



**Written by**  
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## Domaine des Muses - expressing the Valais



Robert Tamarcaz was not feeling well the first time we met at last year's annual tasting of mature and maturing Swiss wines run by the Mémoire des Vins Suisses and described in [Remembering Swiss wines](#). I didn't realise this until much later, when we met at a dinner in London organised by [Alpine Wines](#), one of Tamarcaz's UK importers, the dinner at Mossiman's part of a Swiss-based initiative known as [La Nuit des Vieux Millésimes](#) that showcases older vintages. So instead of simply tasting the three vintages of excellent Humagne Blanche that he was showing that day last year and leaving him in peace, I finished him off with a salvo of questions.

Fortunately he did not seem to mind and instead offered to show me, in June this year, his newly acquired vineyard, about which he is very excited.

Domaine des Muses is in the very heart of the Valais region, not far from Sierre, which is half way between Sion and Brig. It was founded in 1992 by Robert's parents, Nicole and Louis Tamarcaz, who are still involved in the business. Robert's path to taking over in 2002 started in a different direction – economics and law – before accelerating towards his goal, initially via local training and work experience, a stint at Sacred Hill in New Zealand and finally studies in oenology in Dijon, including a thesis on sweet wines. He now runs the estate with his wife Nicole.

The name of the estate, which is reflected in the names of the top cuvées (Euterpe, Terpsichore, Polymnie), is not just a brand name since it is reflected in Robert's love of the theatre, celebrated every summer by their Festival des Muses. Their most expensive wine, a Merlot, is called Cyrano, a role that Robert played during one of these festivals.

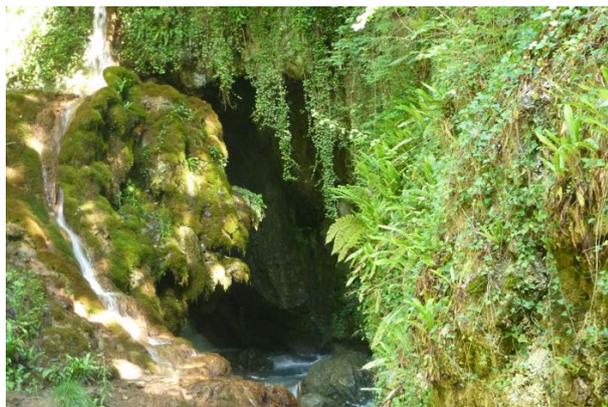
Under the hot June sunshine, Robert took me to see this new vineyard – initially rented with an option to buy – in Les Bains, a lieu-dit of Saillon, south west of Sierre and closer to Martigny. (The two vineyard photos, above and below, are courtesy of photographer Jean-Blaise Pont.) It represents so much more than a patch of dirt to grow vines. It is already planted, fortunately with what Robert thinks are the most appropriate varieties for this sunny site: Syrah, Diolinoir (a Swiss cross between an abandoned French variety Robin Noir and Pinot Noir), Gamaret (an increasingly popular Swiss cross of Gamay and Reichensteiner), Merlot and Humagne Rouge. The sunniest corner also has Rouge du Pays (though he and many other local growers persist in using its more recent and confusing synonym Cornalin (du Valais)). The youngest vines are 15 years old but the Humagne Rouge is 60 years old. The first vintage will be 2015 but, like all good actors, Tamarcaz has rehearsed, vinifying a blend of these varieties from a different vineyard in Saillon to see how best to assemble them (see my tasting note below).



As Robert explained the vineyard mix, I had to quash my preconceptions that favour traditional, local varieties. The current owner bottles the varieties separately but Robert plans to produce a blend, suggesting it will better express the terroir of this spectacular vineyard, the Humagne Rouge giving the wine an 'alpine character', the Syrah expressiveness and freshness, the Diolinoir less aroma and more structure.

