Sustainability In The Modern Wine Industry

Problems, Solutions, and Innovations:

A Cross-Comparative Study of Germany, Italy, and Austria

By Jessica Lowe

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Introduction.

Since the 1970s, the wine industry has blossomed from a single-minded celebration of French wines into a global market where anyone, in any country, could believe themselves capable of making wine. Each season, just like fashion, retail, and technology, the wine industry taps into consumer demands to bring something new into the spotlight. 2017, for example, saw English sparkling wines taken seriously for the first time in decades. It also marked a resurgence in rosé wines, as the English and American markets realised the potential for a style that had previously been restricted to summer days, hen parties, and holidays.

Of its seven “2017 Top Trend” predictions, Rude Wines mentioned one crucial one; “The Thirst For Knowledge”[1]. No longer content with handwritten tasting notes, wine drinkers wanted more. Organic and Fair-trade were already well-known concepts; people were seeking out the labels that gave them explicit confirmation that what they were wearing, eating, and drinking was ethically made, and good for their health. Body positivity and “fit not thin” movements on social media boomed in popularity, with more people than ever shopping organic, adopting ‘clean’ lifestyles, and embracing veganism. After putting their food under a microscope, it was natural to start examining their drinks, too. Antioxidants and cancer-fighting components, sugar content and sulphites; these topics dominated online wine discussions, as the worldly wine consumer, intent on squeezing as much nutrition out of the nightly glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, began to look beyond the winemaker or the grape variety, and instead scan bottles for a tell-tale splash of green.

Fast-forward to the end of 2018, and this demand for new experiences and transparent, readily available information hasn’t gone anywhere. Amongst WineIntelligence’s “Top 5 Predictions for 2018” were climate change, alternative packaging, and the rise of biologically-produced wines[2]. Today, people aren’t just concerned with the ABV of the bottle in their hands- now, the question on everyone’s lips is; “is it made sustainably?”

To find out what this term actually means when it comes to wine production, as well as learn more about how wineries are trying to produce sustainably, and what obstacles they might be facing, I travelled to three established wine-producing countries, each with a longstanding reputation for stellar wine production across the globe; Germany, Italy, and Austria.
It was clear that the trend for sustainable products was having a much slower impact on the wine industry compared to food or retail; but why? I was curious to see how wineries were engaging with this trend, and whether their green initiatives were born out of corporate environmentalism, or competitive advantage. For those resisting change, I wanted to know why - were there drawbacks to labelling your wines as sustainable?

There was also the question of age and tradition. Two articles stood out to me during my initial research; "Wine: Too Complicated For Young People To Enjoy?" (4) noted that wine buffs and experts had turned wine drinking into a fine art, but questioned whether, in elevating wine to such heights, they had put it out of reach of many - particularly young adults. The second; "Young Italians 'drink less wine than ever', was written after the 2011 Vinitaly Trade Show in Verona; marking health, the fragmentation of the Italian family and unemployment as strong factors in the decline, as well as noting that 30% of Italians no longer considered wine to be a symbol of Italian gastronomy(5).

Italy, Germany and Austria are all Old World Wine Countries; would this make them less inclined to give up their deep-rooted traditions and preconceived notions of how wine should be, in favour of new ideas and modern innovations, designed to steer the wine industry towards a more sustainable future? Did younger winemakers consider the environmental impact of their wines more than than the older generation- and what barriers did they encounter as a result? And as for the wine drinkers, Millennials and Generation Z are the strongest influencers on the food and retail industry; would the same be the case for wine, where social media isn’t such a big element, and many traditional winemakers in tiny European villages don’t have- or even need- a website?

To help me answer these questions, I sought out businesses, such as Fair’n Green, a certification body (later visiting one of their members, Jean Stodden, to learn more) and Staatliche Weinbauninstitut Freiburg, a research institute and state winery. By chance, I met Patrick and Marko, two students of Geisenheim University - one of the leading universities for oenology in the world- who gave me valuable insight into the world of wine for young winemakers. I visited wine festivals across Germany, and found plenty of family-run wineries happy to chat over their wines.

This led me to Roland, an Austrian winemaker, and his friends; Christian, organiser of the Bioweinfestival in Austria, and Tamara, a female wine producer and former Wine Queen of Styria. Intrigued by Airbnb Experience tours and what their popularity meant for digitalising the wine industry, I interviewed Miriam, who ran a wine and vegan food tour in Milan, and Carol, running an Austrian wine tour in Vienna; who, incidentally, turned out to have studied at Weingut Stift Klosterneuberg, one of the oldest wine producers in the world, and worked as a international wine judge and merchant, selling Italian wine to Germany and Austria.
Problem One: Variability Breeds Confusion.

The trend for sustainable living is putting pressure on the wine industry to catch up and start improving packaging, cutting plastic, and reducing carbon emissions. But with scope for changes at every stage, from vineyard to bottling company, choice of grape to the type of ink used in labels, where on earth are winemakers supposed to start?

