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OIV Turns 100 Amidst New Challenges

Overcoming historic hurdles, OIV faces modern obstacles like climate change and consumer shifts

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John Barker, Director General of the OIV

The International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV) is celebrating its centennial, marking a significant milestone characterized by a history of resilience and adaptation. Established in 1924, the OIV has weathered numerous challenges, including Prohibition in the United States, devastating vine diseases such as phylloxera, global conflicts, and shifts in the wine market. Now based in Dijon, as of this year, the organization hosted its 100th anniversary in October during the 45th OIV Congress, gathering experts to address current and critical issues facing the industry.

Today's challenges are different but no less pressing. Climate change and shifting consumer preferences are at the forefront. The year 2023 proved particularly difficult for wine producers worldwide. Global wine production dropped to its lowest level since 1961 due to extreme weather conditions, and international wine consumption fell by 3%. Nevertheless, OIV Director John Barker remains hopeful, emphasizing during the congress that the wine sector has repeatedly demonstrated its resilience.

The OIV was born out of an international wine crisis. At the time, Europe was still reeling from the aftermath of the phylloxera epidemic, and the market was plagued by the proliferation of adulterated products. In response, eight founding countries—Spain, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Tunisia—came together to create an institution dedicated to standardizing regulations and promoting scientific research on grapes and wine. Today, the OIV boasts 50 member states, with China expected to join as the 51st member in November. The European Union and wine regions such as Ningxia in China and Texas also participate in collaboration with the OIV, though the United States withdrew from the organization in 2001.

The OIV's role is scientific and technical rather than political. Its mission includes developing uniform standards, supporting research, and providing detailed statistical data. "We don't manage promotional aspects of wine," Barker explains, underscoring the importance of international cooperation to tackle challenges such as climate change. "Climate change is one of our biggest issues," he says. "The vine is a perennial plant that grows in vulnerable areas, and we see the effects of global warming very clearly." Sustainability is crucial, not just to adapt to a warming world but also to meet evolving market demands.

The genetic diversity of grapevines, with more than 13,000 varieties, offers a potential advantage. Barker points out that this diversity could help identify grapes that are more suited to changing climates or that align better with contemporary consumer trends. The adaptability of these varieties is a key focus of the OIV's efforts to ensure the long-term viability of the wine industry.

Consumer habits are also shifting. In traditional markets like France and Italy, demand for red wine has been declining, and in China, consumption has not fully recovered since the pandemic. However, sparkling, white, and rosé wines have fared better amid inflationary pressures. The industry is also exploring low-alcohol and non-alcoholic wines, which will be a topic of discussion at the OIV Congress in Dijon, where hundreds of experts are expected to contribute.

Barker emphasizes there are reasons to be optimistic. "If we look at the history of the sector, it has always been extraordinarily resilient," he says. The quality of wine worldwide has never been higher, with an emphasis on authenticity and innovation. Despite current challenges, the wine industry has continuously adapted and evolved, and according to Barker, it still holds significant potential for future growth.