Aside from its excellent position, slope and exposition – a sun trap – it is in an idyllic spot with artistic and romantic associations. The water from a hot spring tumbles through the trees into the stream at 20 °C very close to the bottom of the vineyard slope. The rocks around the waterfall, which resemble a giant's head, were recorded in oils in 1873 as *La Grotte des Géants a Saillon* by French realist painter Gustave Courbet after he was forced to flee Paris because he had vandalised a Bonaparte statue (see my photo below). Courbet stayed in the mill at Saillon as the first visitor after its conversion to a guest house. The area around the waterfall was also the refuge of the forger and smuggler Joseph-Samuel Farinet (1845-80), known as the Swiss Robin Hood for what he did with the proceeds of his crime and for his disdain for authority. And all this was just the backdrop to the beauty of the vineyard. Robert did not try to disguise his

sense of hope and expectation for the wine he might be able to make from this amphitheatre-like enclave.



Domaine des Muses's own vineyards, five hectares farmed organically for the last three years, are on flatter land closer to their base in the little village of Granges, though the winery is in the more urban setting of Sierre. They also rent a further four hectares so that they have vineyards on both sides of the Rhône Valley, the cooler north-facing side being better for Pinot Noir, for example.

Rather like Klaus Peter Keller in the Rheinhessen, a winegrower I admire for his intimate knowledge of and attachment to the vineyard, Robert Tamarcaz, pictured below, is very careful about expansion, wanting to be able to stay hands-on in the vineyard as well as in the winery. They currently employ four people in the vineyards during nine months of the year, with extra during the busiest times such as harvest. 'That's what I love about this job - I do everything', he says simply, although he still manages to produce around 80,000 bottles a year and enjoy spending time with his three young children.

It is not just the quality of his wines that impresses me but their ability to age, as I had learned at that first encounter with his outstanding Humagne Blanche, and as his 2005 Syrah (from magnum) revealed over dinner - perfumed like Côte Rôtie, lightly peppery and so elegant.

With all his openness to the wider world of wine, he is still firmly rooted in, and loyal to, his roots. In an article about the Valais, I cannot avoid mentioning Chasselas, 'the symbol of Swiss wine' as it is described in *Wine Grapes*, and more commonly known as Fendant in the canton of Valais. It's the most widely planted white-skinned variety in the country - typically low-acid and relatively neutral - and the Valais is its second home after the neighbouring canton of Vaud.

Even though he had never made a wine from Chasselas before he took over at Domaine des Muses, his first vintage won the overall trophy in the Sierre annual wine competition. He hasn't fully persuaded me of this variety's quality potential but he nudged me a little further down the road, and the 2005 Fendant Classique had aged pretty well, considering.

If you are travelling in the Valais and have time to stop at Sierre, there is a brilliant wine shop/wine bar called *Le Château de Villa*. They have the most incredible selection of wines from the Valais (around 650 wines), beautifully presented by subregion, and very knowledgeable and friendly staff. You can buy some of the wines by the glass, along with small plates of local produce.

The 19 wines are listed below in the order tasted at the domaine. Domaine des Muses wines are available in the the UK from Alpine Wines, Gauntley's of Nottingham and the Wine Society. They

are imported into the US by European Cellars and Charles Neal Selections.

To get an idea of viticulture on the steepest vineyards, see Nicolas Cerutti's student film *Heroic Viticulture*, filmed in the Valais.