The term sustainability is so far-reaching, so multi-faceted in fact, that it's actually easier to start with what it doesn't mean. Though the terms can be entwined very successfully, the terms ‘organic’, ‘biodynamic’, ‘natural’ and ‘sustainable’ are not synonymous.

Whilst they all fall under the bracket “eco-friendly”, wine can be made organically, but not sustainably, or vice-versa. The lack of real understanding as to what ‘sustainable wine production’ entails is a strong factor in a winemaker’s decision to to declare himself sustainable, and for the consumer, choosing between a bottle of sustainable wine or another sporting the globally recognised, heavily endorsed, ‘O’.

Depending on who you ask, there’s pros and cons to each. I encountered many valid arguments against growing organically, getting sustainable certified, or using organic and sustainable methods without advertising them. Whilst the outlook was different in each country - and, indeed, each place - that I visited, one thing remained the same; both issues have travelled down the grape vine, and almost every wine producer I met had an opinion on the subject.

Not all sustainable vineyards are created equal.

Unlike Organic, there is no defining certification body capable of reviewing and labelling all of the world’s sustainable vineyards against a globally recognised set of criteria. This lack of standardisation is partly due to the fact that the concept is still relatively new (compared to organic, which has been around for decades) as well as the fact that the term encompasses so many aspects of responsible viticulture. So what can be done to help baffled consumers, and reassure wary winemakers, that investing in sustainable innovations needs to be done - if not for the planet, then for the future of their family’s winery?

Today, there exists many smaller organisations, often local to one or two countries, intent on improving the national quality of wine, before attempting to conquer the rest of the wine-producing world.

“sustainability involves everything you do on the farm, including economics, environmental impacts of everything done on the farm and all aspects of human resources, including not only you and your family but your employees and the surrounding community”

Ohmart, 2008.(8)

“Organic farming/viticulture refers to the purity of product and using non-synthesized ingredients. Biodynamic looks at the holistic health of the agriculture and ecological self-sufficiency. Sustainable farming considers mitigation and reduction of waste as the foremost important process.”

TripSavvy (9)

“You can be sustainable and grow organic, just as you can not be”.

Nicolas Heinrich, Fair’n Green
AUSTRIA

Launched in 2014, the Austrian Viticultural Association offers an online tool for measuring sustainable work practices; using this, Austrian winegrowers conduct an autonomous evaluation of their own establishment, and can then apply for a certification of sustainability based on the colour-coded chart it generates; green being strong areas, red indicating areas that need urgent or significant improvements. Certified estates may then add the declaration ‘certified sustainable’ along with the estate’s registration number to their label, which is available in both English and German.

“Ultimately, winemakers can see where they stand; how far they are from an optimally managed winery and what improvements can be made through various practices.”

ITALY

Up until 2016, there were more than 15 programs with different approaches to sustainable development in the Italian wine sector (10). Although there were differences in how they process indicators, they all worked to the same objective - a holistic vision of sustainability - but their emphasis was almost exclusively on environmental aspects and goals, only part of what ‘sustainability’ actually embodies. Consequently, EQUALITAS was launched with the aim of uniting the Italian wine business. Whilst comprised of many of the 15, it is largely controlled by Unione Italiana Vini (UIV), the trade union for wine producers, and Federdoc (the national confederation that protects and promotes the Italian Appellations and Dominations of Origin – AOC, DOC and DOCG). The system uses “social, environmental and economic pillars” (11) which comes in the form of five categories, each branching off into sub-categories. Valid for 3 years, the EQUALITAS symbol is open to everyone; from whole companies and co-operatives, to singular wines and territories (i.e. regions). For clarity, the label has been tailored to reflect this, though the symbol remains the same.

Also located in Italy is the VIVA “Sustainability and Culture” project, developed by the Italian Ministry for the Environment, Land and Sea, in collaboration with OPERA, Research Centre for Sustainable Agriculture. The 2014 pilot scheme involved a number of major Italian wineries, including the famous Emiliana Romagno wine region, and created a technical specification against 4 indicators: Air, Water, Vineyard and Territory. It now serves as a reference for companies who want to achieve the validation foreseen by the project (12) - namely, preservation of Italy’s agricultural landscape, saving money through improved business efficiency, and a competitive marketing edge. Approved members are listed on the company’s websites, and are permitted to use the V.I.V.A label, which has been specifically designed to be clear and easy to understand.

Along with a QR code, the icons used on the label help the consumers to learn about the 4 different project indicators (Air, Water, Vineyard and Territory). A “+”, shows the current performance value of the wineries, making it possible to assess indicator trends over time.
GERMANY

Germany is actually the biggest importer of organic wine in the world. From the conversations with the people I meet in Germany, however, it’s a little bit harder trying to establish yourself as a German sustainable winegrower. Alongside the now internationally recognised Ecovin Association of Organic Winegrowers, there is one championing sustainable wines; FAIR’N GREEN. I travelled to the headquarters in Bonn to meet Nicolas Heinrich, a key member of the 6-man team, who was happy to tell me more about why the Fair’n Green system was different.

