vinetur

Unified Wine & Grape Symposium Attendance Drops as Industry Faces Economic Strain

Organizers cite ongoing financial challenges for the decline, but participants express optimism about market recovery within four years.

Tuesday, February 17, 2026



The Unified Wine & Grape Symposium, held annually in Sacramento, remains the largest gathering for the wine industry in North America. This year's event drew more than 1,000 attendees, though organizers noted a slight drop in attendance compared to previous years. The decrease was attributed to ongoing economic challenges affecting the sector. Despite this, participants reported a generally positive atmosphere, with many expressing cautious optimism about the market stabilizing by 2027 or early 2028.

During the State of the Industry session, nearly every attendee received a five-inch flexible "stress bottle," a gesture from sponsor Vintage Crop aimed at helping participants manage anxiety during discussions about the industry's uncertain future. The session focused on how wineries and growers can prepare for potential changes in the market and what steps they can take now to adapt.

A highlight of the symposium was the Tuesday Keynote Luncheon, featuring a conversation between Felicity Carter of Drinks Insider and Laura Catena, head of Argentina's Catena winery and an emergency room physician in San Francisco. Their discussion addressed the complex relationship between wine and health. Dr. Catena emphasized that consumers should consult medical professionals rather than rely on internet sources for advice about alcohol consumption. She noted that while some individuals should avoid alcohol entirely due to medical or family history reasons, moderate consumption may be appropriate for others depending on various factors. The session also encouraged attendees to look beyond sensational headlines and consider the nuances of scientific studies.

The international nature of the wine industry was evident throughout the symposium. Attendees heard a variety of languages including Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and English with accents from around the world. The trade show floor featured new exhibitors such as the Italian Trade Agency (ITA), which promoted Italian wine technology rather than finished wines. Another notable presence was CIR Label from China, showcasing custom wine labels designed for global brands. CIR Label's participation marked its first attempt to enter the U.S. market, and their booth attracted significant interest from attendees.

Spanish-language programming has become an important part of the symposium, reflecting the multilingual reality of the U.S. wine industry. This year’s sessions were concentrated on Thursday morning and saw strong participation despite concerns about possible immigration enforcement activity near the convention center. Organizers said these programs are essential for supporting talent across all levels of the industry.

The trade show itself covered every aspect of wine production, from vineyard management to bottling and marketing. While overall attendance was down—some organizations sent fewer representatives than in previous years—enthusiasm remained high among those present. Technology continued to be a major focus, with robotics and computer systems addressing labor shortages and environmental concerns such as water use. Although non-alcoholic and low-alcohol wine technologies were less prominent this year compared to previous events, several exhibitors offered new plant varieties for vineyards, signaling that growers are planning for long-term changes even amid current difficulties.

The Unified Wine & Grape Symposium continues to serve as a key meeting point for industry professionals seeking information, networking opportunities, and solutions to ongoing challenges. Organizers have already announced dates for next year’s event, scheduled for late January 2027 in Sacramento.