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THE WINE MAGAZINE



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STOCK HOLM

Where Fika, Fine Dining and Northern Wine Meet



Photo: Michèle Shah

Strandvägen — Stockholm's elegant waterfront boulevard

Stockholm conjures elegant architecture, Scandinavian design, world-class museums, the archipelago – and, inevitably, ABBA. But Sweden's capital has many more layers. Beyond its historic streets and waterways, a new wine culture is taking root, adding an unexpected dimension to a city where history, food, culture and water are woven together. Michèle Shah explores Stockholm through this changing lens

Stockholm's attractions are spread across its islands, making sightseeing part of the pleasure. Gamla Stan, the historic Old Town, is a maze of narrow cobbled lanes, colourful 17th- and 18th-century buildings, small squares, independent shops and cafés. At its heart stands the Royal Palace, where visitors can see the Changing of the Guard. Across the water, Djurgården is home to some of the city's most popular museums, including the Vasa Museum, with its remarkably preserved 17th-century warship, and Vikingaliv, which explores Sweden's Viking heritage. Nearby, on Södermalm, Fotografiska combines major photography exhibitions with spectacular views over the water.

And then there is the water itself. Stockholm is spread across 14 main islands and surrounded by an archipelago of thousands more. Ferries are therefore not simply a means of transport but one of the best ways to experience the city. Sightseeing boats and historic steamships head out among rocky

islands and red wooden cottages. In summer, watching Stockholm gradually give way to open water from the deck of an old steamship is one of the most quintessentially Swedish experiences.

For a stay that captures some of the city's character, I particularly recommend the historic **Kung Carl Hotel** (www.kungcarl.se). Centrally located in the heart of Stockholm, it has a warmth and individuality that many modern hotels lack. Its superb breakfast, acclaimed cocktail bar and exceptionally friendly staff make it a particularly welcoming base from which to explore the city.

The restaurant scene ranges from traditional Swedish cooking at **Pelikan** to the polished seafood and extensive wine list at **Sturehof**. **Ekstedt** offers contemporary Nordic cooking centred on wood, fire and smoke.

At the top end, **Wedholms Fisk**, centrally located on Nybrokajen overlooking the waterfront, is a Stockholm institution and an ideal address for seafood lovers. The emphasis is on exceptional fresh fish and shellfish, elegantly prepared and accompanied by an impressive wine list. There is also a distinctly French touch: Champagne and oysters sit naturally alongside the Swedish catch. Sweden's long relationship with France even has a royal dimension: the Bernadotte dynasty was founded by the French-born Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, who became King Charles XIV John in 1818.

Stockholm is equally compelling at street level. The traditional Swedish ritual of fika — taking time over coffee and something sweet — sits comfortably alongside ambitious Nordic cuisine, an exceptional speciality-coffee scene, natural-wine bars and restaurants with serious wine programmes.

Vete-Katten, whose original premises date back to 1928, offers the classic Swedish combination of coffee, pastries and an unhurried atmosphere. For speciality coffee, **Drop Coffee** on Södermalm is one of the city's best-known roasters, while **Café Pascal** is another good stop.

For wine lovers, perhaps the most interesting development is Stockholm's wine-bar culture. **Leijontornet Bar** in the Old Town is a destination for serious wine drinkers, while younger bars such as **Savant** have helped create a more informal scene encompassing natural wines, small producers and classic European regions. For another perspective, the rooftop **Charlie** at the Radisson Collection Strand Hotel offers wonderful views across Stockholm and the harbour — particularly magical towards sunset, with an espresso, wine or Champagne in hand.

And for visitors wanting to discover Swedish wine itself, it is worth asking wine bars and restaurants what local bottles they currently have open. Production remains tiny, so availability can be intermittent. But that scarcity is part of the attraction and that scarcity has a source. Behind Stockholm's wine bars and restaurant lists lies an industry most visitors never think to ask about — one that barely existed a generation ago.

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Sweden: an unexpected wine country

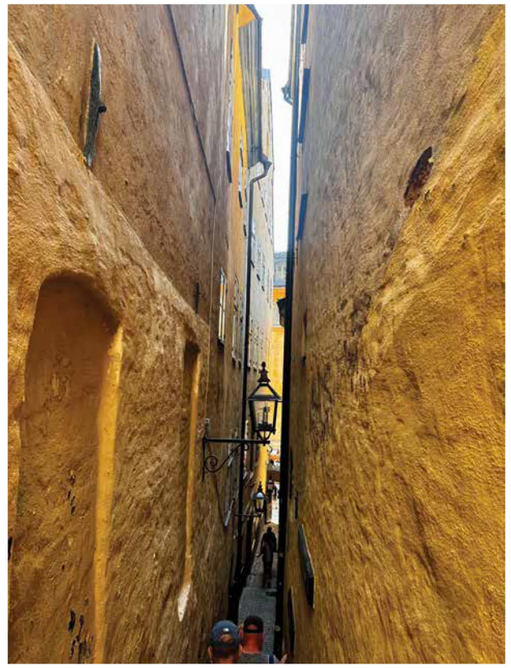
It may sound surprising, but Sweden is becoming a wine-producing country. Commercial wine production has been permitted since 1999 and the industry is developing rapidly. Svenskt Vin's latest survey records around 50 commercial vineyards, 230 hectares and 800,000 vines, with 145,000 litres of wine sold during the preceding 12 months. Almost half of producers intend to increase their vineyard area.

Sweden's greatest advantage is not heat but light. Long summer days provide extraordinary hours of daylight, while cool nights help retain acidity. Southern Sweden, particularly Skåne, has the country's most favourable conditions and has become the centre of the emerging industry.

