

“How does climate change affect the acceptance of new grape varieties and the introduction of new regulations in France’s AOCs?”

1. Motivation

In recent years, I’ve become increasingly interested in how the wine world is responding to climate change, especially in regions where tradition is deeply rooted in regulations. As both a jurist and wine professional, I wanted to understand how flexible the French AOC system really is when it comes to adapting to new environmental realities. This especially came to my mind when the news was spread that AOCs Bordeaux, Champagne and Alsace were planning to introduce ‘new’ grape varieties in their AOCs. How is that possible in the traditional and somewhat rigid regions? This topic feels both relevant and personal: it connects my background in (EU) law with my passion for wine, and it raises fascinating questions about identity, regulation and climate change.

2. Objective

The question at the heart of this thesis is: how can France’s AOCs, based on tradition and strict regulations, adapt to allow new grape varieties that are more resistant to heat, drought or diseases? I specified my research to AOCs Bordeaux, Champagne and Alsace, as those are the most obvious AOCs that made, or are making, changes in their regulations. One of the most important objectives is to find the answer to the necessity of the allowance of new grape varieties in those AOCs: what scientific research has been done to come to this solution, and are the traditional varieties of the AOCs not able to adapt to the climatic challenges?

I also wanted to understand what institutions come to play, and what must be done to change these regulations? How are these changes received by different stakeholders: winemakers, consumers, researchers? My aim was not only to map the legal landscape but to explore the broader cultural and social conversation around innovation in wine regulations.

3. Methodology

To find answers, extensive research to the climatic challenges grape varieties face, is made at first. I studied several high-profile research projects on climate change. While studying those scientific studies, I discovered that AOC Bordeaux was the furthest ahead of the French AOCs

on this topic. Other AOCs seem to be following AOC Bordeaux's lead. That's why the focus of the thesis is mostly on AOC Bordeaux. After that, I analysed French and EU legislation, the different (and many) institutions that are playing a part in the French AOCs and reviewed AOC specifications. Special attention was paid to the VIFA-framework (Variétés d'Interêt à Fin d'Adaptation): grape varieties that are temporarily authorised for experimental use in AOC wines. The roles played by national and regional (and sometimes international) institutions such as INAO, CNAOV, ODG and CIVB are very relevant to adapt regulations. The research is based on legal texts, academic articles and first-hand case studies.

4. Key insights

The examples of AOCs Bordeaux, Alsace and Champagne reveal that adaptation is already underway, but at different speeds and with varying degrees of formality. AOC Bordeaux (Supérieur) has approved varieties like Touriga Nacional, Arinarnoa and Castets for limited blending. In AOC Alsace, producers are exploring options like Chenin Blanc and Syrah, though often under IGP classification. Champagne has taken very cautious approach, permitting the resistant (hybrid) grape variety Voltis for specific, limited use.

Each region balances tradition and change differently. Some winemakers embrace innovation, seeing it as essential to survival. Others remain hesitant, concerned that new grape varieties may dilute the concept of the typicity of the region. This raises broader questions about identity, marketing and how consumers interpret these changes. How can other regions (French and European) and their regulatory bodies respond to the inevitable climatic challenges they are, or will be, facing in the future?

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This thesis suggests that the French AOC system is evolving, albeit slowly and with built-in tensions. Tools like the VIFA-framework offer a way forward, but their limited scope and temporary nature mean they can only go so far. What happens to other regions? Will the AOCs maintain their identity and 'terroir' by allowing these grape varieties? And: is it actually a problem if their identity slightly changes?

Concluding, my recommendation is that the European Union will play a more active role in shaping the future of varietal innovation across its PDO system. Climate change is a real issue and seems to be the new crisis in the wine world after the Phylloxera-crisis at the end of the 19th century. That crisis was the main incentive to establish the AOC-system, and right now we have the tools to anticipate on the newest crisis. This includes in my opinion greater support for climate adaptation trials, more opportunities for cross-border learning and enhanced coordination between national authorities and EU institutions to future-proof the PDO system. In the end, adapting to climate change is not just about surviving, it's about doing so in a way that honours the heritage of European wine while making space for its future.