

## How Bureaucrats Are Wrecking French Wine

It's time to throw out the rule book.

By Mike Steinberger

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Jean-Paul Brun, one of the leading winemakers in the Beaujolais region of France, is just weeks away from picking this year's grapes, but he is also dealing with a major hangover from last year's harvest: Most of the 2007 version of his signature red, the L'Ancien Vieilles Vignes, has been denied *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*, or AOC, status.

The AOC designation is the highest in French winemaking. AOCs are geographic zones within which certain types of premium wines are made. Wines produced in these areas are not automatically entitled to advertise their noble roots; in order to claim the AOC imprimatur, they must, among other things, pass a taste test meant to ensure that they conform to the standards of the appellation—that they exhibit sufficient *typicité*. Two of the three samples of the '07 L'Ancien that Brun submitted were rejected because they allegedly had off aromas, even though they were the exact same wine as the third, approved sample, and I'm unaware of anyone else who has tried the '07 L'Ancien and found it to be anything but delicious. Brun has thrice appealed the verdict and lost every time, and the result of a fourth and final appeal is expected next month. If the original judgment is upheld again, around 5,200 of the 7,500 cases of the '07 L'Ancien will have to be sold as *vin de table*. That's the lowest classification in French wine and one that permits neither the vintage nor the appellation name (in this case "Beaujolais") to appear on the label, omissions that could seriously impede sales.

It is possible Brun is the victim of an innocent mistake or one aberrant decision. However, this sort of thing keeps happening to talented French winemakers. In recent years, stars like Jean Thevenet, Didier Dagueneau, Eloi Dürrbach, Marcel Lapierre, Thierry and Jean-Marie Puzelat, Marcel Richaud, Georges Descombes, and Philippe Jambon have all had wines turned down for being insufficiently representative of their respective appellations. So they were: They were excellent wines produced in districts that mostly churn out swill. This curious trend comes at a time when much of the French wine industry is in crisis, and the economic gap between good producers and not-so-good ones is becoming a chasm. The taste tests are conducted by committees made up of appellation insiders, and in any given year, 95 percent to 99 percent of the wines submitted are approved. The evaluations are done blind (that is, the names of the producers are concealed), but in light of all these facts, it doesn't take a conspiracy theorist to wonder what exactly is tripping up vintners like Brun. This much is clear: The system for classifying and administering French wines is broken and in dire need of reform.

Controlled appellations were formally introduced in France in 1935. They were, firstly, an effort to map out the boundaries within which various wines, such as Châteauneuf-du-Pape, could be made and to keep these names from being used elsewhere. As such, they were also meant to be a form of consumer protection—an assurance that what was on the label corresponded with what was in the bottle. More broadly, creating appellations was an attempt to codify what centuries of trial and error had established: that wine was chiefly a product of the land, that some vineyards were superior to others, and that matching the right grape to the right site was the route to good wine. The aim, in other words, was to give the concept of *terroir* the force of law. It is frequently claimed that the AOC imprimatur was never intended to be a guarantee of quality, but that isn't true; according to Hervé Briand, an official with the Paris-based Institut National des Appellations d'Origine, the people who conceived the appellation system did indeed view it as a quality-control mechanism, and only the finest vineyards were supposed to be eligible.

As such, appellation status was conferred sparingly in the early years. By 1940, there were only between 100 and 150 appellations (precise figures are hard to come by), and the number grew incrementally over the next several decades. Through the 1950s and '60s, fewer than 20 percent of French vineyards fell within AOCs. But in the 1970s, regulators decided that putting more vineyards (and therefore more wines) under the AOC umbrella was the way to ensure continued French domination of the global wine market. This proved to be a disastrous move, one that has completely diluted the AOC concept. There are now 474 wine appellations, encompassing more than 50 percent of all French vineyards and accounting for 45 percent of France's total wine production.

But it isn't just the vastly increased number of appellations that has undermined the overall caliber of AOC wines; it is also the way in which the appellations are governed. The rules vary from appellation to appellation, but they cover just about everything a winemaker does in his vineyard and cellar—from planting density to harvest dates to crop yield. In theory, all these edicts promote quality; in reality, they often serve to undermine it, and that's because of how they are applied and by whom. It is often assumed that the wine industry, like other sectors of the French economy, is micromanaged by bureaucrats in Paris. The INAO does oversee the appellation system, but as wine writer Tyler Colman (a friend of mine) notes in his informative new book, *Wine Politics*, viticulture is an exception to the norm in France, in that it is mostly administered locally by the winemakers themselves. This arrangement, plainly fraught with conflicts of interest, has had onerous consequences.