“People choose the Fair’n Green system because they too face the question of ‘but you’re not organic’ Nicolas says as we sit down. “In the next 10 years there will be a massive shift in view over what sustainable production means- at the moment, it means organic. But it’s more than that, and organic has its flaws.”

The issue he is describing is the difficulty of communicating to a customer that a wine can be grown sustainably, when it is not also certified organic. What ‘sustainable’ actually means is still quite fluid- something which Fair’n Green tries to work with, rather than against. “We are a dynamic system” Nicolas tells me. “One that we’ve changed and built according to what we’ve learned on the way. For example, we initially had criteria against flame-killing weeds, but have since taken it out after feedback from winemakers that, well, nobody really does it any more!”

“Fair’n Green is always changing and trying to take on new things. It’s a learning system, not a static one”

As with the other Sustainable certification bodies, Fair’n Green members earn their accreditation based on different qualities- from 150 criteria. You can’t be 100% sure that the wine from X vineyard will, say, use lighter bottles, just because vineyard Y does. Nicolas highlights another issue to me- the difficulty in understanding to what degree the bottle in your hand actually is sustainable, due to the fact that each member of Fair’n Green progresses at a different rate. Like the EQUALITAS system in Italy, Fair’n Green have a tiered system of compulsory changes, and ongoing improvements. “In the first year, you need at least 40% in each section, and 50% overall to be accepted- basically, a good starting point in each area.” Nicolas tells me. Whilst great for encouraging more wineries to start the process of change, is not very reassuring for the end customer deciding between organic, biodynamic or sustainable wine labels on a shelf. It also makes the Fair’n Green system vulnerable to being accused of ‘greenwashing’- giving their label to everyone- as Nicolas tells me their main critics have been the organic wine organisations.

However, given the organisation’s Directors and Advisory Board feature the likes of Reinhard Löwenstein, who coined the term terroir and is considered one of the most prominent wine growers in the country, Clemens Busch, a pioneer of organic vitification in Germany, and many prominent figures in the field of...
sustainable business management (Fair’n Green being primarily a sustainable organisation, rather than a wine-centric one), it seems that the Fair’n Green standard deserves a degree of respect.

And, of course, some aspects of the Fair’n Green system are standardised, much in line with the VIVA, EQUALITAS and Austrian models. Chemical herbicides aren’t allowed, and whilst non-sustainable techniques might be permitted during the first season, they will not be the following year. The result is that wineries aren’t put off from approaching the organisation, as they aren’t obligated to have every criteria met beforehand (a lengthy, expensive task that many would understandably abandon before they’ve started. One of the key reasons many wineries gave me for choosing not to apply for organic certification), and are instead applauded for their efforts - however small - and given tips on how to move forward.

Is it common for wineries to lose their Fair’n Green status if they aren’t performing?

Nicolas tells me that they’ve had to exclude 2 wineries since they started 5 years ago. “It’s a very fair system.” He explains. “If candidates score 48% (the requirement is 50%) they have a chance to do something about it, for example, source greener electricity and show proof. This enables them to get the certification that year anyway.” Wineries who don’t achieve the required 3% increase in improvement annually do get a chance to make this up- and it is cumulative, so if they’ve increased they sustainable practises by 9% in one year, this is taken into account if they don’t manage to make 3% the following year. This is good, because it shows that Fair’n Green don’t just give the label to everyone. “We don’t publicise that ‘if you do this you get 2 points’, but shortfalls are identified in the report, and then they have a chance to improve.” It’s a key strength of many of the Sustainable standards over their Organic cousins; it isn’t a ‘one strike and you’re out” situation.

“I want a system that tells me what I CAN do, rather than what I can’t.” - Clemens Busch (21)

And no effort goes unrecognised. “Lots of winemakers choose value chain first; sustainable bottles, labels and inks. Others will favour the vineyard first’ Nicolas tells me. Basically, whatever is the cheapest and easiest changes to implement - and maintain- are the first to happen. He also points out that actions are rewarded differently - such as preservation of the cultural or historical landscape. “Because (maintaining the historical landscape your vineyard is built on) is done for cultural reasons, you don’t get much back from it, and it costs money - we rate that very highly in our system” he explains.

Wineries are encouraged to protect the local heritage by growing traditional and regional grapes, and planting regional plants

“The annual update of the certification depends on the implementation of the proposals for improvement. This way, FAIR’N GREEN makes an important contemporary contribution to securing the future of the German viticulture, the development of a sustainable, ecologically responsible wine culture.” (20)

Reinhard Löwenstein
Vice Chairman

“For me as a long-practicing organic winegrower, it is important to integrate other aspects of sustainable winegrowing into my way of working. Moreover, the FAIR’N GREEN system is leading more and more winegrowers of conventional viticulture to develop towards an ecological and sustainable winemaking.”

