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Italian wine executives said producers must cut output to match lower demand

At a Trento discussion, leaders from Banfi, Biondi Santi and Cavit rejected hopes for a return to earlier drinking habits.

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Wine producers from three very different Italian companies said in Trento that the industry can no longer plan on a return to old drinking habits and must adjust to a market shaped by lower consumption, higher costs, and weaker ties with younger

consumers.

The discussion took place at the Festival Trentodoc, in a wine talk organized with Corriere della Sera and moderated by the newspaper’s deputy editor, Luciano Ferraro. The speakers were Enrico Zanoni, general manager of Cavit; Rodolfo Maralli, president of Banfi; and Giampiero Bertolini, chief executive of Biondi Santi-Tenuta Greppo. Though their companies differ in size, structure, and market position, all three described the same challenge: wine businesses need to manage supply more carefully, protect the value of their territories and brands, and find new ways to speak to consumers.

Their message was direct. The wine market has changed, and producers who wait for demand to recover to earlier levels risk falling behind. Consumption has been declining for years in many markets, executives said, while younger generations are often less connected to wine culture than earlier ones. At the same time, producers are facing cost pressure in the vineyard, the winery, and distribution. That combination is pushing companies to rethink not only what they make, but how much they make, how they sell it, and how they explain it.

Maralli said management in wine now requires much more than administering an estate. In his view, the central task is deciding which products deserve investment, which sales channels matter most, and which consumers a producer wants to reach. He said wine leadership must be supported by what he called territorial marketing, linking a bottle to the culture, history, and identity of the place where it is made.

For Banfi, that approach includes backing cultural events such as the Jazz & Wine in Montalcino festival, which the company promotes and supports and which is set to mark its 30th edition in 2027. Maralli also pointed to the estate’s small but historic production of Moscadello, a wine tied to Montalcino since the 16th century. It is now a niche product, he said, but it still gives the company a way to talk about the area’s past and its long winemaking tradition.

Banfi was founded in 1978 in Montalcino by the Italian-American brothers John and Harry Mariani and formally opened in 1984, with the guidance of the late wine executive Ezio Rivella. It remains owned by the Mariani family, represented today by

Cristina Mariani. The company controls more than 2,800 hectares of land, including more than 1,000 hectares of vineyards, mainly in Montalcino, but also in Bolgheri, Chianti Classico, Maremma, and Alta Langa in Piedmont.

Maralli said that even producers with strong histories must prepare for the market that is emerging rather than hope for old conditions to come back. He said the wine business is becoming more fragmented, with many wineries competing for attention and shelf space, and that producers must make choices based on where demand is going, not where it used to be.

Bertolini described a similar tension between heritage and change at Biondi Santi-Tenuta Greppo, one of the most important names in Brunello di Montalcino. He said the company began by returning to the vineyards and the cellar to understand and strengthen what it had inherited. At the same time, it reviewed its distribution model to make sure its market presence matched the standing of the brand.

Biondi Santi belonged to the Biondi Santi family until 2016, when France’s EPI Group first acquired a majority stake and then took full control. Bertolini said the ownership change also brought an organizational shift, from a family-style structure to a more managerial model. That included the use of modern data analysis tools, which now allow the company to track performance and the movement of its bottles in near real time.

For Bertolini, a historic brand cannot rely on prestige alone. He said protecting Biondi Santi’s reputation requires turning goals into measurable targets and following strategies over the medium and long term. He also argued that the sector needs a better balance between prices and margins across the distribution chain, saying markups on wine are often too high and should be reduced.

Zanoni brought the perspective of a cooperative, where industrial decisions affect thousands of farming families. Cavit works with 5,250 winegrowers and manages more than 6,000 hectares of vineyards, equal to about 60% of Trentino’s planted vineyard area. Zanoni said that when he arrived at Cavit after work at Nestle, one of his first priorities was to build a planning horizon that went beyond a single harvest or a single vintage. That meant linking production and commercial strategy more closely and

identifying growth opportunities, including abroad.

He said the diversity of territories and microclimates in Trentino can be a competitive strength because it helps the cooperative differentiate its offer and preserve quality continuity. But he said that diversity also requires strong coordination, reliable data, and a solid understanding of the differences among wines and growing areas.

Zanoni pointed to Cavit’s decision nearly 20 years ago to invest heavily in traditional method sparkling wine, a segment that has since become one of the healthier parts of the market. At the time, he said, that category did not have the same visibility it has today, but the choice now looks far-sighted.

The sharpest part of the discussion came when the executives addressed the gap between supply and demand. Zanoni said lower wine consumption is a structural trend, not a temporary downturn, and that the sector must cut production accordingly. In some cases, he said, that could mean pulling out vineyards, much as has already happened in France. He argued that there is little sense in defending volumes that are hard to sell or can only be sold at prices that do not provide a return.

He said warning signs had been visible for years, including in the United States, but that the post-Covid rebound in consumption created a false sense of security. That rebound, in his view, was temporary. He noted that Italy moved over the years from per-capita wine consumption of about 100 liters to less than 30 liters, showing how deeply drinking patterns have changed. He also said consumer taste has shifted. In Trentino, he noted, the most common grape used to be Schiava and the focus was on red wine. Later, the region moved more strongly toward whites, helped by the success of Pinot Grigio and Chardonnay.

Bertolini agreed that restoring balance between production and demand may require removing some vineyards, though he framed that step as part of a broader search for equilibrium. He said the industry also needs to win back younger consumers and that this will require a different kind of communication. Rather than relying on technical language, he said, wineries should offer experiences that make wine easier to understand and more engaging, including activities at the estate itself.

Maralli said decisions such as reducing vineyard area must be considered carefully because they can have lasting effects on the landscape and local agriculture. Replacing vines with olive trees or another crop is not a short-term change, he said, and the implications reach beyond one company’s balance sheet. Still, he described the current crisis as a challenge that can also create opportunities.

He said the problems facing wine did not begin recently. In his view, the pandemic reminded people how vulnerable they are and fed a stricter health mindset that has hurt wine’s place as a social drink. That shift, combined with changing habits among younger adults and growing fragmentation in the market, is forcing producers to rethink their role.

What emerged in Trento was not a single strategy, but a shared view that the wine business has entered a period that requires tougher planning and more selective decisions. For large cooperatives, that means aligning vineyard output with realistic demand while protecting grower income. For major private producers, it means using data, brand discipline, and tighter distribution management. For all of them, it means treating territory, culture, and consumer engagement as part of the business rather than as decoration around it.