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EU Greenlights Organic Alcohol-Free Wine

EU Approves Vacuum Evaporation and Distillation for Organic Alcohol-Free Wines

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In recent years, the wine industry has been undergoing significant transformations, one of which is the rise of alcohol-free wine. Historically, wine has been synonymous with alcohol content, but shifting consumer preferences towards healthier lifestyles have

pushed the demand for non-alcoholic alternatives. While this trend is not entirely new, it received a boost in 2021 when the European Union officially authorized the production of alcohol-free wines. However, despite this progress, regulatory hurdles remain, particularly in the realm of organic certification, where the current framework still lags behind these innovations.

At the heart of this regulatory discussion is the European Commission's proposal to expand the list of permissible methods for wine dealcoholization. Currently, the production of organic wine in Europe is regulated by the 2018/848 Organic Regulation, which outlines specific standards for organic farming and winemaking practices. This regulation, however, does not address any processes for reducing alcohol content, effectively preventing dealcoholized wines from being certified as organic, even if they are produced from organically grown grapes.

Germany has been one of the first countries to challenge this gap. In 2021, it formally requested that the European Commission assess the inclusion of vacuum evaporation as an authorized method for dealcoholization in organic wine production. Following this request, the independent technical advisory group for organic production, known as EGTOP (Expert Group for Technical Advice on Organic Production), issued a favorable opinion on the matter. The group not only endorsed vacuum evaporation but also recommended the addition of distillation to the list of authorized processes, provided that the wine is not heated above 75°C and that no filters with pore sizes smaller than 0.2 micrometers are used.

This development led to a significant milestone in August 2024, when the European Commission opened a public consultation on the proposed delegated act, which would amend the organic wine regulations to allow these processes. This consultation remains open until September 24, after which the European Parliament and Council will have two months to raise objections. Should there be no opposition, the new regulations could come into force soon after, offering organic winemakers an expanded toolkit for producing alcohol-free wines.

The Technical Complexities of Dealcoholization

Vacuum evaporation and distillation represent two of the most promising methods for reducing alcohol in wine without compromising its core sensory qualities. Vacuum evaporation works by reducing the boiling point of liquids, enabling the removal of alcohol from wine at lower temperatures, thus preserving its aromas and flavors. Similarly, distillation allows winemakers to separate alcohol from wine in a controlled environment. These methods, once approved, would mark a significant step forward for organic winemakers, providing them with more versatile and sustainable techniques for creating non-alcoholic wines.

However, as Stéphane Becquet, technical and scientific director of the organic winemakers' union in Aquitaine, noted, while these advances are promising, they only address the issue of total dealcoholization. The proposal does not yet include provisions for partial dealcoholization, which would enable winemakers to lower, but not completely remove, the alcohol content in their wines. Currently, partial dealcoholization remains a point of discussion primarily for conventional wines, particularly those protected by geographical indications like IGP (Protected Geographical Indication) and AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée).

The INAO (National Institute of Origin and Quality), which oversees French IGP wines, has advocated for the inclusion of partial dealcoholization in the organic wine certification process. Should this change occur, winemakers could produce IGP-certified wines with reduced alcohol content while still maintaining their organic "AB" label, a certification mark signifying compliance with French organic agriculture standards. However, as of now, the European regulatory framework does not accommodate this option.

While the current proposal is a step forward, it also highlights the complexity of dealcoholization within the broader context of organic wine production. According to EGTOP, partial dealcoholization presents a more complicated set of challenges and is not currently seen as a priority. This stance reflects broader industry concerns that reducing alcohol content in wine is not merely a technical issue but also a matter of preserving wine's identity, especially for wines tied to specific terroirs and appellations.

Moreover, the organic wine sector faces additional challenges when it comes to broader acceptance of alcohol-free products. For many traditional wine consumers and producers, the concept of wine without alcohol remains a contentious one, raising questions about authenticity and quality. While organic certification plays a crucial role in reassuring consumers about the sustainability and ecological impact of their wine choices, the lack of a clear regulatory framework for alcohol-free organic wines complicates the matter.

The push for dealcoholized organic wines is also linked to the growing trend of health-conscious consumers seeking lower-alcohol or alcohol-free beverages without compromising on taste. This demographic, which spans younger consumers, pregnant women, and those avoiding alcohol for health reasons, represents a significant market opportunity. If organic winemakers can meet the demand for alcohol-free products while retaining the organic certification, they could potentially tap into this expanding segment.

The evolving landscape of alcohol-free wine production in Europe reflects broader shifts in both consumer preferences and regulatory frameworks. The European Commission's proposal to authorize vacuum evaporation and distillation as acceptable methods for dealcoholization in organic wines marks a pivotal moment for the industry. Should the proposal be approved, organic winemakers will have greater flexibility to create alcohol-free wines that meet growing consumer demand while adhering to the strict standards of organic farming.

Nevertheless, the debate over partial dealcoholization remains unresolved, underscoring the complexity of balancing tradition, regulation, and innovation in the wine world. As the consultation period draws to a close, the wine industry awaits the outcome with keen interest, as it could significantly influence the future of organic wine production in Europe. Whether total or partial dealcoholization, the ability to maintain organic certification in alcohol-free wines may well be the next frontier in the ongoing evolution of the European wine industry.