Clemens Busch, Chairman of the Advisory Board (21)
between the vines. “There’s so much space when you grow wine that is not used,” Nicolas continues, telling me how they want to start including seeds in members’ starter packs, including local, regional, maybe even endangered plant varieties. Sowing these between the vines not only utilises the surplus space, it creates a more sustainable eco-system supporting indigenous plants, nourishing the soil, and attracting insects and wildlife. It’s been a proven success in the Mosel valley - a famous region in Germany which produces top-notch Riesling - so Fair’n Green have high hopes for the project.

Related to this, Nicolas goes on, is the fact that many vineyards are set on historical sites, on steep slopes, where vines need anchoring. A longstanding technique, which is gentle on the land (and makes economical sense) is to use the stones unearthed during cultivation. Trockenbauweise- ‘dry building’ - means there’s no cement and the stones remain unchanged. So, although planting a vineyard does invariably change a landscape, as much of the history is preserved as possible, and nothing is removed unnecessarily.

Even if its flexibility is its greatest flaw, the Fair’n Green system is certainly working, and now has almost 50 members in Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland. Over the next few years, Nicolas hopes that a Fair’n Green membership will mean access to a network of sustainable business opportunities; meaning that aspiring members will find it much easier to find lighter bottle producers, or label makers who print on FSC paper and use sustainable ink.

To find out more about the Fair’n Green system in practise, I visited one of its members- the Jean Stodden winery in Rechs, a small village in the Ahr region of Southern Germany.

The estate has been a member of Fair’n Green since 2012. Alexander Stodden and his wife Britta took over in 2013 from his father, Gerd Stodden- who, having known nothing about wine when he first inherited the winery, questioned winemaking conventions from the beginning. Although it’s far away from the traditional growing areas, the estate is primarily known for Pinot Noir. It is Britta who meets me to talk about how the estate has earned its sustainable certificate. They aren’t organic; Britta tells me that organic farming “is very hard for red grapes; you need very good grapes to get through the fermentation”. As well as this, it’s very hard without any herbicides because in Rechs, it’s rather cold and the grapes need a lot of help to grow. Particularly Pinot Noir - a notoriously fussy grape.
“In Germany, you have options. You can be biodynamic, sustainable, organic. The difference between Organic and the Fair’n Green method is that in organic, you are only allowed to use copper-based things. When you use copper, you don’t think long term.”

There are stringent rules surrounding organic classification that members must follow- and the list of permissible natural herbicides and pesticides gets shorter every year. Most are copper-based sprays and up to 6kg of copper is currently permitted per hectare in France, and 3kg in Germany; you don’t have to use this much, but many do. Both Nicolas and Britta explained the problems this can cause; how using more copper in the absence of synthetic chemicals saturates the soil with toxic levels of metal, which adversely affects the quality the landscape, and the animals in it. During our meeting, I was shocked to be told by Nicolas that he’d heard of a housing estate built on a previous organic vineyard- the soil quality was so diminished, it was actually classed as toxic waste!

This doesn’t mean Jean Stodden use insecticides- in fact, Britta tells me, Ahr is the first region in Germany to go 100% without insecticides. Instead, they use some pretty ingenious natural alternative: mating pheromones are used to confuse the grape moth, which preys on vines, and they use a machine a little reminiscent of a small carwash to pull weeds without disturbing the grape vines. No chemicals - natural or otherwise - required!

The pheromone technique is utterly dependant on community spirit, Britta explains. “This only works if the whole valley uses it - if only 1 or 2 did, the pests would just move to the next one.” It’s another hot topic in the To Be Organic or Not debate- the frustrating fact that its success relies utterly on collective effort. In Germany, Italy, Austria, and every other wine-producing country, the landscape is dominated by vineyards; they’re practically on top of one another, which means that if you are the only organic farmer in the group, your soil will likely carry non-organic traces. This likelihood can tear through a well-intentioned winemaker’s conviction - however concerned they are on the topic, organic certification is very expensive, and perhaps not worth the risk.

In Ahr, everyone is on board. The wineries pay per hectare for their allowance, and on spraying day they donate man-power for their neighbours. It’s the kind of community spirit that really shows the social aspect of wine-making, and how keen winemakers are to sustain something so integral to their country’s heritage.

To combat the shortfalls of both organic and sustainable systems, winemakers are employing a vast array of creative techniques. These can range from small additions, like the ones Britta and Nicolas tell me about, to large-scale alternatives; such as abandoning traditional grapes, and growing PiWi instead.
PiWi Wine and the P.A.R System:

Why use chemical, or metal-based herbicides at all, when you can just breed disease-resistant grapes instead?

