

Would a Signature Variety Contribute to the Success of the Wine Region Limburg?

*Abstract Weinakademiker thesis,
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Motivation, problem

The combination of my passion for wine and being born and still living in Limburg, which is increasingly developing as a wine region, gave me the direction for the subject for my thesis. Focus on my own environment rather than focusing on a global setting (partly due to Corona), confirmed my choice to research a subject that could benefit the wine region Limburg.

From a historical point of view, Limburg is a multi-cultural province, which belonged alternately to different countries. Even now, it is partly Belgium and partly Dutch, but both sides have a lot in common, also when it comes to viticulture. A clear example of this is the cross-border PDO (Appellation) Maasvallei, which is unique in Europe.

Because of several pioneers producing high quality wine, the region has achieved a good reputation both in Belgium and in The Netherlands. But because of the use of many varieties both *Vitis Vinifera* and new varieties and many different wine styles it has not achieved an own identity. Rapid growth may increase the risk of an even more diluted identity and more variability in quality.

The question arises how to maintain the good reputation and how to strengthen it with an own identity? The concept of a signature variety comes to mind.

Research questions, methodology and content

The (basic research) question of this thesis therefore is whether the concept of a signature variety could contribute to the future success of the wine region Limburg and if so which variety or varieties would have the potential to fulfill this role?

The following sub questions have been formulated and researched by studying literature, using questionnaires and by conducting interviews:

- What defines the wine region Limburg and its future (terroir, winemakers, sales)?
Methodology: Literature review
- What is a signature variety and what are the criteria underlying a signature variety in the world?
Methodology: Literature review
- What is the varietal makeup of the wines of Limburg?
Which varieties are performing currently best (in terms of vineyards planted, scores and appellation inclusion)?
Methodology: Questionnaire / Literature review
- Which variety or varieties do have the potential in Limburg to be the signature variety?
In what way might such variety or varieties contribute to the success of the region? What is the likelihood the region would be willing to adopt such signature variety or varieties?
Methodology: Structured interviews / Questionnaire

The core of the *questionnaire* was sent to *all major producers* in Limburg and to most producers with more than 1 hectare, in total 50 winemakers. Some 34 of them completed the questionnaire (68%), representing 96% of the official registered regional area under vine.

Interviews were presented to *a selection of the stakeholders*, including 12 winemakers, 5 representatives of the sommelier's corps, 4 press representatives and 4 from the off trade.

Conclusions

The most important conclusion from the research is that there is ambiguity among winemakers about the role of a signature variety for Limburg as wine region. Although overall, many stress the importance of 'identity' for Limburg as wine region, it is a minority of winemakers who feel a signature variety can play an important role. This is contrasting the views of several other stakeholders, such as the trade and press, who strongly believe there is a role for a signature variety for the future identity and marketing of Limburg as wine region.

Several wine producers plea for more diversity in order to get to identity. But the author of this thesis finds it hard to imagine how unrestricted diversity is going to support the identity of this emerging wine region. Some focus rather than diversification surely should be helpful.

Although that most winemakers thus do not see a leading role for a signature variety, most participants of the research were able to choose a few preferred varieties. From the questionnaire and interviews it is clear that the most suitable candidates, would be: Chardonnay followed by Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris and Auxerrois.

From the SWOT-analyses of these varieties, however, based on the four criteria for a signature variety (defined in chapter 3) the variety with the most potential seems to be Pinot Gris. Although the variety is not unique, it does give an unique sense of place and thus could well represent a typically recognizable Limburg wine style and differentiate itself from Alsace as well as Pinot Grigio with a much more elegant, fresh and mineral style. And –last but not least- it is a perfect match in the local gastronomy.

Recommendations

Although diversity is a great attribute, focus will be necessary to maintain and improve the good image and own identity of Limburg as a wine region. Suggestions on how this can be achieved are in particular related to the PDOs.

Limitation of the number of grape varieties

It is suggested to re-assess the number of approved grape varieties for the PDOs and restrict these to get more focus. Limitation to just one or a few grape varieties would also allow the consumer, press and trade to associate themselves with PDOs which would contribute to the future identity of Limburg as a wine region. Another suggestion is to consider the possibility of blends.

Other recommendations

PDOs must get a much more prominent place. This can be achieved by increasing their quality requirements and the participation of the number of producers. Also, the difference between PDO and PGI wine should be made more transparent. Collaboration with top gastronomy for PDOs and with local catering and tourism for PGI wines seems most efficient.

It is recommended to appoint external promoters for marketing of the whole region.

Final conclusion

Although diversity rather than a signature variety is mostly appreciated among the winemakers, a selection of signature variety or, maybe even more appropriate, a signature *blend* of selected varieties may contribute to the future identity and marketing of Limburg as wine region.