

Valle d'Aosta's Wine Zones

Valle d'Aosta is so engulfed in the Alps that the only easy access to the outside world is along the Dora Baltea river into Piedmont. Otherwise there are high mountain passes – the Great St. Bernard into Switzerland and the Little St. Bernard into France – and the long tunnel under Europe's highest peak, the 4,810-metre Mont Blanc. Its glaciers are the source of the Dora Baltea river which crosses the region through a long, narrow valley that supports most of the population and all of their limited sources of wine. Yet despite the scarcity of arable land, some of the steep and often terraced slopes have exceptional conditions for vines in prevalently sandy soils on a glacial base or, lower down, in alluvial sandy clays and gravel.

Winters are cold with ample snowfall in the mountains, but at some points along the valley summer days can be extremely hot and nights relatively cool. Precipitation in the central valley around Aosta is among the lowest in central Europe (500-600 millimetres annually). This apparent anomaly is due to the enclosed position and the effect of the so-called *föhn*, hot Mediterranean currents that lose their moisture before

they reach the valley. To the north lie the highest Alps in Mont Blanc, Cervino (the Matterhorn), and Monte Rosa. To the south rises the mass of Gran Paradiso. The Dora Baltea's tributaries form lateral valleys which lead to alpine resorts too high for vines.

The upper valley or Valdigne

The upper valley of the Dora Baltea river between Mont Blanc and the gorge at Runaz has vineyards around Morgex and La Salle which are reputedly the highest of Europe (between 900 and 1,300 metres) where the vines of Blanc de Valdigne trained onto low pergolas make delicately perfumed whites with light, zesty flavours.

The central valley

The unusually dry, hot summer climate of Aosta's central valley between Aise and Saint-Vincent favours reds of some body and finesse from Petit Rouge (Enfer d'Arvier, Torrette, Chambave Rouge), as well as the vaunted sweet wines from Malvoisie de Nus and Muscat de Chambave, though conditions in vineyards at 500-700 metres are well suited to Pinot Noir, Müller Thurgau, Gamay, and other varieties.

The lower valley

The broader valley between Saint-Vincent and Piedmont is noted above all for Nebbiolo in vineyards at 300-400 metres for lean but sometimes attractive red Donnaz and Arnad-Montjovet.

