vinetur

Bordeaux Chaptalization Sparks Debate

Bordeaux Winemakers Turn to Chaptalization Amid Climate Change Concerns

Tuesday, November 5, 2024



The use of chaptalization in Bordeaux wines during the 2024 harvest has stirred debate among producers, experts, and wine enthusiasts. Chaptalization, which involves adding sugar to grape must to increase the final alcohol level, is permitted in France but

requires official authorization. This year, several Bordeaux producers applied for and received permission to use this technique, highlighting the challenges winemakers face as a result of low grape ripeness, partly attributed to climate change.

Approval for chaptalization in Bordeaux was granted between September 5 and October 7, when authorities in the Gironde department issued multiple decrees, as reported by the local newspaper Sud-Ouest. The decision came after evaluations by the INAO, the French organization that oversees appellations, which assesses producers' requests and submits recommendations to local authorities. One Saint-Émilion Grand Cru producer told the press that he anticipated needing extra sugar, purchasing supplies ahead of the harvest. According to his winemaker, the potential alcohol level reached only 11 percent, which was below the target, and he justified the decision to add sugar as an effort to "satisfy customers."

Not all producers are concerned about lower alcohol levels, however. Some, like Nicolas Piffre, an enologist at the Enosens winemaking laboratory, view this vintage as a return to Bordeaux's classic style, marked by greater freshness and acidity due to reduced sunlight exposure. For Piffre, the 2024 vintage is not problematic but rather an opportunity to revive wine profiles that have gained popularity in recent years. This opinion is echoed by François Despagne, former president of the Saint-Émilion Grands Crus Classés organization, who described the harvest as "not catastrophic," though he admitted that some batches were "on the edge" in terms of sugar content.

Frédéric Massie, an enologist with the consulting group Derenoncourt, noted that while an 11 percent alcohol content is low for certain grands crus standards, many batches reached between 12 and 14 percent without chaptalization. Massie questioned the emphasis on alcohol content as a marker of quality, arguing that alcohol is not a determining factor in the excellence of a wine. His perspective points to a broader debate within the industry about whether alcohol is truly essential to the perception of quality in premium wines.

Public reactions to Bordeaux's chaptalization have also surfaced, with mixed responses in the media and on social platforms. Some expressed disapproval at the notion that an 11 percent alcohol level might be insufficient, while others criticized the media's

coverage, suggesting that outlets, especially Sud-Ouest, were sensationalizing an already challenging moment for the wine industry.

A Sud-Ouest journalist responded to these comments, pointing out that Bordeaux wines in the past often had alcohol levels around 11.5 percent without causing concern. This exchange highlights the complexity of modern viticultural changes, where rising alcohol content over recent decades has reshaped expectations about wine profiles, even in a region as iconic as Bordeaux.