- **Dom des Muses Gamay 2014 Valais** Cold pre-ferment maceration for a week. Unoaked. Gamay is currently the most popular red in the Valais. Light bright cherry red. Fresh cherry fruit and a hint of pepper. Fine texture, very fresh but not overly light, with the tannins adding length. Juicy but not simple. (JH)12.8% Drink 2015-2017 18.50 Swiss francs 16.5
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Cornalin 2014 Valais** This is Cornalin du Valais, or Rouge du Pays, not the Cornalin that is grown in the Aosta Valley. Usually includes 5% stems but not this year because it was so difficult, and ripening was less sure. Shorter élevage than usual because he was worried about full maturity, even though the Cornalin was harvested late - a week before Syrah. It was just ripe. Bright mid crimson. That lovely crunchy peppery aroma of tart red fruit – cranberry and redcurrant. Tannins are already smooth. Delicacy and finesse. (JH)13.5% Drink 2015-2019 32 Swiss francs 17
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Humagne Rouge 2014 Valais** Yield 600-700 g per m<sup>2</sup>. Bottled yesterday. Mid cherry red. Has an attractive stony/dusty quality and very slightly floral but also a touch herbaceous over dark-red fruit. Fresh and peppery. Dry and elegant on the palate. Extremely fine texture and impressive length. Dry, mineral, stony finish. (JH)13% Drink 2015-2019 32 Swiss francs 17
- **Dom des Muses, Réserve Pinot Noir 2012 Valais** Planted on the left bank of the Rhône, which is a little cooler and less sunny. Lots of powdery mildew in 2012. Oak aged in 2nd- and 3rd-year Dargaud & Jaeglé barrels for 18-24 months. Light to mid cherry red. A little closed at the moment. Delicate red fruit. Cool, fresh, delicate on the palate too. Refined, with just a tiny hint of oak's sweetness. Lovely dry finish. And long. Wonderful finesse. (JH)13% Drink 2015-2022 38 Swiss francs 17
- **Dom des Muses, Réserve Syrah 2012 Valais** Planted on the sunnier, hotter right bank of the Rhône but 2012 was a cool vintage. Oak aged – mostly new barrels from Dargaud & Jaeglé. Mid crimson. Deliciously peppery aroma. And a touch of smoky reduction. Great finesse here. There's fresh dark fruit but it is very pure Syrah. Long, the tannins are there but feather light and you can hardly spot the oak except in a slight spice. 'Il faut qu'il reste frais et digeste [it must remain fresh and digestible]', says Robert Taramarcas, and he could have said this about any of his wines. (JH)13% Drink 2015-2022

38 Swiss francs 17.5

- **Dom des Muses, Réserve Syrah 2010 Valais**Served from magnum at dinner. This has fine Côte Rôtie-like perfume, lightly peppery and fragrant. Marked by freshness and elegance and just a hint of spice on the finish. (JH)13% Drink 2013-2020  
18
- **Dom des Muses, Terpsichore Séduction 2011 Valais**60% Humagne Rouge, 40% Cornalin. Oak more evident than in the previous wines tasted – and there is more new oak. In the sunnier vintages he tends to include more Humagne Rouge.  
First bottle is a bit dry on the finish, so we taste a second. Seductively fragrant as it opens. Fraises des bois. Chalky dry tannins and a combination of chewy and chalky. Not ready yet – perhaps with food. Elegant if less aromatic than some of the Dom des Muses wines, for now at least. Dry finesse. (JH)13% Drink 2014-2018  
49 Swiss francs 17
- **Dom des Muses, Cyrano Merlot 2009 Valais**Such a hot vintage that they started harvesting the whites 11 August and this was picked very early. Three years in barrel.  
Quite evolved. Garnet with bricky rim. Mature undergrowth. Sweet, but not longer primary, fruit. At its peak. Chewy, fresh but only just. Fine mature flavours but best to drink soon. Light spice. Still has quite a grip. There's a slight dislocation between the evolution of the fruit and the need to keep the tannins in bottle a little longer. (JH)14% Drink 2013-2016  
78 Swiss francs 16.5
- **Dom des Muses, Classique Fendant 2014 Valais**Fendant is the local name for Chasselas, and this is from the commune of Sierre. When Tamarcaz first made this wine, it was in a fresher style because it did not go through malo. He liked it but was unhappy that it was described as atypical. Apparently, and counter-intuitively, Chasselas that goes through malo ages better than if it does not, perhaps because the malic acid level is quite high. Such a wine is best drunk very young – in the first year – or after ten years, but not in between.  
Lovely ripe pear aroma. Remarkably aromatic for Chasselas. Slight peppery note. Gentle texture - pear grain, soft acidity but not without freshness even though the TA is only 3.6 g/l. (JH)12% Drink 2014-2015  
16.50 Swiss francs 16.5
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Fendant 2014 Valais**From Vétroz, one of the best areas for Chasselas. Old vines.  
Surprisingly (to me) not as intense or as ripe as the Classique. More peppery on the nose. Chalky texture and more stony on the palate. Fresher and tighter than the Classique. Very different, and longer. (JH)12% Drink 2015-2018  
22.50 Swiss francs 16.5
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Petite Arvine 2014 Valais**Ripe, almost pineapple, slight honeyed note. Acacia honey, pear. Lovely freshness allied to those ripe fruit flavours. Full in the mouth but not fat at all. With a chalky finish, saline. Long and fresh. Lots of potential as well as being delicious now. (JH)13.3% Drink 2015-2019  
28.50 Swiss francs 16.5+
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Heida 2014 Valais**Vines from 700 m and planted also on the north side of the Rhône.  
Lovely ripe citrus nose. Intense, direct, clean and very precise. Excellent concentration and length. (JH)13% Drink 2015-2020  
28.50 Swiss francs 17
- **Dom des Muses, Tradition Humagne 2014 Valais**Fermented and aged in older oak. This variety is relatively neutral, as Chardonnay can be, says Tamarcaz.  
Subtle cedary oak on the nose. Lots of flavour on the palate, but a little abrupt on the finish. Creamy texture and marked by the oak at the moment. Will benefit from a bit longer in the