As I discover across the trip, viticulture uses far higher levels of chemicals than any other agricultural sector within Europe. It's largely due to how vulnerable almost every variety is to mildew, a fungus, and phylloxera, a pest. I met a few owners preferring to grow their vines "au naturale," and a few that tell me of an interesting new development - inbred immunity.

Not yet particularly well-known to the rest of the wine-drinking world, "PiWi" are fungus-resistant, grape varieties, created by crossing European breeds with resistant American ones. I first hear of these during my discussions with Lia, the Project Manager at Staatliche Weinbauninstitut, the State Vineyard and Research Institute in Freiburg - who are currently invested in breeding these varieties. Later in my trip, I meet Christian Waltl, an organic winemaker who started the Austrian Bioweinfestival, which promotes PiWi and Organic wines in partnership with the surrounding regions of Austria. He told me of another Austrian winemaker, who owns 27 hectares of vineyards - 3 of which are organic, 1 of which is PiWi vines; the PiVi needed to be sprayed with copper and sulphur only once or twice a year - compared to other vines, which needed spraying 14-15 times to protect them against mildew.

Taking the opportunity to spread awareness and educate winegrowers and drinkers alike, Waltl’s festival held seminars on PiWi wines last year, taught by the Head of Tasting and inventor of the P.A.R (Product Analytics Rating) system himself, Martin Darting. The PIWI International Society use it to communicate the qualities

(25) Compared to conventional 100-point scales, which generally see 90% of wines placed within a range of 25 points, tasters using P.A.R scores are able to evaluate much more transparently within the ranking levels. The awarded points are explicitly documented with up to 24 evaluation parameters and can be accessed globally online. Using this, a fan of rich, creamy Chardonnays can identify which PiWi grape produces the most similar wine.

"You only have to go into the vineyards three times a year, so there’s less chemicals, less time for the grower and less pressure on the ground.”

Lia

(26) "We don’t use PiWi because we don’t think you can compare internationally and therefore compete. I think at the moment you can’t make very great wines because they are invented in Switzerland - they are used to other conditions so in our region, they get too much sugar, and they get too ripe. That means high alcohol and I don’t want this. Maybe in a few years, though…”

Tamara

(27)
of a hybrid wine, by scoring them against relatable wine characteristics. It has members from Austria and Germany, as well as one from Italy.

“Winegrowers, wine retailers, and final consumers view the wine characteristic at a glance and can estimate how it matches the flavour of the respective target market.” [25]

There are drawbacks of course. Tamara Kögl, of the award-winning Weingut Kögl winery, and a former Wine Queen of Styria, summarises some of the doubts of hybrid grapes to me. For starters, there’s the challenge of convincing people to exchange their reliable Sauvignon Blanc for a more sustainable, yet unpronounceable, grape. Her family haven’t invested in PiWi because they lead to more tannins, and more alcohol - which goes against the trend for lighter, lower alcohol wines that’s currently dominating the wine markets of Germany, Austria, and beyond. What the next few decades will bring, however, both she and Christian remain optimistic on the future of PiWi wines. A shift in taste could be supported by the P.A.R system, which has been designed to translate new grapes into the language of old ones - and, of course, whilst it would be illegal to name their wines after a original variety, there’s scope for growers to incorporate it into the new varietal name; opting for names such as Danube Riesling, Cabernet Blanc, or Souvignier Gris, to convince the suspicious taster to try a glass.

The P.A.R system has benefits beyond just PiWi wines, too. It shows not only the rating result of the product, but also the whole path leading to it. At a glance, it’s far more in depth than the famous 100 Point Scale, or the Parker System, which only comments on a few attributes; specific qualities such as herbaceousness, bitterness, clarity, and sweetness are individually scored out of 10. It will be interesting to see what happens with this new evaluation system in the next few decades.

“I don’t want a wine festival that targets just the VIPs, I want to make sure everyone can access it and the information is easy to understand”

Christian

The Emperor of Wine, by Elin McCoy, details the life of Robert Parker, creator of the now world-renowned Parker system for scoring wines out of a 100.
A common goal.

Ultimately, what all these systems for certification and labelling have in common is that they have been developed with the purest of intentions; to assist the inexperienced wine lover has they negotiate the minefield of wine, to aid the winemaker in earning the certification that will give them an edge in the market, and, of course, to promote sustainable wine-making. For the end consumer, the ambiguity of the sustainable label is less of a problem in practise than it looks on paper; many would argue that how they earn the accreditation matters less than the fact that they have.

For their faults, each has the potential to reach more people, and appeal to more winemakers, than organic or biodynamic certification, because the standard is able to adapt to the needs of the market. By marrying traditional techniques with innovative new ways of making and selling wines, they serve as useful tools which educate, inspire, and enable winemakers to communicate that, although they may not be organic-certified, top-quality wines can still be produced in ways which act with nature, rather than against it.

Unfortunately, working towards a clear definition of sustainably-made wine, and a way to measure it, is really only the beginning. In each of the three countries, why did I find winemakers who were adamant they would not - or could not - get certified at all?