In some appellations, the boundaries have been extended to include land not fit for making decent wine. Yield limits are now routinely flouted in many appellations, and a number of them also permit mechanized harvesting, which is a surefire way to produce rotgut. Then there are the taste tests, whose results are about as trustworthy as Zimbabwean presidential elections. In a survey released last year by the French consumer group UFC-Que Choisir, wine industry insiders acknowledged that as many as one-third of all AOC wines were undeserving of the distinction. Local control, combined with reckless growth, has been a disaster, and the wine-buying public has taken note. In the past decade or so, the French share of the global wine

market has declined sharply. Fine cabernets and chardonnays are being produced around the world nowadays, and while the most celebrated French wines—the Romanée-Contis and the Latours and Lafites—are more popular and expensive than ever, the market for many lesser ones has all but dried up. Alain Bazot, UFC-Que Choisir's president, summed it up well: "For years, there has been a steady fall in the quality of many AOC wines which has completely undermined the confidence of consumers in the system." This, combined with the continued decline of domestic consumption in France (it has plunged 50 percent over the last four decades), has left thousands of winemakers in danger of losing their livelihoods. *La crise viticole*, as it is known, has hit the two lowest categories, *vin de table* and *vin de pays*, hard, but it has also driven many AOC vintners to the brink.

But rather than seeking to root out the bad wines and incompetent producers, some appellations seem to be punishing the good ones, and it appears that Brun, who owns an estate called Domaine des Terres Dorées, is the latest target. Brun fashions classic, lip-smacking Beaujolais, the sort that is increasingly difficult to find in an area drowning in cadaverous, insipid wines. The dismal quality of so much of the output in Beaujolais goes a long way to explaining why the region is mired in a slump that, by some estimates, is likely to put 30 percent to 50 percent of its winemakers out of business. In a rational universe, Brun would be considered a local hero and a beacon to his neighbors. Unfortunately, viticultural France is not such a place.

Joe Dressner of Louis/Dressner Selections is Brun's U.S. importer and also represents a handful of other winemakers who have run afoul of the wine commissars. Dressner thinks the '07 L'Ancien will find buyers but says it will have to be sold mainly through specialty shops that have the time and desire to explain to clients why it is no ordinary *vin de table*. Dressner is hopeful that reason and logic will one day reconquer France's vineyards, but he believes that the appellation system, in its current form, is a joke. "I don't care if some guy in Vosne-Romanée [an appellation in Burgundy] makes swill, but I do care if he is making it impossible for winemakers there to do otherwise," Dressner told me by phone from France. "I think they should just let the market decide what's good or not good."

I agree. When it comes to the AOC system, I've become militantly libertarian—which is to say, I think the taste tests and most of the regulations ought to be dropped. (If the Cato Institute ever branches out into wine studies, consider this my application.) The AOC designation should serve one purpose: to indicate a wine's place of origin. Beyond that, and apart from a few basic rules guarding against fraud, vintners should be left to decide for themselves how they work, and it should be left to the market to decide whose wines reflect well on an appellation and whose do not. There is a lot of talk about overhauling the AOCs, but it is delusional to believe that the French government is capable of fixing the problem. As one Bordeaux official recently told the *Wine Spectator*, "Proposing important agricultural reforms yet rarely putting them into practice is a great French tradition." Even if Paris were to come up with a sensible plan—and any sensible plan would necessarily include a sharp reduction in the number of appellations—it would likely run into insurmountable, possibly even [violent](#) opposition. The protracted, farcical

[battle](#) over efforts to update the chateaux rankings in Bordeaux's Saint Emilion appellation is indicative of just how deep resistance to change runs.

No doubt, the idea of scaling back the significance of the AOC designation would strike many in France as blasphemous. As Tyler Colman pointed out in an e-mail, even the most laissez-faire, freethinking French vintners consider the system sacrosanct. But rigid classifications and bureaucratic red tape are not the source of France's viticultural glory; it is the quality of the land (some of it, anyway) married to a centuries-old winemaking tradition. Moreover, if the logic undergirding the appellation regime—the idea that certain grapes pair better with certain sites than others—is true, why does it need legal enforcement? Hundreds of years of experience have demonstrated that pinot noir flourishes like no other grape in Vosne-Romanée. Is Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, which is located in Vosne-Romanée, suddenly going to rip up its pinot vines and replace them with cabernet sauvignon if no longer prevented from doing so? Pinot noir is what works best in Vosne-Romanée, it is what oenophiles want from Vosne-Romanée, and that is not going to change anytime soon.

True, Vosne-Romanée is a successful appellation where the qualitative bar is set high, consumer demand is strong, and producers are generally doing well. The fear is that if the rules are swept away in appellations that aren't so prosperous, part of France's rich viticultural heritage might be swept away in the process. But many of the ailing appellations don't have illustrious pasts, and whether they do or they don't, the AOC mechanism can't sustain vintners and regions that ultimately can't sustain themselves. In too many places, it has become a drag on quality, promoting lowest-common-denominator winemaking at the expense of good winemaking. Fortunately for the competent producers, the market increasingly holds the whip, and thanks to the proliferation of wine criticism and the advent of the Internet, it is becoming ever-more efficient at identifying and rewarding excellence and punishing failure. That's why millions of bottles of insipid French wines now go unsold each year and why (sadly but unavoidably) hundreds of vintners are going bust. But it is also the reason why those 5,200 cases of the '07 L'Ancien won't necessarily be collecting dust in Brun's cellar if his last appeal is rejected. More and more, the market is treating AOC status as simply a geographic indication—a wine's birth certificate. French officialdom should do likewise.

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