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Bordeaux's court battle over wine prices

Winegrowers vs. Négociants

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In a significant legal confrontation that has garnered widespread attention in the French media, two prominent Bordeaux wine négociants, Ginestet and Excell (a subsidiary of Cordier), have been brought before the Bordeaux Commercial Court. The central issue at hand is the accusation of paying excessively low prices for bulk wine, a practice that has sparked considerable controversy within the wine industry.

The lawsuit, initiated by retired Médoc winegrower Rémi Lacombe of Château Bessan-Ségur, a Cru Bourgeois estate in Civrac-en-Médoc, alleges that these merchants purchased his wines at €1200 per tonneau (900 liters), significantly below his estimated production costs of €1600 per tonneau. This case not only highlights the financial struggles of winegrowers but also raises critical questions about fair pricing practices in the wine industry.

Central to Lacombe's argument is France's Egalim Law of 2018-19, designed to balance commercial relations in the agricultural and food sector and protect farmers from unfair pricing practices. This law, untested in this context, could set a legal precedent, depending on the court's decision. Notably, the case also addresses the adherence to a clause in the Egalim Law requiring the seller to set the initial price in writing, a protocol Lacombe claims was not followed.

Lacombe's stance, passionately voiced in various French media outlets, underscores the hardships faced by winegrowers who feel pressured to sell their products at prices that do not cover their production costs. His lawyer, Louis Lacamp, emphasizes the unwillingness of winegrowers to sell at a loss and accuses négociants of exploiting the crisis to lower prices. Lacombe's battle is not just for himself but is seen as a stand on behalf of other agricultural operators in the region who fear retribution.

On the other side of the legal divide, the defense argues that the transaction in question was a standard brokerage deal, conducted through an intermediary and reflective of the market price for the wine's quality. They assert that there was no undue pressure on the seller and that the dealings were part of the day-to-day business of buying bulk wine in Bordeaux.

Adding complexity to this case is the current status of Château Bessan-Ségur, which has been sold for a substantial sum. This separate but related case involves disputes over the sale and the current condition of the estate's vineyards, which have raised environmental and agricultural concerns in the region.

As the Bordeaux wine community and interested observers await the court's verdict, due on 22 February, this case stands as a significant moment in the ongoing conversation about fair pricing, agricultural sustainability, and the intricate

relationships within the wine industry. The outcome could have far-reaching implications, not only for the parties involved but for the broader dynamics of wine production and distribution in France and beyond.