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Champagne's ambitious 2023 yield amidst market contradictions

Balancing sales, production, and environmental stewardship

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Despite facing challenges from declining sales and rising competition, the Champagne region aims to magnify its 2023 vintage, revealing mixed sentiments among stakeholders. The core decision involves the rise in Champagne yield levels for the forthcoming vintage, a move welcomed by some growers but questioned by others,

especially against the backdrop of the sector's major market sales decline.

Unveiling the 2023 Vintage Strategy

Champagne, on July 19, articulated its yield strategy for the 2023 vintage. The commercial yield was fixed at 11,400 kg/ha, with an additional provision allowing growers to collect an extra 4,100 kg/ha to bolster their Réserve Individuelle (RI). The unique reserve system of Champagne, RI, has been subject to a notable revision, with its limit being uplifted from 8,000 kg/ha to 10,000 kg/ha. This reserve system, typically, empowers growers to yield more during bountiful years, to be utilized during challenging seasons.

A rapid procedural alteration to the cahier des charges in June paved the way for this change, bypassing the customary investigative process by the INAO. This regulatory body is set to convene in September to deliberate on this matter, yet prevailing sentiments suggest the possibility of a refusal for the final approval is minuscule.

According to Olivier Russeil, representing the INAO, the hasty adjustment was spurred by the potential for this year's harvest to cater to the full commercial yield, within the set boundary of 15,500 kg/ha. The primary motivation being a safeguard against potential climate-induced threats intensified by global warming. David Chatillon of the CIVC elaborated that erratic yields necessitated Champagne to bolster its adaptive capabilities through continuous regulatory refinements.

Mixed Reactions From the Ground

Michel Drappier of Champagne Drappier lauded the initiative, terming it a potential boon for environmentally-friendly farming. He opined that the enhanced buffer would empower growers to adopt riskier, more ecological cultivation techniques. Sébastien Dubuisson from the CIVC mirrored this sentiment, underlining the benefits of a larger reserve in propelling a green transition.

Contrastingly, some questioned the RI's extension, given that the reserve hasn't historically faced depletion at the appellation level. A few organic winemakers, devoid of significant reserves, are unlikely to benefit. Jérôme Bourgeois, at the helm of

Champagne Bourgeois Diaz, elucidated his position, highlighting the disparity between the new targets and the realities faced by growers like him. Similarly, Gil Conejo, co-partner at Champagne Cosse, expressed apprehensions about the feasibility and practicality of the updated RI system.

Behind the Numbers: The Current Sales Scenario

Champagne's decision to set the commercial yield at 11,400 kg/ha, translating to 323 million bottles, surpasses both the present sales figures and the end-of-year forecast. This determination aligns with the previous year's strategy, wherein the harvest exceeded sales by a sizable margin. Notably, sales have been waning in Champagne's primary markets. By mid-2023, France, the US, and the UK all witnessed descending sales trajectories, whereas competitors like Prosecco flourished.

A Glimpse into Environmental Concerns

A pivotal issue intertwined with this production strategy is the environmental impact, particularly concerning the use of chemicals in cultivation. A study by Agreste spotlighted the extensive chemical use in Champagne, significantly outstripping counterparts in Alsace and the broader French wine sector. The EU's initiative to halve pesticide utilization by 2030 implies that regions like Champagne may have to reevaluate their agricultural practices soon.