

France shakes up its wine act

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France's new five-year plan to beef up its wine exports incorporates some very specific ambitions. The average amount of French wine exported each year in the 1990s was 13.6 million hl (a hectolitre being 100 litres). By 2013 they want to be exporting at least 16 million hl a year, giving Australian and California wine exporters much more competition. But as well as increasing the volume of wine they export, they also want the average value of wine exported to increase, which may be more difficult to achieve – particularly since any increase in volume is most likely to come from the new, much more flexible Vignobles de France category that is scheduled to replace lowly Vin de Table from next month.

Unlike Vin de Table, a Vignobles de France wine may carry the vintage year on the label and, crucially, may be labelled by grape variety – the clearest sign so far that France has capitulated to the New World way of selling wine. Those creating Vignobles de France wines – and the French authorities hope that they are giving the green light to a new generation of cleverly marketed international French wine brands – will be allowed to blend ingredients from all over France, and there will be no restrictions on which vine varieties are planted where. Those who have planted Riesling in Bordeaux, or Chardonnay in Alsace, such as Olivier Zind-Humbrecht, for example, will no longer have to dissimulate. A national list of approved varieties is to be drawn up (which seems a bit of a waste of manpower - why would anyone want to plant a variety that would not make saleable wine? and are all hybrids really so bad?).

Thanks to the [new EU wine regime](#) announced at the end of last year, which included the adoption of much [more liberal winemaking practices](#), all sorts of techniques previously frowned upon as quintessentially un-French such as the use of oak chips and added tannins will be allowed for these Vignobles de France wines. Limits on yields seem to have been abandoned for this new category, which, when combined with much more interventionist winemaking, must be a potential cause for concern.

Still within the letter of the new wine regime, the Appellation Contrôlée category continues, as does its regulatory body the INAO, but the official announcements made at the end of last week tacitly admit that some appellations' regulations need revision. 'Decentralisation' is a recurring theme throughout the document setting out the reforms. Presumably local wine organisations are expected to put their own houses in order?

The current Vin de Pays category will now also be overseen by INAO and all French wines will fall into one of three tiers so that they conform more closely to the distinctions confirmed in the EU wine reforms agreed last December and due to come into force in August this year. (The three tiers are: wines without geographical indication, such as these Vignobles de France wines; wines of protected geographical indication, similar to current Vin de Pays; and wines with protected designation of origin, similar to current AOC wines.)

Wine tourism is specifically targeted for development – look out for a programme of grants like those which have turned parts of Italy's wine country into an *agriturismo*

zone. And, amazingly, the development of French wine marketing online has so far been stymied by health campaigners in France.