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Bordeaux’s Top Châteaux Launch Vignerons AVenir to Mentor Struggling Small Winegrowers

Prestigious estates share expertise with local producers as Bordeaux faces declining demand and economic challenges in the wine industry.

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This winter, four of Bordeaux’s most renowned Grands Crus—Châteaux Cheval Blanc in Saint-Emilion, Lafite Rothschild in Pauillac, Petrus in Pomerol, and Yquem in Sauternes—have joined forces to launch a new initiative called Vignerons AVenir. The program is designed as a skills-based sponsorship for four selected candidates, who will be chosen this spring. The goal is to support smaller winegrowers by sharing expertise and helping them navigate the economic challenges facing the region.

Guillaume Pouvaret, who manages Château Grand Maison with 5 hectares of organically farmed vines in the Côtes de Bourg appellation, participated in the pilot phase of the program last year. He received guidance from the team at Cheval Blanc and noted that even the application process encouraged him to step back and reassess his vineyard operations. This reflection is especially relevant as Bordeaux faces a historic crisis marked by declining demand and financial strain for many producers.

Nicolas Corporandy, head viticulturist at Château Cheval Blanc, acknowledges that while his estate is among the most privileged in Bordeaux—with 40 hectares of red vines and 9 hectares of white—the realities for smaller properties are different. He emphasizes the importance of avoiding a patronizing approach and instead focusing on practical solutions tailored to each vineyard’s needs. For many growers, this means reevaluating long-held traditions and making difficult decisions about their vineyards.

One of the most sensitive issues is what to do with very old vines. These ancient plants often hold deep sentimental value for winegrowers, but they also present significant challenges. Yields from old vines tend to be low, and maintenance costs are high. As Pouvaret explains, it is sometimes necessary to set aside emotional attachments and make pragmatic choices based on economic realities. He has shifted his approach to viticulture, now focusing on identifying truly exceptional vines while being prepared to remove those that no longer contribute to the vineyard’s profitability.

Corporandy summarizes the rationale: when vines reach the end of their productive life, they must be pulled out if they can no longer deliver sufficient yields to justify their upkeep. The key factor is achieving a yield that supports economic sustainability. This approach requires careful assessment and a willingness to adapt traditional practices in response to changing market conditions.

The Vignerons AVenir initiative reflects a broader trend in Bordeaux as winegrowers seek new ways to remain viable amid shifting consumer preferences and rising production costs. By fostering collaboration between prestigious estates and smaller producers, the program aims to ensure that both heritage and innovation continue to shape the region’s future.