, found nowhere else in the wine world, among them the Dolomites, the Jungfrau-Aletsch glaciers, the Lavaux vineyard terraces, the Rhaetian Railway and the prehistoric pile dwellings of the Alpine lakes.

A civilisation centred on wine

Wine is rarely only about the liquid in the glass. No wine category in the world sets out a broader offer more vividly than Alpine wine.

Consider what the Alps bring to a drinker before a single bottle is opened. The most dramatic and emotionally resonant mountain landscape in Europe. Three countries, countless culinary traditions and at least eight distinct linguistic cultures converging in the same valleys: French, German, Italian, Romansh, Arpitan, Walser, Lombard and Ladin, each leaving its mark on grape names, vineyard names, cellar traditions and the food that has always accompanied the wine. The Alps are the author of this culture, not merely its backdrop.



In Savoie, vines and culture are intimately entwined (© Alpina Vina)

The wines reward the curious drinker precisely where fine-wine consumption is heading: freshness over weight, precision over power, authenticity over formula. They convey a genuine and unmistakable sense of terroir: Petite Arvine from a high Valais terrace rooted in ancient schist (saline, citrus-edged, taut with Alpine acidity); Jacquère from a Savoie slope above Lac du Bourget

on calcareous moraine (crystalline, stony, weightless); or Nebbiolo from Valtellina's gneiss terraces (lean, aromatic, transparently mineral).

What lies beyond the glass in the Alpine arc is a civilisation still visibly at work. In addition to vineyards carved into near-vertical slopes by hand and terraces rebuilt each spring against the mountain's permanent pressure to reclaim them, the local food traditions have been shaped by the same long winters and scarce resources that shaped the wines: raclette, fondue, tartiflette, polenta, speck, Bündnerfleisch, Fontina and Reblochon as examples. It is rather ironic that several of these quintessential Alpine foods are far better known globally than the Alpine wines that pair so naturally with them. The visitor who travels to these valleys briefly inhabits a way of life that has been continuous in these same landscapes for more than two millennia.

Why Alpine wine matters now

The case for Alpine wine rests on geology, heritage and culture. But the contemporary moment makes it more urgent still. As global temperatures rise, mountain viticulture is attracting serious attention. Elevation moderates heat, cool nights preserve acidity, and indigenous varieties adapted over centuries to extreme conditions may prove among the most climate-resilient in Europe. The qualities Alpine wines have always expressed (freshness, balance, moderate alcohol and precision) align closely with the current trends in fine-wine consumption.

The regions themselves are responding. Across the arc, new classification systems are being developed, mapping individual vineyard sites, restricting yields and limiting varieties. These are encouraging signals of an ambition for terroir specificity more commonly associated with better-known wine regions.

The category also offers these regions wider reach outside their home markets. For sommeliers, Alpine wine offers a coherent cross-border narrative for wine lists that no national or appellation framework currently provides. For retailers, a compelling specialist assortment built around story, rarity and discovery. For educators, a genuinely new framework that challenges the nation-state structure of every major wine syllabus. For writers and critics, a category that is rising, intellectually rich and still largely unclaimed. These are conversations that are only beginning, and that this framework has been shaped to stimulate: conversations that would benefit not only the drinkers who discover this world, but the producers whose life's work has waited this long to be seen as part of something larger.

The building blocks exist, and the category deserves to be recognised at long last as the remarkable whole that it is.

Photo of Valtellina at the top of this article by rebaisilvano at Depositphotos.com.

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