The leading variety is Solaris, an early-

Photos: Michèle Shah





Above: Stortorget, the main square in Gamla Stan; right, Gamla Stan's narrowest lane; below, Nordiska Museum on the waterfront



ripening white PIWI grape bred for cooler climates. Other PIWIs include Souvignier Gris, Muscaris, Donauriesling and Cabernet Cortis, while Rondo, Pinot Nova and Regent are among the red varieties being explored.

PIWIs are particularly relevant in Sweden because their resistance to fungal disease can reduce the need for treatments in a cool, humid climate. But Swedish wine is already becoming more diverse, with producers experimenting with sparkling wine, skin contact, oak ageing and, increasingly, classic European varieties.

What Does Swedish Wine Taste Like?

The simplest answer is: fresh. High acidity is one of the defining characteristics of Swedish wine, making it particularly well suited to food. Sparkling wines and dry whites are perhaps the most obvious styles, although lighter reds can also work surprisingly well.

Sweden's greatest advantage is not heat but light. Long summer days provide extraordinary hours of daylight, while cool nights help retain acidity

Climate change is changing the equation. Longer growing seasons and warmer autumns are making viticulture increasingly viable in southern Sweden, while established wine regions are increasingly dealing with excessive heat and declining acidity. Sweden does not need to become a warm-climate wine country; its opportunity may lie precisely in specialising in cool-climate styles — sparkling wines, fresh whites and elegant, lower-alcohol reds.

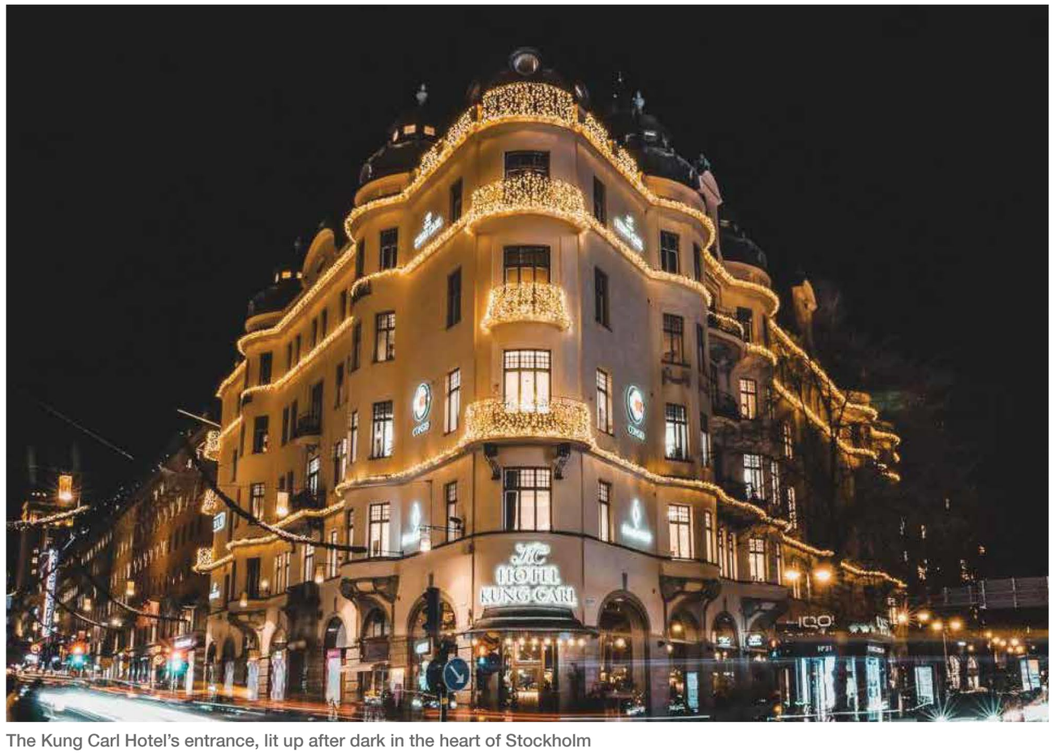
PIWI varieties will remain important, but experiments with Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and other classic grapes suggest that Sweden's final grape palette has yet to be determined. That uncertainty is part of the excitement.

A Market Still Finding Its Identity

Swedish wine remains a niche product. Systembolaget, the state-owned alcohol retailer, provides access to a sophisticated domestic market, but small production volumes and high costs make Swedish wine expensive compared with imports. Restaurants and wine tourism are therefore crucial. Svenskt Vin reports that around 70% of Swedish vineyards sell to restaurants, while more than half also sell through Systembolaget.

For small producers, welcoming visitors can be as important as selling bottles. The vineyard, landscape, food and personal encounter become part of the experience, helping visitors understand the wines and the challenges of producing them so far north.

Exports remain limited, and for now the more interesting international opportunity may actually be wine tourism. Visitors already come to Sweden for Stockholm, design, nature, food and the archipelago. Discovering its vineyards is an unexpected extension of the journey.



The Kung Carl Hotel's entrance, lit up after dark in the heart of Stockholm



Photos: Michèle Shah

Left: Statue of St George and the dragon in Gamla Stan, Stockholm, right: Järntorget (Iron Square), with its central fountain

High acidity is one of the defining characteristics of Swedish wine, making it particularly well suited to food

The Future

I would not expect Sweden to become the next France, Italy or Spain — and that is not the point. The more interesting possibility is that it develops its own identity as a cool-climate wine country, shaped by northern light, maritime influences, PIWI varieties and a new generation of ambitious winemakers. The challenge will be consistency: finding which grapes genuinely suit each site, managing difficult vintages and moving from technically sound wines to bottles with real personality and terroir.

That is what makes Swedish wine worth watching. For the wine traveller, Sweden offers something established wine countries cannot: the chance to witness a wine culture being created almost in real time. ❖