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Vatican City wine market draws global attention amid papal transition and record Jubilee crowds

Exclusive imports, secretive trade practices, and new projects highlight the enclave’s unique role in Italian wine culture

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Vatican City, the world’s smallest independent state, is also home to one of the most secretive and unique wine markets. In 2025, the enclave is at the center of global attention due to the death of Pope Francis on April 21, coinciding with a Jubilee Year that draws millions of pilgrims to Rome and the Vatican. The number of visitors is

expected to surpass previous estimates, as Catholics from around the world come to pay their respects and participate in religious celebrations.

Despite its tiny population—estimates range from 500 to 1,000 residents—Vatican City leads the world in per capita wine imports. According to 2019 data, each resident consumed an average of 79 liters of wine per year, or about 99 bottles. This figure is more than double Italy’s national average. Nearly all wine imported into the Vatican comes from Italy, and all arrives already bottled. In 2024, Italian producers exported 54,200 liters of wine to the Vatican, with fortified wines like Marsala making up a significant portion due to their use in Communion. These numbers fluctuate year by year; for example, imports peaked at over 71,000 liters in 2018 but dropped to just over 46,000 liters in 2022.

The process for getting wine into Vatican City is not straightforward. The Vatican is not part of the European Union, so it operates outside EU trade regulations and tariffs. Exporters must apply through a public notice portal called Bandi Pubblici Santa Sede. The application process distinguishes between general drinks and “wine and hosts for Holy Mass.” However, insiders say that personal connections are often more important than paperwork. Producers who have managed to sell wine to the Vatican rarely disclose their contacts, making entry into this market highly competitive and secretive.

Some Italian wineries have a long history with the Vatican. For example, Bava Vini supplied a Moscato called “Alleluja” for Eucharist use from around 1990 until the papacy of Benedict XVI. Other producers like Abbazia di Novacella have been exporting wines since 2010. Their religious background may help open doors, but it is not a requirement; quality and persistence also play roles.

Within Vatican City, there are two main shops where wine can be purchased. The Annona store is open to visitors but has been closed for renovations since January. The other shop is located in an old railway station and requires a membership card for access. This shop serves Vatican staff, employees of affiliated institutions like Bambini Gesù Hospital, and accredited diplomats. Wines from well-known Italian producers such as Marchesi Antinori are available here.

One reason for high import figures is that Vatican City is a duty-free zone under the terms of the 1929 Lateran Treaty. Wine prices are lower than in Rome, and border controls are minimal. This makes it easy for Romans and others with access to purchase wine in bulk and take it out of the enclave.

Pope Francis was known as a supporter of Italian wine culture. He often spoke about wine's role in bringing joy and fostering community. In January 2024, he addressed more than 100 producers at an event organized by Veronafiere, praising their respect for tradition and environmental stewardship. Even near the end of his life, he continued to celebrate wine's significance beyond its sacramental use. On April 9 this year, he presented King Charles III and Queen Camilla with a magnum of Aneri Amarone 2005 during their private visit—a symbolic gesture marking their wedding anniversary.

The Vatican's influence on Italian wine extends beyond its borders. Italian Wine Brands recently launched Grande Alberone Rosso: Jubileum Edition—a special release aimed at tourists visiting Rome during the Jubilee Year. Although not sold inside Vatican City itself, it targets those drawn by religious events.

Looking ahead, new projects are underway within Vatican territory. Riccardo Cotarella is leading efforts to produce a Cabernet Sauvignon-based red wine from vines planted at Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence southeast of Rome. This wine will be sold exclusively within Vatican City starting in 2026. Another initiative at Castel Gandolfo involves research into disease-resistant grape varieties under the Borgo Laudato Si' project.

The Vatican's wine market remains difficult to penetrate and closely guarded by those involved. For many Italian producers, supplying wine to this spiritual center is a matter of pride rooted in cultural heritage rather than commercial gain or marketing strategy. As millions continue to visit during this historic Jubilee Year—and as new papal traditions take shape—the flow of Italian wine into this tiny enclave shows no sign of slowing down.