Roland (pictured), the guest Austrian winemaker for the wine festival in Wiesbaden, wasn’t confident in organic wine certifications, but was hopeful for the emerging sustainable ones. And his wine was rather nice, too…

Wine & Spirits Columnist

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Winery move into the sustainability movement

It's great for the environment, workers and in many cases profits, too. But do consumers care? Probably a lot less than the industry as a whole would hope for. The problem lies with the cumbersome word itself, I think. Frankly, it's vague, at least in relation to wine. With fishing or forestry, there's simple

It's going to take a lot of campaigning to persuade consumers that fermented fruit is not an inherently renewable resource. Or maybe it's just going to take a lot of very good sustainably certified wine to get us on board, paired with sizzling-hot Filet-O-Fish, of course.
Problem Two: The Fickle (and Stubborn) Wine Consumer

Wrapped up in the sensory pleasures of tasting and smelling wines, and enchanted by images of European families sharing stories over a meal and a bottle; of vineyards passing through generations, it’s easy to forget that wine is, first and foremost, an industry of business - a business that relies on money to sustain itself.

It is difficult to predict which fashions will become trend, and which trends will become long-term. For many, it’s a guessing game; full of hit-and-miss opportunities, guesswork, risk, and bravery. Jump on the ‘vegan-friendly’ bandwagon, and you could decimate your market, rather than double it. Opt for the lengthy, expensive task of applying for organic certification, and you may fail because of your neighbour’s field. Larger-scale wine businesses might have the disposable income, labour, and time to instigate such colossal change to their business model, but how long would it take for tiny wineries, perhaps making 2000 bottles a year and sold exclusively in their country, region, or even just village, start to recoup their losses? And, whilst trendier labels, lighter bottles and online shopping might appeal to the millennial generation (31) are these features popular enough to justify abandoning the deep-set traditions of wine, and upsetting the conservative wine consumer who doesn’t appreciate change?

With early market research into the sustainability trend championing the benefits, but also admitting that consumers were, despite their claims, still "not prepared to trade organoleptic (ie smell and taste) quality for sustainability" (32) it is quite easy to see why small wineries, already unwilling to invest in a globally recognised organic certification, would be even more reluctant to invest in a sustainable one still in its infancy.

Changing for a trend is risky, and costly.

Tamara had already told me as much, when she explained that she didn’t think PiWi produced a wine that responded to the taste trends of 2018. On the new trend for vegan-friendly wines (an extension of the ‘eco-friendly” family) most of the people I met were undecided about it - whilst many were convinced that sustainable wines were a thing to look out for over the next few decades, they weren’t so sure about this ‘trendier’ movement. Lia pointed out to me that many winemakers were reluctant to capitalise on this trend and label their wines as ‘vegan-friendly’ - even if they were - for fear of ostracising those who weren’t vegan. Over in Austria, Christian enlightened me to the fact that, due to a wine scandal of the 90s, Austria was very strict on labelling privileges; initially, you had to be part of the Vegan Association, which was just a further cost to wineries, so few bothered with it.

The same goes for the trends on sustainable packaging; online, The Drinks Business is flooded with predictions on wines in cans,
boxes, bags, and recyclable bottles designed to fit through letterboxes, all hustling for the top spot in revolutionary wine presentation. Most of the winemakers I met, however, were somewhat horrified by the can idea, but several were open-minded about wine in bags and boxes— but not wholly convinced it was worth investing in.

But: large-scale businesses are prepared to take the risk, on behalf of the ones who can’t.

Despite outcry from traditionalists, for the past 8 years every wine from Staatsweingut has been closed with a screw cap— partly on money reasons. Lia tells me that a rise in cheap corks following a disproportional demand led to customer complaints of cork taint, so they were losing a lot of money replacing the bottles. “Still, some people say they won’t buy wines with screw caps for our price.” She tells me. But this is okay— because that’s what the Weinbauinstitut is for: experimenting. The VIVA project is doing something similar in Italy; experimenting with replacing cork with a new biopolymer cap made from sugarcane.

“We do things like this because we have the funds to survive a set-back, and the information we gain from the experiences is free for others to use and learn.”

Where other wineries might be too scared, or too small, to attempt it, Freiburg is pioneering many new sustainable approaches; Grüne Weinbox, digital marketing, and collaborating with Switzerland on PIWI breeding programmes. “That’s the reason we exist— there was a need to start research.” Lia tells me. They don’t just grow new varieties, and not all the wines are organic. “We try to answer questions from all areas of the wine industry— we’re trying to find answers on Organic and Natural wines; but, perhaps, Natural answers to Organic questions.”

“There has to be a demand, and we have to create that, if it isn’t there.”

According to Nicolas, Fair’n Green are creating the demand for sustainable alternatives, by using the weight of their 50+ membership to encourage suppliers to consider offering these products, on the reassurance that the market is already there. “We go to them and say, look, here’s 50 potential customers you’re missing out on.” He tells me. And it’s been working, so far!

