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Sustainability loses power as a marketing tool in the global wine industry amid shifting consumer priorities

Producers embrace eco-friendly practices but price, taste, and health concerns outweigh environmental messaging for most wine buyers

Thursday, July 3, 2025



Sustainability has become a central theme in the global wine industry, with producers and marketers alike eager to highlight their environmental credentials. The movement has gained momentum despite political headwinds, such as the Trump administration's resistance to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) guidelines. Today, sustainability is so common in winemaking that it rarely serves as a unique selling point. Kristen Goceljak, wine director at Kent Hospitality Group, notes that sustainable agriculture is now so widespread that it no longer differentiates one label from another.

The push for ethical consumption continues to grow, marked by frequent press releases and public commitments from wineries around the world. However, beneath the surface, there is significant debate within the trade about the real value of sustainability as a marketing tool. Many professionals involved in selling and promoting wine express skepticism about whether sustainability messaging truly resonates with consumers or drives sales.

This skepticism is not rooted in climate change denial or simple fatigue with environmental issues. Most wine professionals agree that reducing the environmental impact of winegrowing is a worthy goal. Nor are accusations of greenwashing at the forefront of their concerns, though they acknowledge that corporate messaging can be misleading. The main issue is whether sustainability actually influences consumer behavior or if it simply serves as a talking point for the industry.

Some believe that promoting sustainability, along with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), could help wine appeal to younger consumers who are increasingly disengaged from the category. Queena Wong, founder of Curious Vines and an advocate for gender balance in wine, argues that a more diverse workforce is essential for reaching new audiences and reversing declining market share. However, data from IWSR shows that price, taste preferences, and health concerns are far more important factors for younger drinkers than a winery's ecological practices.

A recent survey by CGA by NIQ found that while over 70 percent of consumers claim sustainability matters to them, few actually base their purchasing decisions on it—especially when it comes to alcohol, where price sensitivity is high. Retailers like Rupert Pritchett of Taurus Wines in the UK report that most customers are more

interested in price than sustainability and can even be put off by messaging that feels like moralizing.

Pritchett observes that some customers—often parents influenced by their children's interest in sustainability—ask about eco-friendly wines but rarely switch from their preferred brands if those wines do not meet sustainable criteria. He also notes that efforts to promote local or organic wines have met with limited enthusiasm among his clientele.

Despite these challenges, some producers see real value in serious sustainability efforts. Anselmo Guerrieri Gonzaga of San Leonardo in Trentino believes that authentic commitment to sustainable practices adds depth and meaning to his wines. He argues that true luxury lies in respecting the land and people involved in winemaking and sees no conflict between ethics and excellence.

On the restaurant side, opinions are mixed. Kristen Goceljak says that while guests do not object to discussions about sustainable practices, these factors rarely drive purchasing decisions. Still, sustainability heavily influences her selection of wines for her list because it matters to producers.

Stuart Skea, group head sommelier at Aizle Restaurant in Edinburgh, is more blunt. He says consumer interest in how wine is farmed is minimal and believes most people have only vague ideas about wine production. In contrast, Ren Neuman of Printemps in New York finds that weaving sustainability into broader stories about producers can spark interest without overwhelming customers.

Price remains a major barrier for younger consumers who might otherwise be interested in sustainable wines. Pritchett points out that local restaurants seeking organic or sustainable lists often find the costs prohibitive, making these wines inaccessible to their target audience.

Another challenge is the proliferation of certification schemes and labels related to sustainability. Andrea Cardenas of Viña Seña highlights the administrative burden and potential confusion caused by multiple overlapping programs. She advocates for unifying standards to make it easier for consumers to understand and compare

sustainable practices across different wineries.

As more vineyards adopt visible sustainable practices—such as installing solar panels or planting cover crops—these efforts have become part of the visitor experience. However, industry insiders caution against expecting back-end improvements alone to solve wine’s broader challenges with declining consumption and changing consumer preferences.

While sustainability has become an integral part of how many wineries operate and present themselves to the world, its effectiveness as a marketing tool remains uncertain. For now, heritage and quality continue to hold sway among many buyers, even as the industry seeks new ways to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving marketplace.