

# Perfect ending to autumn day in Valais

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a five-part series on Valais, Switzerland. Visit [www.vaildaily.com](http://www.vaildaily.com) to read the first three installments.

**By Suzanne Hoffman**  
BEHIND THE SCENES

In Colorado, aspens paint the autumn landscape gold. Valais, Switzerland, has melezes, larch trees that grow to the timberline around 6,100 feet. Some of Valais' larches have witnessed nearly 800 years of history. They are the last trees in autumn to surrender their leaves, that are actually 1-inch flexible needles that transition from lime green hues in spring to brilliant gold as autumn turns to winter. In Valais, because of the steep mountains, spring is long, beginning in the valley floor around 1,100 feet and slowly climbing to the alpages and even scree fields where alpine flowers pop out from between flat pieces of stone. Autumn, of course, is the reverse, giving us nearly six weeks to enjoy the vibrant foliage of forests and vineyards.

As we continue our hike north along a flat portion of the Bisse de Tsittoret, we can peer down steep, melez-covered slopes into the ravine where La Tieche flows from the glacier Plaine Mort. In early spring, one can hear water rushing below and in the bisse as snow melts above. Now, in autumn, when it is generally dry under bluebird skies, the only sound from nature is the breeze in the melezes, until we reach the waterfalls.

But flat turns into steep as we climb rustic stairs beside the first set of waterfalls. Hiking in the mid-'80s when I first arrived in Valais was a bit treacherous, with no railings. The paths along some bisses, such as the precarious Bisse du Rho on the Haut Plateau's western side, are narrow, or for some distance exist as planks of wood on metal beams anchored into sheer rock faces hundreds of feet above the valley. Walking those bisse today with railings is still frightening. Walking them in the '80s, before the renovations, was sheer terror! Now, as we climb the stairs, the rope railing beside the path allows us to feel



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Exterior view of the 15th-century Chateau de Villa in Sierre, Switzerland, in the Canton of Valais.

safe next to the raging waterfalls.

But after climbing the steep stairs, we are rewarded with a stunning view of the broad alpage, sadly without the iconic Swiss cows that graze here in summer. The "descente des vaches" (descent of the cows) occurs in late September as cows are paraded down to their winter homes. Now, only wildlife inhabit the high pastures.

We have to hurry as the days are short and we want to reach our picnic grounds 1,300 feet up at les Ottanes, below the sheer face of les Faverges. The walk through the sprawling alpage begins easy but quickly becomes steep as we reach another set of waterfalls. This is where precarious becomes part of your lexicon. I can't begin to imagine a hike up this rocky path, often wet from spray, without the security of the ropes affixed to the adjacent rock wall. Three waterfalls translate into three days of cramped hands from gripping the rope. Confession. I'm terrified of heights, but these views and the explosion of sensory stimuli are too exciting to let a phobia get in the way.

Now we are safely onto the scree field where the watercourse is gentle

and easier to cross. We continue, following the yellow signposts that now have distinctive white and red tips denoting alpine trekking conditions. I wish we had these signs in Colorado. Vail Mountain Rescue would have less to do, but happily so!

Another steep, 300-foot climb up Arete de Nusey, and we are now in the high plateau of Les Otannes. We have yet to encounter another living creature here — bovine or human — except birds. Remember that bottle of Fendant? The icy waters of La Tieche's source make a perfect wine chiller. And this spot, nearly 6,000 feet above the Rhone Valley, lays open a spectacular panoramic view of the Pennines. Normally in summer, we might take a nap after enjoying our Valaisan picnic feast, but it's autumn when the sun disappears quickly, so let's start down the mountain and rest up before we leave for our evening fromage feast at Chateau de Villa.

## Middle Ages chateau for 21st-century dining

Built in the 16th century, the Chateau de Villa sits above Sierre, just

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below vineyards. For centuries, generations of two families lived in the Chateau: first the Plateau from its construction and to the death of its last descendant, the Preux family. After a tumultuous 20th century of ownership changes, a foundation now owns and operates the Chateau as a tribute to the "culinary heritage of Valais." This is no tourist trap. It's the real deal where locals and tourists flock to indulge in one of the most decadent raclette experiences imaginable.

First, after a long day hiking, we deserve an aperitif in the Chateau's Oenotheque. You will find no place else on earth that houses as many different Valais wines and spirits than here: More than 600 wines from 102 winemakers and 10 distillers. On any given day, you might find a wine producer sitting at the Oenotheque's circular bar. Everyday, however, you will find experts ready to educate you on all that Valais vineyards and orchards have to offer. Now that you've had a chance to browse, try some Petite Arvine and learn about wines, eau de vie and schnapps from the region, it's time for dinner.

### The perfume of molten Raclette

From the moment we push open the Chateau's heavy wooden door, our olfactory systems are awash in the pungent, but ever-so-delightful, smell of melting cheese. As we enter the cozy main dining room, we pass the maitre racleur, Alexandre Alder, who is busy scraping molten cheese from a half wheel of raclette onto a small plate.

Choosing our main course is easy enough. Raclette! But there are other choices you'll come back for: fondue, steak Herens and seasonal treats, such as game



The round bar in the center of the cavernous Oenotheque at the Chateau de Villa where locals and tourists alike gather for Valaisan "vinotherapy."

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Petite Arvine at the Oenotheque, it's a hard decision to make. I'll have to ask Monsieur Dominique Fornage, the restaurant's manager who is infinitely knowledgeable about Valais food and wine, for a little advice.

But the smell of melting raclette has been driving me crazy and I'm certain you're ready to indulge in it. My apologies, though. I told a white lie last week. As I wrote this, I decided to wait one more week to explore the raclette feast we're about to enjoy. There is so much I want to share with you that I couldn't bear to deny you the complete raclette experience Maitre Racleur Adler has to offer. For now,

let's savour this Valais moment while we peruse the wine list: [http://www.chateau-devilla.ch/carte\\_vins\\_resto.html](http://www.chateau-devilla.ch/carte_vins_resto.html)

A la semaine prochaine!

Suzanne Hoffman is a local attorney, wine importer and the Chambellan Provincial of the Southwest Region and Bailii (president) of the Vail chapter of the Chaime des Rotisseurs. She is passionate about all things gastronomique. For more background information on her "Behind the Scenes" series, go to [www.facebook.com/vailvalleysecrets](http://www.facebook.com/vailvalleysecrets). Email comments about this story to [cschnell@vaildaily.com](mailto:cschnell@vaildaily.com).