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Europe’s Wine Industry Urges the E.U. to Separate Moderate Drinking From Alcohol Abuse

At a Strasbourg debate, lawmakers and scientists weighed whether cancer policy should treat wine differently from other alcohol use.

Tuesday, October 6, 2026



The debate over alcohol and health is intensifying in Europe as lawmakers prepare to revisit parts of the European Union’s cancer prevention strategy, and the wine sector is pressing its case that policy should distinguish between harmful drinking and moderate

wine consumption.

That message was at the center of an event held in recent days at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, where scientists, policymakers, and representatives of the European wine industry met for a discussion titled, “Health Debates: Can wine be part of a healthy lifestyle?” The meeting was hosted by Italian lawmaker Dario Nardella of the Socialists and Democrats group and organized by the Comité Européen des Entreprises Vins, or CEEV, the body that represents EU wine companies and is led by Marzia Varvaglione.

The gathering came as European institutions continue to debate how alcohol should be treated in public health policy. According to the discussion referenced by participants, the latest European Parliament resolution draws a distinction between alcohol consumption in general and “harmful consumption” of alcohol. At the same time, the broader policy debate has included calls for health information on labels and tighter limits on advertising and other forms of promotion.

The Strasbourg event focused on a question that remains politically sensitive and scientifically contested: how to assess wine within a broader picture that includes diet, social habits, drinking patterns, and lifestyle. The organizers said the discussion was meant to underline the need for health policy to be grounded in scientific evidence rather than broad, uniform judgments about all alcoholic beverages.

Varvaglione said the wine sector recognizes the risks linked to alcohol abuse, but argued that European policy should take a more nuanced approach. She said the industry believes in moderation, education, and informed choice, and that its goal is not to encourage people to drink. Instead, she said, the aim is to preserve a culture in which adults who choose to consume wine can do so consciously and responsibly.

Nardella, who hosted the event, said protecting public health must remain one of the EU’s main political responsibilities, but added that prevention policy should be based on science and should reflect the complexity of people’s diets and behavior. He also pointed to wine’s role in Europe’s agricultural, economic, and cultural life, saying policymakers have a duty to listen to scientific evidence while also recognizing the realities of rural areas, local communities, and long-standing traditions.

Two Italian researchers took part in the scientific discussion. Gianni Pes, a senior researcher at the University of Sassari known for his work on so-called Blue Zones, argued that there is no single explanation for longevity in places such as Sardinia. He said exceptional longevity there has developed within a broader way of life that includes regular physical activity, traditional food, strong family and community ties, social interaction, and shared meals. Wine, he said, has traditionally been present in that setting, generally consumed in moderation and with meals, but he described it as only one part of a much larger picture.

Pes said the relationship between wine and health remains complex and debated in science, and should not be isolated from the wider context in which people eat and live. His remarks reflected one of the main themes of the event: that both science and policy should address patterns of consumption and the circumstances around drinking, rather than treating all uses of alcohol as identical.

Attilio Giacosa, a gastroenterologist and president of the Institute for Research on Wine, Food and Health, made a similar point while also stressing the risks tied to alcohol. He said alcohol abuse is unquestionably harmful and that there are people and situations in which alcohol should not be consumed at all. At the same time, he said scientific research must examine amount, frequency, consumption with meals, and the broader dietary and lifestyle context. He said the role of scientists is to ensure that public information and public policy reflect the full complexity of the evidence.

The event took place against a wider European and international policy debate over cancer, cardiovascular disease, and other noncommunicable diseases. In Brussels and Strasbourg, those discussions have become more contentious as health advocates press for stronger warnings and restrictions, while agricultural and wine industry groups argue that policy should not ignore differences in product, culture, and use. Wine producers have also sought to frame the issue around responsible drinking rather than abstinence, particularly in countries where wine is closely tied to farming, exports, and local identity.

Ignacio Sánchez Recarte, CEEV’s secretary general, said the meeting highlighted the need for open dialogue between science and politics as Europe shapes its response to major public health issues. He said the region needs a whole-of-society approach in which all parties, including stakeholders, are part of the conversation, with science, responsibility, and education at the center.

The exchange in Strasbourg did not settle the underlying dispute over how alcohol should be presented in health policy, but it showed how strongly the issue is being contested ahead of upcoming EU decisions. For lawmakers, the question is how to balance disease prevention with scientific uncertainty, economic interests, and cultural traditions. For the wine sector, the immediate goal is to make sure that future European rules do not treat wine only as a health risk, but also take account of how, when, and in what setting it is consumed.