bottle. (JH)13% Drink 2015-2022

28.50 Swiss francs 17

- Dom des Muses, Réserve Chardonnay 2011 Valais Sunny vintage. Smart, creamy oatmeal oak, finely integrated oak. Good freshness and a leesy texture. Lots of flavour and freshness at the same time. Full bodied but finely dry on the finish. (JH)13% Drink 2013-2019  
33 Swiss francs 16.5
- Dom des Muses, Euterpe Séduction 2011 Valais 60% *Petite Arvine* - selected and harvested early. 40% *Humagne Blanche* from the domaine. The first for aroma, the second for longevity. Aged separately.  
Fine aroma of orange and grapefruit with the first signs of an oily, honeyed complexity of maturity. With air, it starts to smell a little like a sweet wine, even though it is dry. Spicy, long, complex and refined, full of flavour and freshness, the oak in a purely supportive role. Delicious, a wonderful combination of origin, variety and winemaking. Savoury finish. (JH)13% Drink 2014-2020  
41 Swiss francs 17.5
- Dom des Muses, Classique Fendant 2005 Valais Fruit from the commune of Vétroz. His first vintage - he felt that as a Valais producer he just had to make a Chasselas - and it won the 'grand médaille d'or' in the Nobilis 2006 competition (now renamed *Sélection des Vins du Valais*) - the first time a Chasselas had won this top award in the competition's 25-year history  
Very pale gold. Complex aroma. Oily and spicy. Ripe citrus and finely evolved. Still very fresh (relative for Chasselas) and ageing beautifully. For my taste, there is a slight lack of freshness on the finish but it really has aged very well without loss of its original (moderate) freshness. (JH) Drink 2006-2017  
16.5
- Dom des Muses, Flétri Muscat 2012 Valais Flétri refers to grapes that have been dried or partially dried prior to fermentation. RS 48 g/l.  
Pale gold. Pure, intense apricot. Grapey and honeyed. Scented on the palate. Super-fragrant. Still very youthful. Sweet and still fresh. (JH)13.5% Drink 2014-2018  
24.50 Swiss francs for 50 cl 17
- Dom des Muses, Polymnie Séduction Or 2012 Valais Marsanne plus 15% Pinot Gris for added freshness. Botrytised and desiccated on the vine. RS 110 g/l.  
Intense apricot and a touch of mushroom. Very very sweet, honeyed, viscous. Mouth-filling sweetness and just enough freshness to balance. Gorgeously sweet and creamy. Apricots boiled down to their most intense, pineapple too. For my taste, it could do with just a little more acidity on the finish. (JH)14% Drink 2014-2020  
17.5
- Dom des Muses, Classique Rosé Gamay 2014 Valais Saignée - same grapes as for the red Gamay. Pale orange gold. Victoria plum aroma. Fresh, off dry? Has a certain apricot/plum sweetness though it is technically dry, I am told. (JH)14% Drink 2015-2016  
16.50 Swiss francs 16