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European wine medal regulations tighten to combat misleading advertising and protect consumers

National laws and EU rules require transparency in award claims as authorities crack down on fraudulent practices across the industry

Monday, May 5, 2025



In recent years, the regulation of wine medals and awards in Europe and internationally has become a key issue for both consumers and producers. The rules governing how wineries can advertise medals won in competitions are designed to protect consumers from misleading information and to maintain the integrity of the wine market. Each country in Europe has its own national legislation, but these are also shaped by European Union regulations and international agreements.

In Spain, the main legal framework comes from the Law on Unfair Competition (Law 3/1991) and the General Law on Advertising (Law 34/1988). These laws prohibit any advertising that could mislead consumers, including false claims about awards or medals. If a winery attributes a medal to a wine that did not win it, or uses a medal from a different vintage to promote a current release, this is considered misleading

advertising. The Spanish authorities responsible for enforcing these rules include the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and regional consumer protection agencies. Sanctions can range from fines to product withdrawal and even legal action by affected consumers.

France enforces some of the strictest rules in Europe regarding wine awards. The French Consumer Code requires that any mention of an award must specify the name of the competition, the year it was awarded, and, if relevant, the specific batch or vintage. Only competitions officially recognized by the French Ministry of Agriculture can have their medals used on labels or in advertising. Violations can result in heavy fines and, in severe cases, criminal charges.

Italy follows similar guidelines. Italian law requires that any reference to an award must be verifiable and clearly linked to the specific vintage being sold. The contests themselves must meet standards of transparency and impartiality. The Italian Competition Authority (AGCM) monitors compliance and can sanction both contest organizers and wineries for misleading practices.

At the European level, Regulation (EU) 1308/2013 establishes common market rules for agricultural products, including wine. This regulation requires accurate labeling and presentation of wines. Regulation (EU) 1169/2011 further obliges producers to provide transparent information about food products, including any mention of awards or medals.

Internationally, there is no single global law governing wine awards, but the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV) provides guidelines for wine competitions. These guidelines are voluntary unless a competition chooses to adhere to them.

When wineries use medals that are not real or do not correspond to the wine being sold, they risk significant legal consequences. In Spain, such cases are handled by consumer protection agencies like AECOSAN (now part of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs). Penalties can include fines, product recalls, and reputational damage. In France and Italy, similar agencies have authority to act against violators. If protected designations such as Denomination of Origin or Geographical Indication are involved, penalties may be even more severe due to potential harm to regional reputations.

Anyone—consumers, other wineries, or industry associations—can report suspected misuse of wine medals. In Spain, complaints can be filed with regional consumer offices or national agencies like AICA under the Ministry of Agriculture. In France, reports go to the DGCCRF; in Italy, to AGCM. Complaints should include evidence such as photos of labels or advertisements and purchase receipts.

For a medal claim to be legal on a wine label or advertisement, it must always state the exact name of the competition, the year awarded, the type of distinction (gold, silver, bronze), and make clear whether it applies specifically to that vintage and batch. It is not permitted to generalize an award across all bottles if only one batch was recognized. Consumers should also check that medals are verifiable through official competition results published online.

The number on a bottle’s label or cork often identifies its batch; this should match records from the awarding competition. If there is no match between awarded batch and marketed product, this is considered misleading advertising.

There have been several high-profile cases involving fraudulent use of wine medals in Europe. In 2017, French producer Raphaël Michel was investigated for selling ordinary wine labeled as prestigious origin wines with unearned medals. The case led to large fines and temporary suspension of business activities.

In Spain in 2020, ACEVIN found some wineries using old medals from previous vintages to promote new releases—a practice that led to public warnings and threats of formal complaints unless corrected.

In Italy in 2022, small producers were found using medals from unofficial competitions where awards were given almost automatically after paying high entry fees. Italian authorities opened investigations into both contest organizers and participating wineries.

Internationally in 2018, Wine Paris exposed some Asian producers who advertised fake awards with invented names similar to well-known competitions. Major trade fairs responded by banning companies involved until issues were resolved.

These incidents show that while regulations exist and enforcement mechanisms work in many cases, fraudulent practices still occur. Ongoing vigilance by consumers, industry professionals, and regulators remains essential.

For consumers wanting to verify if a medal on a bottle is legitimate: check that it clearly states the competition’s name; ensure it lists the year awarded; confirm that both competition and award are real by searching online; look for batch numbers matching official records; pay attention to whether multiple obscure medals appear on one bottle; and be wary if information seems exaggerated or unverifiable.

The goal behind these regulations is clear: protect honest producers and ensure that wine awards remain meaningful indicators of quality rather than empty marketing tools.