

The Cost of Quality

Achieving quality in wine has a cost, but it's difficult to quantify exactly what the price is. Jean-Francois Mau, head of Bordeaux producer Yvon Mau, has calculated what quality really costs in their own vineyards and for members of their "Club de Producteurs". Mau reckons that per hectare, the cost for green harvesting is around FF10,000; leaf plucking FF1,000; selecting out unripe grapes at harvest FF1,000 and hand harvesting FF10,000. The aim is to achieve 75-85% of the maximum permitted yield (for the Bordeaux region the average yield in 2000 was 60.4hl/ha), but the result is an overall cost increase of 20-50%. Costs vary even within the Bordeaux area. Keith Garrard (retired managing director of Chateau Lascombes, Cru Classé Margaux) reckons green harvesting in 2000 took an extra 20 casual staff working for 10-15 days, which works out at around FF2,000 per hectare. This doesn't take account of full-time staff who also carry out leaf plucking and canopy trimming.

Elsewhere in France, Domaine Laroche report per hectare costs of FF17,000 in Chablis for green harvesting, but only FF3,000 in the Languedoc. Leaf plucking is FF6,000 in Chablis but is done by machine in the Midi where costs are only 1,500 FF. At harvest time, handpicking in Chablis is FF17,000 versus just FF3,000 for machine picking. In Chablis, these techniques are restricted to the best Premier and Grand Cru vineyards where there is a chance of recouping the additional costs. Laroche's vineyard manager believes that green harvesting and leaf plucking are corrective measures and if the vine has been properly fertilised there is no need to do either. Garrard confirms that leaf plucking is not significant at Lascombes as the vine canopies are not excessively vigorous. He mentions too that for some producers green harvesting can be a useful opportunity to bring yields back within permitted limits, rather than just a quality measure, if fruit set has been too good.

Garrard points out that it's difficult to quantify any direct benefit of all these procedures and separate them from market movements. Mau reckons it's not always possible to recover full costs but his company pays a premium of up to 80% to growers who achieve top-quality ratings in tastings. Even the bulk Bordeaux market seems to be recognising quality differences and instead of the historical flat rate, prices for 2000 reds per hectolitre currently range from FF6,000 to FF9,000.

In the end, even if the cost of quality is not all recoverable, it seems certain that with global wine surpluses running at 84 million hectolitres in 1999 (Vinexpo research), it's the producers who commit to quality who will survive and thrive.

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