

Abstract: The crux of crus in Champagne

The objective of this study is to evaluate whether the use of the current classification system of Champagne is justified and what the opinion of producers in the area is. Often seen as the last remnants of the Échelle des Crus, the terms Premier Cru and Grand Cru have been granted to be used “by virtue of local, loyal and constant customs” by the producers of Champagne. The research will cover three distinct parts. First, the focus will be on the development of the current system and its history. The second part will be based on a survey of Champagne producers, seeking their opinion on the current state of the classification. The third part will focus on future possibilities for the region.

Past: the story of Champagne and classifications

The landscape of the Champagne region today is greatly influenced by historical events like the riots of 1910 and 1911. This period of turmoil led to the development of the viticultural delineation as we know it today and was an initiation for the implementation of the Échelle des Crus, a percentile rating system used to set grape prices between the growers and big houses. This rating system brought forth the use of the terms Premier Cru and Grand Cru and was a crucial aspect of the economic scene for almost a century. When it was functionally abandoned in 2004 due to its conflict with EU regulations, only the labelling terms remained.

These terms are still used today but are based on an entire village rather than individual vineyard plots, thus overlooking important variations in terroir and potential quality. The question is whether this is reasonable or if a revision is in order.

Present: in the opinion of Champagne producers

Methodology

To answer said question, a survey was conducted. A total of 180 producers were contacted, of which 43 producers were interviewed about the usage of the labelling terms and the overall classification of the region. A set of ten questions was used to gather sufficient data on the topic. The survey was presented in French to aid the respondents, who could opt to remain publicly anonymous. The questionnaire was designed to support both qualitative and quantitative analysis and used both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Results and analysis

The results indicated varying opinions among the respondents. When asked about their degree of satisfaction with the current of the labelling terms, all possible scores from one to ten were given, with six being the average value. When asked about the cancellation of the Échelle des Crus, a remarkable ex aequo was achieved: half of the respondents did not agree with this decision. The preference for the future is still in favour of the status quo: only 36% of interviewees preferred to abandon the current labelling terms. When asked about other possible classifications, the most popular choice was the classification system of Burgundy, a hierarchical and parcel-based indexation.

A notable statistic here was the absence of the NM category, which envelops the large Champagne houses, among these votes. Not a single négociant manipulant would prefer the more fragmented landscape this system would bring. This is a general trend among the responses: the large houses prefer the past over possible futures.

Future: implications and recommendations

Even though the grapes for most Champagne cuvées are sourced from a wide range of terroirs and villages, this does not justify an overly generalising classification. The aim must be to be transparent with consumers and produce the highest possible quality of wine. However, a revision of the classification system would have large implications for the region. A revision could disrupt the local economy if not implemented with care and developed with a strong academic justification. On the other hand, it could beneficially lead to a more widespread distribution of grape prices in all categories. An important aspect would be to create new measuring standards in order to appreciate the qualities of a vineyard in function of the desired wine, as these would not be in line with any other region, emphasising the uniqueness of Champagne as a region and a wine.

It is recommended that further studies be conducted on this matter using larger survey groups and further developed alternatives to the classification in order to investigate the viability of change.