Modal 5 Diplomarbeit
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Thesis title: From Necessity to Philosophy: Dry Farming as Fine Wine Identity in the Swartland and Its Implications for Water-Stressed Regions

Executive Summary

Motivation

Climate change and increasing water scarcity are reshaping global viticulture and forcing wine regions to reconsider their dependence on irrigation. Dry farming, often associated with the Mediterranean climate, has attracted renewed attention. Farming vines entirely on natural rainfall and soil water reserves is regarded as a symbol of sustainability, authenticity, and respect for terroir. Nevertheless, scientific evidence linking dry farming directly to superior wine quality remains inconclusive.

Against this background, the success of South Africa's Swartland provides an intriguing case study. Over the past two decades, the Swartland has transformed from a bulk-wine region into one of the country's leading fine wine regions. This thesis asks whether the Swartland's success can be attributed primarily to its viticultural conditions or to the deliberate construction and communication of a regional identity centred on dry farming.

Swartland is compared with Roussillon and Jumilla because all three regions share several structural characteristics, including water stress, dry farming traditions, old vineyards, and histories of undervaluation. This comparison allows the study to focus on the role of regional narrative and collective identity in commercial repositioning.

Research Questions and Objectives

The principal objective of this study is to explain the commercial success of the Swartland by weighing its viticultural conditions against the deliberate articulation of a regional identity and to evaluate whether its experience offers lessons for other water-stressed wine regions.

To achieve this objective, the thesis addresses three interrelated questions: first, what the scientific evidence demonstrates about the relationship between dry farming and wine quality; second, despite this, how the Swartland transformed dry farming from an agronomic necessity into the core of its regional fine wine identity; and third, why similar positioning has not emerged in comparable southern European regions such as Roussillon and Jumilla.

Methodology

The study adopts a literature-based analysis that draws on critical academic reviews, industry publications, trade sources, and producer communications concerning viticulture, regional identity, and wine marketing. This is complemented by observations from trade tastings and producer presentations attended by the author in the Swartland in January 2026, coupled with published producer statements drawn from print media and podcasts. These materials are used as interpretive sources throughout the paper.

Content

The literature review demonstrates that moderate water stress can favour grape composition and wine quality under certain conditions, but the quality signal tracks vine water status rather than dry farming as such. Existing research does not establish a causal link between farming method and superior wine quality.

The Swartland case shows that its success resulted from more than viticultural conditions. A group of like-minded producers consciously reinterpreted old vines, dry farming, and Mediterranean varieties as symbols of authenticity and regional identity. Through the Swartland Revolution, the Swartland Independent Producers, as well as external validation by critics and institutions, these elements were articulated into a coherent regional narrative.

The comparison with Roussillon and Jumilla shows that comparable vineyard resources do not necessarily produce parallel commercial outcomes. Although both regions have received some critical recognition, neither has developed a similarly unified regional narrative. Roussillon fails to communicate its diversity through one legible identity, while Jumilla's prestige narrative is overshadowed by its bulk-wine legacy.

Conclusion

The study concludes that dry farming in the Swartland functions simultaneously as a viticultural philosophy, a quality narrative, and a commercial positioning strategy. Its value arises not simply from the farming practice but from the way producers collectively composed and communicated it as a regional identity.

More broadly, the Swartland demonstrates that authenticity does not automatically emerge from natural constraints; it must be consciously constructed and communicated. As water scarcity intensifies, more southern European wine regions will be compelled to dry-farm out of climatic necessity, with little room to present it as a chosen philosophy. To what extent dry-farmed vineyards will serve as a commercial advantage depends on the region's ability to build dry farming into a coherent and credible regional identity.