

How do the sustainability commitments of the Comité Champagne impact Champagne producers?

Motivation for this thesis

The first introduction I had with wine producers was during a holiday in Champagne in 2008. This region holds a special place in my heart with large producers (conglomerates) and above all family businesses. Behind this luxurious sparkling wine are families farming and giving their all for the next generations.

When I read an article in Drinks International which stated that the Comité Champagne has ambitious plans to move the sector towards "Net Zero Carbon" by 2050, it made me wonder: What will be the impact of such plans on the producers?

Besides my work in a wineshop and teaching three levels of WSET, I also work in the financial industry. Part of my job is to incorporate the European Sustainability Goals as effective as possible. Incorporating these goals is not easy. For many major companies with sufficient fundings it seems easier, but is it? This question is my motivation for this research. Is this assumption reasonable?

The objective of this thesis

Sustainability is a hot topic. Most people walking the earth are aware of the impact of industries on our environment. For some industries it's easy to change their methods of producing to a sustainable and environmental friendly way. For winegrowers this might be more difficult.

One of the wine regions with ambitious goals towards sustainable producing is Champagne. The region with a big reputation for sparkling wines didn't have a big reputation for producing environmentally friendly. Winegrowers sprayed pesticides, used waste of the cities to fertilize the soil and shipped bottles all over the world by planes.

In the year 2000 the first commitments towards sustainability were set by the Comité Champagne. Today some of their goals are to be 100% environmental certified by 2030 and to reduce the carbon footprint of the region with 75% in 2050 towards a net-zero carbon industry.

What is the effect of this ambition on different producers. Is this ambition feasible and which difficulties and advantages did it bring in the last 23 years? Is there room for more progressive sustainability goals?

Methodology

My study includes an analysis of the past, many books and articles from professional magazines and websites were used for desk research. Field research is done by various Q&A's, a consumers survey and a "QuestionPro" survey among winegrowers and interviews with the Comité Champagne and producers. Interviews were both online and in the Champagne region.

This all to get the right insights in the ambitions and impact. I knew that interviewing some of the conglomerates would be a difficult task but many press releases and interviews were printed over the years which I could use to capture their aim and thoughts on the topic.

Content of this Thesis

This Thesis is divided in two parts.

The first part of this thesis focuses on the Comité Champagne and some of their commitments. The road of the last 20 years that leads to these commitments and the commitments themselves are explained.

The second part of this thesis is focussed on the impact of these commitments on the small and large producers of the region. What is the impact on grape growing, producing and selling Champagne. How are their ways of working changed these last decades and how do they see the future. Furthermore what are their thoughts in the commitments set by the Comité Champagne, do they think these commitments are feasible.

Conclusion

In the past 20 years the Champagne region has come a long way.

The impact of the sustainability goals on the producers is considerable, not only for the smaller producers but also for the conglomerates. The impact however has different focal points for these various producers.

The positive impact is somewhat overshadowed by the negatives at the time of writing. A turn to the other direction is to be expected in the future when all efforts pay off.

The commitments from perspective of the producers are is not feasible. They all state it is very ambitious and to reach some of the goals as they are dependent on suppliers.

The next step for the Comité must undoubtedly be the working conditions. Listed producers already have goals on their roadmap. Publications of 2023 harvest underline the need for this (ESG) ambition.

Furthermore I would encourage the producers to radiate their certifications on the labels of their Champagne because of the growing environmental concern and awareness of younger consumers who are of great importance for the future.