

The fine wine forward



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I recently attended a seminar organised by *Forum Malta fl-Ewropa* in conjunction with the Environment Ministry's Viticulture and Enological section. The seminar, billed as a public consultation, dealt with the EU Commission's new proposals to tackle the massive problems that European wines have been facing.

The EU has more than 2.4 million holdings producing wine, covering 3.6 million hectares or two per cent of the EU's agricultural area. Wine consumption in the EU has been dropping, although the demand for quality wines is increasing. Basically, people are drinking less but better wine.

Imports from the New World have been growing by about 10 per cent a year for the last decade. For many vintages, Europe has been producing excess wine that no one wants to drink or buy. It is estimated this will reach 15 per cent of total annual production by 2010-11.

As in many other agricultural sectors, the EU subsidises this by various means such as storage and distilling at the cost of around €500 million a year.

To address this situation, the EU proposes to spend around €1.3 billion on far-reaching reforms in the hope they would lead to lasting solutions. The funding will focus on



production, quantity and marketing.

Among the important changes that affect production is the proposal to ban the use of sugar, turning instead to rectified or concentrated musts to enrich wines and abolish all aid to measures such as crisis distillation and storage.

Growers who wish to leave the sector will be offered premiums for grubbing up the soil voluntarily. The EU is hoping that this will lead to a reduction in vineyard area of around seven to eight per cent. Aid will be made available for growers in less prestigious areas or generous yielding vintages to destroy grapes while still on the vine.

From the marketing point of view, there are fewer strict labelling regulations and aid for promotion and information both within the EU and outside. It was not easy to formulate the proposal document and I

know that there are still outstanding agreement issues – which leads me back to the forum.

I expected a serious debate about Malta's proposals, but instead it turned out to be a near three-hour presentation/recital of the EU's proposed reforms, which we had all received and read. During the 20-minute question time, various issues were raised.

One major player explained that most of the proposed reforms have very little to do with Malta as our problems are different to our European counterparts, since the problem here is under-supply, not over-supply of grapes. Someone also mentioned that not even the ban on the use of sugar remains a major issue.

The recurring theme, which seemed to be ignored by the panel, is that Malta should not miss out on

funds simply because our wine industry is healthy. The money that would have been due to us if we had an over-supply should be still made available under the national envelope scheme to be used in marketing and planting. Interestingly, there seems to be disagreement between the major players and the authorities as to how many hectares of vines are actually planted in Malta.

As one who 'sits on the fence', I know that a major problem in the Maltese wine sector is clearly a lack of communication, primarily between the producers themselves, but to some extent also between growers and producers, and the authorities.

This, of course, is a shame, since there are many advantages in sharing knowledge.

The Vine and Wine Board, which should be the framework for discussion within the industry, is ineffective. Just think of the benefits that collectiveness in such an organisation could bring in such areas as oenological research, branding, export, and marketing.

EU funds are available for the setting up of growers' unions, co-operatives and marketing organisations. Other Mediterranean countries have taken advantage of such schemes – just look at the progress Greece, Lebanon and Sicily have made. All these countries/regions had serious quality, reputation and marketing problems, which they have recently overcome because wine growers and producers were united.

The setting up of the DOK regime should have been the opportune moment to get together and formulate Malta's wine future. Evidently it did not happen. Dr Philip von Brockdorff, Permanent Secretary at the Rural Affairs Ministry, rightly stressed his concern about the lack of unity among the players in the sector. Although not in crisis, Malta's wine industry still has to address some important issues, such as what varieties/clones to grow, soil and exposition suitability, irrigation, small growers' sustainability, and product reputation. These will be more effectively dealt with if everyone made a valid contribution.

Building on the 'collective strength' idea, I think it is time to create an organisation to improve the standards of wine service and to

enhance and encourage the better understanding of wine by people who work in the business.

The consumption and production of quality wine on the island has increased dramatically in the last five years – now estimated to be around 14 million bottles a year. More importantly, interest and enthusiasm for wine knowledge has increased accordingly. Evidence of this are the many wine clubs, events and gatherings organised throughout the year.

The demand for trained, versed, enthusiastic wine professionals to fill the new jobs with wine producers, importers, and the catering industry as a whole has accentuated the shortage of people in the trade. There are valid reasons for this – the healthy economy, demand for IT people and the traditional disrespect for catering jobs are just a few.

A number of organisations, including the major players themselves led by the producers, have tried without much success to address the situation. Training courses, better pay and job titles, and foreign travel are a just a few of the methods to solve the problem.

The Institute of Tourism Studies and the Employment and Training Corporation also had little success in addressing the situation, and although the courses are relatively popular, they had little impact on the problems of the catering industry, as they are largely attended by

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consumers and people who want to sell, rather than serve, wine.

I think that setting up some sort of academy should address this situation by embarking on a programme as detailed below. It should lead to improving wine knowledge among people who are already working with wine and encourage new, young and energetic people to become interested in a wine career.

Having discussed the subject with a few wine professionals, both locally and abroad, here are some topics that could form the agenda of the academy:

- Encourage young people to work in wine-related jobs to complement ITS and ETC;
- Encourage intelligent and relevant home-grown wine conversation to have a broad outlook from all contemporary wine opinions and all aspects of the subject;
- Encourage a better understanding of wine and wine service in the catering industry;
- Bring together people and ideas from all wine backgrounds;
- Become Malta's main wine forum, free from political, economic or marketing influences;
- Link producers, importers and service providers;
- Link with international wine institutions;

These are just some ideas that will need refining and adjusting before we set off. If you already work or are looking to work in the wine industry and are interested in being part of this organisation, please drop me a line.

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