Weinakademiker Thesis (D7) – Sébastien Maury

THE RÈZE GRAPE – HISTORY AND POTENTIAL FOR VITICULTURE IN VALAIS

Abstract

Motivation

Until the end of the 19th century, the Rèze grape was broadly widespread throughout the Alpine region. In Valais, it was known as the original variety used to produce the local Vin du Glacier. After phylloxera hit the continent in the beginning of the 20th century, Rèze almost disappeared, being replaced with varieties that were more profitable and easier to grow. In the beginning of the 21st century, it got resuscitated and is now slowly gaining interest from winemakers and wine lovers in Valais. But it remains mostly unknown from the general public. In this context, the author – borne and raised in the middle of the Valais vineyards – wanted to trace Rèze's documented history and cultural significance, examine its ampelographic as well as oenological characteristics and evaluate the agronomic and economic conditions that could support its revival.

Objectives

The discussion aims to highlight the most relevant historical developments to help clarify both the challenges and the promises around the resurrection of this emblematic grape in a modern Valais landscape. In addition, some predictions should be formulated as to the future developments of the viticulture environment in Valais, with a special focus on the role of the Rèze variety. Finally, it should look into potential strategies needed to ensure a successful future of the Rèze grape variety.

Methodology

Diverse sources have been used for this research: historical and technical literature, scientific articles, specialized podcasts, television and radio programs as well as professional press and books. In order to add some practical input, the author also interviewed 7 winemakers from Valais that grow Rèze grapes and produce wines from this grape as well as a famous grape geneticist with local roots and a particular interest for autochthonous varieties. To complete the study and help formulate some predictions as to the developments of viticulture for the next ten to twenty years, a short analysis of statistics for the last 30 years was performed.

Content

Rèze's documented existence dates to 1313, making it one of the first recorded Valais varieties. Likely related to the ancient Roman *Raetica*, it historically spread across the Alpine arc—from Valais and Savoy to northern Italy—earning its reputation as an "Alpine grape par excellence." In the early 20th century, Rèze accounted for around

15% of Valais vineyards, but phylloxera, modernization, and changing market preferences caused its near extinction. By 1997, fewer than 0.7 hectares remained. The introduction of the AOC/PDO system in 1992 and renewed interest in terroir revived attention to traditional varieties, leading to gradual replanting. By 2025, about 5.6 hectares of Rèze were cultivated by over 25 small producers.

Rèze ripens late and thrives on warm, sunlit slopes between 500 and 1,100 m altitude. Though sensitive to rot and viruses, it yields aromatic yet restrained wines with vibrant acidity, saline notes, and aging potential. Historically, it formed the base of *Vin du Glacier*—a solera-style oxidative wine matured for decades in communal casks near Grimentz—symbolic of Valais winemaking tradition. Modern interpretations include dry whites, orange, and sweet styles, showing Rèze's versatility.

Rèze embodies Valais's identity, offering strong marketing value through authenticity and terroir expression. It aligns with consumer interest in indigenous, story-rich wines and could complement flagship varieties like Petite Arvine and Cornalin. However, obstacles remain: limited recognition, lingering reputational stigma for rusticity, modest yields, and competition among Valais's many local grapes. Producers hesitate to expand without clearer market positioning or stronger institutional support.

Though Rèze will remain a niche product, its symbolic and qualitative potential is significant. Statistical trends between 1995 and 2025 show a massive decline in some traditional varieties (Chasselas, Gamay, Pinot Noir) and solid growth in autochthonous ones, with Rèze's area multiplying eightfold. Future prospects suggest continued diversification and further planting of autochthonous grapes. To strengthen its standing, the author recommends:

- Regulatory reform, including restricting AOC status strictly to autochthonous varieties, classify all or most other varieties as PGI wines and promoting Rèze as a *Grand Cru* wine in the appropriate villages;
- Further planting to increase production in order to test the variety's versatility and various styles (dry, oxidative, sweet, sparkling);
- Domestic marketing focus with active promotion of autochthonous varieties before export, emphasizing the story and regional identity of Valais wines.

Rèze's survival has been secured, but its long-term success depends on courageous replanting, innovative vinification, and proactive promotion. Its revival offers Valais both a cultural anchor and a differentiating symbol in global wine markets. Together with the autochthonous variety Lafnetscha and other local varieties, Rèze could help transform Valais's famed diversity into a unifying identity, ensuring the region's wines are recognized not only for variety but for place.