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Billionaire's vision for UK's largest winery hits major hurdle

UK's Kentish wine vault project stumbles amidst opposition and environmental concerns

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Plans to establish Britain's largest winery, heralded as the next epicenter of an English wine renaissance, have met another stumbling block. The Kentish Wine Vault (KVW) project, valued at a staggering £30 million ($38M), was envisioned to be the birthplace of "English Prosecco". But as the latest appeal verdict reveals, the dream might be

further from realization than anticipated.

A Dream Deferred?

The UK government's planning inspector has dashed hopes by ruling against the large-scale development of the KVW. As a result, the primary producer, MDCV, is now grappling with a daunting challenge: the potential shortage of capacity to process grapes from its extensive vineyards spread across more than 1,000 acres in southern England.

MDCV, in its quest to innovate and disrupt, has aimed to produce Charmat method sparkling wines, a cost-effective alternative that aligns more with Prosecco than the traditionally preferred Champagne-inspired sparkling wines.

Notably, MDCV had openly challenged the Medway council's 2022 decision which initially blocked the winery's development near Cuxton, a quaint village in the English county of Kent. This wasn't the first sign of resistance; opposition from Cuxton locals was evident as early as 2021.

A Billionaire's Conundrum

Mark Dixon, the Monaco-based billionaire owner of MDCV and its affiliate, Vineyard Farms Limited, now finds himself in a precarious situation. While the existing MDCV winery in Luddesdown, Kent, boasts a commendable capacity of approximately 700,000 liters, it's constrained by its physical boundaries and cannot be expanded further.

Furthermore, MDCV's projected vineyard plantings will necessitate a capacity nearly three times the current size. This pressing issue was emphatically highlighted as a "ticking clock" by Dixon's legal representatives in their plea to gain approval for the Kentish Wine Vault.

MDCV had previously shared with Wine-Searcher in 2021 its ambitious goal of having 647 hectares of vineyards established in Britain by 2023. The envisioned winery and accompanying visitor's center, an architectural marvel designed by Lord Foster, would have sprawled over an area equivalent to two football fields.

Environmental Concerns Overrule Commercial Interests

After prolonged deliberations, the UK government's planning inspectorate dismissed KVW's appeal against the local council's refusal to green-light the winery's construction.

Stephen Wilkinson, the planning inspector appointed by the UK's Secretary of State, elucidated that the proposed winery's location posed significant environmental concerns. Specifically, its proximity to a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and an adjoining local conservation area could compromise the region's intrinsic value.

Wilkinson emphasized the broader public interest, remarking that the envisaged "English wine revolution" could feasibly be accomplished outside these ecologically sensitive areas.

Stephen Hubbard, chairman of the Medway Council's planning committee, expressed satisfaction with the appeal decision, highlighting its alignment with the council's previous refusal to grant the KWV planning permission.

Describing the scale of the project, Hubbard stated, "The Kentish Wine Vault was a unique application due to its size, location and the nature of a business off a country lane." He also intimated that this might not be the last attempt by MDCV to gain approval.

MDCV has the option of escalating the matter to the high court if it deems the appeal decision as unlawful. As Hubbard puts it succinctly, the chapter isn't closed: "It will not be over until the fat lady sings."

As of now, MDCV's managing director, Gary Smith, has not commented on the appeal decision. The entire wine industry and conservationists alike will be closely watching the developments surrounding the KVW, as it shapes the future of wine production in Britain.