Organic wine, defined

9 Feb 2012 by Richard Hemming

At long last the citizens of the world may sleep easy in their beds, for yesterday the new EU rules for organic wine were announced. The Standing Committee on Organic Farming will be publishing the new regulation within the next month, and the term may be used for this year's vintage. The term 'organic wine' is significant because it concerns the vinification process – a definition already exists for 'wine made from organically grown grapes'. Organic wine will of course have to be made from organically grown grapes.

The restrictions are:

- no desulfurication (as the EU term it)
- sorbic acid prohibited
- maximum sulphite levels of 100 mg/l for reds, 150 mg/l for dry whites and rosés – both of which are 50 mg/l below the maximum allowed for non-organic wine
- and maximum sulphite levels of 30 mg/l below the relevant non-organic maximum for wines whose residual sugar is above 2 g/l.

That potentially still permits quite a bit of winery tinkering – just as organic viticulture permits the use of copper sprays. Even so, it is a well-intentioned piece of legislation and should be welcomed as such. According to Dacian Ciolos, EU commissioner for agriculture and rural development, consumers are 'more and more interested in organic products'. He said he was pleased that they had emerged with 'rules which make a clear difference between conventional and organic wine – as is the case with other organic products. As a result, consumers can be sure that any "organic wine" will have been produced using stricter production rules.' Organic wines will be identified by the use of the EU organic logo on labels.

More and more interested we may be, but the accompanying press release gives some figures documenting the reality of organics. Of 3.5 million hectares of vineyards in Europe, only an estimated 75,000 are organic. That's around 2%, compared with the European total agricultural average of 4.7%.

Perhaps this new definition will encourage more winemakers and growers to convert to organics, although the reality of production and economics for many wine regions will surely remain a prohibitive influence on the spread of organic wine.