Every organisation mentioned in this report networks with sustainable label suppliers, cork producers, and bottle makers who will accept collaborative orders (many won’t accept orders below a certain threshold, which is generally too high for small wineries, so they order as groups).
For those wanting to make the changes, there’s actually a lot of support already available - and it’s only increasing.

And the demand is tangible already.

The observation - that customers aren’t willing to exchange a oenological quality for an environmental benefits - was published in 2014, at the Milan Expo by the The Forum for the Environmental Sustainability of Wine. It was sponsored by Unione Italiana Vini (the leading wine review body in Italy) so carried a substantial influence on wine business leaders considering their next move. Jump ahead 4 years, however, and the 2018 Global Sustainable, Organic and Lower Alcohol (SOLA) Wine Report by WineIntelligence offers a far more promising review of the wine consumer market - this time, of a worldwide scale.

Cross-examining 11 markets and developing 12 sub categories - including organic, sustainably-produced, carbon neutral, Fair-trade, and vegan- the report created an index that would determine which of these so-called SOLA wines would triumph in the global market, and where. Unsurprisingly, the highest-ranking ‘opportunity’ was Organic wine- but, the report pointed out, this could quite plausibly be attributed to the fact that the term ‘organic’ outranked the other categories by both longevity, and consumer awareness. Someone not connected to the wine world might naturally assume that ‘orange wine’ is orange-flavoured or orange based, but ask them to explain organic wine and there’s a strong chance they’ll recognise it. ‘Organic’ was closely followed by ‘Fairtrade’ - another term that crosses multiple food and drink categories and therefore accesses a greater consumer base - and then, most importantly, ‘sustainability-produced’ and ‘environmentally-friendly’ wines. So close, in fact, that the report led to this conclusion;

This is overwhelmingly positive for what has been dubbed “the alternative wine” scene; suggesting that current wine consumers are becoming more liberal in their wine choices, and there’s a growing preference for environmental responsibility over the prestige of terroir, despite the problems this report has already discussed.

With international market research concluding that sustainable wines are here to stay, and countless organisations racing to put together a reliable, supportive framework for winemakers to follow, the risk of experimenting with sustainable alternatives is certainly softened. Neither of these, however, can combat the deep-rooted prejudices of the wine industry, and how stubbornly drinkers retain their preconceived ideas of how wine should look, and taste.
Wine: Too Complicated For Young People To Enjoy?

This article by the Daily Globe suggested that, for inexperienced wine drinkers, choosing a bottle of wine from the masses is plagued by far too many choices and complicated further by the dos and don'ts of wine culture. Wine buffs and experts turn wine drinking into a fine art, but elevating wine to such heights puts it out of reach of many, particularly young adults. If the wine industry truly was too traditional to change, what was being done to persuade it?

The Judgement of Paris.

In the past, it has been shown how its steadfast traditions have made the wine industry, and the people in it, complacent. There’s a tendency to coast on reputation, assuming that people will drink the wines they have always drunk, purely because they have been told to. Many winelovers recall the Paris Wine Tasting of 1976 - also known as “Judgment of Paris”, and what is widely considered to be the pinnacle turning point in America’s wine history.

Whilst the French grumble obstinately, Americans remember it proudly; the day a British wine merchant named Steven Spurrier jovially snuck Californian wines into a blind tasting competition, and 11 of the best French wine experts gave the top 5 places to the American wines. Nobody, including Spurrier (who exclusively sold French wines) ever thought that Californian wines could win. This marked a new wave of thinking when it came to wine - the industry exploded, reaching every viable grape-growing country on the planet. Yet, we still find instances of fierce conservatism; the belief that terroir matters more than anything, even the skill of the winemaker; that Old World is the Only World; that screw-caps can never replace corks; the immediate, almost compulsive, rejection of any packaging that is not a heavy glass bottle, labelled with countless details that inform the amateur wine enthusiast, simply trying to find a nice bottle for dinner, of absolutely nothing.

“We’re taught to sell this wine and that customers will love this wine as is. Not to ask what the customer actually wants.”

Although she graduated only a few years ago, Lia, the Project Manager at Staatsweingut in Frieburg, encountered this problem whilst studying International Wine Business at Geisenheim. I had heard this unwavering confidence firsthand the week previous at Wiesbaden Wine Festival; from Francois, a proud Burgundian
who tells me his people don’t advertise their wines as sustainable, vegan, or anything else, because they already sell just fine. Then there was Marko, a 3rd Year International Wine Business student at Geisenheim, who may be young, but he echoes the thoughts of a traditionalist; “People are getting lazy, in a few years, people will not go out- they’ll get wine delivered” he told me. “You have to go to the winery, to taste, to try….you need that feeling.” But, he did concede that this was Germany-centric; he thought the wine industry should use social media to offer virtual interviews and cellar tours, for those that could not easily visit European vineyards every time they wanted a bottle for dinner.

