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Slow Wine Fair Challenges Industry to Confront Labor Exploitation in Vineyards

Event in Bologna spotlights ethical production and urges fair treatment for immigrant workers behind every bottle

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The Slow Wine Fair opened today at BolognaFiere, sending a strong message to the wine industry: “Wine is only good if it’s fair.” The event, which runs until February 24, 2026, is organized alongside Sana Food and marks the 40th anniversary of Slow Food. This year’s fair brings together 1,100 Italian wineries and producers from 28 countries,

focusing on ethical, social, environmental, and economic fairness in wine production.

The fair's organizers are using their platform to highlight labor issues in vineyards, especially those affecting foreign workers. According to Slow Food Italy's director general Serena Milano, most vineyard workers are immigrants. She emphasized that wine should not be the product of exploited labor but rather a vehicle for recognizing and fairly compensating workers' contributions. Milano pointed out that wine is not a daily necessity but a cultural and social experience, making it even more important to ensure ethical practices in its production.

Maria Cristina Galeasso, coordinator of the Accademia della Vigna, explained that labor issues in vineyards have been under scrutiny since 2020. Many workers lacked contracts and received inadequate pay. Today, finding skilled labor is difficult, and building strong relationships between companies and workers remains a challenge. Most non-EU vineyard workers lack necessary training. The Accademia della Vigna addresses this by combining ethical work, training, social inclusion, and corporate responsibility. The program connects companies with workers—mainly from Africa, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—helping them enter the industry in a protected environment.

Yunuel Ibarra and Irene De Barraicua from Lideres Campesinas spoke about their efforts to protect women in agriculture. They promote gender equality and fair wages through "ethical labels" that use QR codes to inform consumers about working conditions behind each bottle of wine. To earn this label, producers must meet requirements for gender equality, training, and healthy working environments. In California, where they operate, farmworkers often face risks from wildfire smoke or pesticide exposure.

Yvan Sagnet, president of NOCap and recipient of Italy's Cavaliere del Lavoro honor, shared his personal experience as a migrant farmworker. He described working 14-hour days for minimal pay during tomato harvests in Nardò. After experiencing exploitation firsthand—earning just €14 gross per day—he led a strike that became the foundation for his ongoing fight against illegal hiring practices known as "caporalato." NOCap has since helped regularize over 5,000 workers' statuses in Italy. Sagnet estimates there are about 500,000 farmworkers employed illegally in the country due to ineffective

immigration policies. NOCap also works with supermarkets on fair pricing campaigns and uses its own label to identify products made under fair labor conditions.

Boban Pesov’s story adds another perspective to the discussion. Originally from Macedonia and now a wine producer in Piedmont, Pesov recounted how his family started their own cooperative after experiencing the challenges faced by immigrant workers. The Arco del Lavoro cooperative began with 10 people in 2008 and now employs up to 120 workers from Bangladesh, Pakistan, North Africa, and other regions. Pesov believes investing in people leads to better business outcomes—and better wine.

The Slow Wine Fair’s message comes at a time when Italy is preparing to restart discussions on anti-caporalato measures at the Ministry of Labor. Organizers hope their focus on fairness will inspire change across the industry and encourage consumers to consider not just the taste of wine but also the conditions under which it is made.