I spoke to two people hosting wine tours through Airbnb Experiences, to get a local perspective. Miriam told me Milan “is actually one of the open-minded and international cities” but “Rome is far more difficult - it’s harder to live in central Rome and be interested in sustainable living”. In Vienna I interviewed Carol, who sold Italian wine to Austria and Germany. Her opinions on digitalising the industry, as well as the market tastes of the individual countries, was invaluable; Austria, followed by Italy, are very closed markets, very difficult to sell different things to, and that whilst sustainability is more important in Austria than Italy, Austria is the most patriotic, and rather reluctant to drink wines outside of their country. This aversion to new - and the preference for what’s already established- is a huge barrier when it comes to buying, selling, and making sustainable wine.

Nicolas told me that part of the appeal of Fair’n Green was that the label is a USP for his members - but Francois said otherwise, and apparently many don’t declare anything about their choices as a winemaker. It’s a conservative practise that stems decades, back to when wineries were shrouded in mystery and their wines were almost magical- but this secrecy is only encumbering the industry’s progression in sustainability, as it slows down the rate in which information - about glass Co2, about water usage, about the opportunities available - reaches the consumer. As a result, it’s taking longer for them to ask the questions, and fuel the demand that will force the industry to act. So what’s being done to encourage this?

“Austria is very patriotic, they only drink Austrian wines… I think, perhaps 65%. It’s a very closed market. In my opinion, Austria is facing big problems because they were so conservative for so long.”

Carol

“We are very conservative, so if you want to change something, you have to work hard for it. You have to really hit the taste of a single person, and that’s quite hard.”

Lia

Wine Intelligence may have listed it as one of their top predictions for 2018 amongst UK consumers, but Lia tells me of the challenges she faces in getting interest for boxed wine. “In Germany, we have the problem that they associate cardboard boxes with bad wines. But what we have is good - and you need good wine, otherwise the marketing is very difficult.”

And Germans, according to Lia, are quite hard to market alternatives to when it comes to wine. Because sustainable wine is new, buyers don’t trust it - not like they trust organic wine- and if buyers won’t invest, the consumer won’t have the chance to try the
boxed wine and realise that is, in fact, rather good. I’ll be the first person to admit that I was shocked by the quality of the wines Lia drew from the boxes in front of me.

“The bag-in-box concept is not new; you just have to get people from apple juice to wine.”

The Grüne Weinbox started because glass bottles are one of the biggest obstacles in the path to sustainable winemaking. Sand for glass is a limited resource, and the need for alternatives is already starting to press upon the wine industry. Decanter Magazine pointed out that, given the fact that 9 out of 10 bottles of wine are drunk soon after purchase, it’s hard to justify the thousands of tonnes of Co2 put into the atmosphere to make heavy glass bottles, transport them, and then recycle them- hence the rise in products like Garcon Wines bottles [39]. The difficulty, I’m told- first by Nicolas, and then Lia- stems from the belief that heavy glass bottles denote quality in wine.

It’s a prudish concept. In terms of longevity, most wine wouldn’t degrade using a cardboard box, because - as Lia tells me - 75% of the wine in Germany is made to be drunk in a year anyway.

“We have to put a lot of work into changing their minds.”

According to Nicolas, 30 years ago German wineries would take back their bottles to be washed and refilled. Although this is seeing some resurgence today, many premium winemakers don’t want to use second-hand bottles, or lighter bottles. It is these instances, where consumers remain unwilling to trade sustainability for a perceived denomination of quality, that proves most frustrating.

To combat this preset snobbery, Staatsweingut are reaching out to those already familiar with boxed wine; it’s already rather popular in France (surprisingly), Italy, and Scandinavia, apparently. I’m also told that there’s a picnic event in summer in the vineyards in the city, (Staatsweingut literally translates to State Vineyards; these are right in the heart of Freiburg’s Old Town) where guests try the Grüne Weinbox wines. “We want to show how easy it is to integrate sustainability into your life with small charges, like enjoying sustainable wine.” Lia tells me. On the business’s motivations, she’s very adamant they are genuine; “We want to make it more famous,” She insists. “Not just make money.”

Garçon Wines, a UK based company, have made headlines in the Daily Mail, Decanter, Forbes, The Independent, The Telegraph and Huffington Post, and already been listed for awards for their slimline wine bottles, which are designed to fit through post boxes and are made from 100% recycled (and recyclable) PET plastic. (39)
By spreading awareness of the techniques, drawing in expertise from other wine countries and educating winegrowers on the harsh reality of using so much glass, the opinion is changing, albeit slowly.

During our meeting, Nicolas shows me how Fair’n Green are helping the younger members, who have newly taken over from the older generation. “It’s hard for the younger generation to win this argument if their fathers are still there, wanting the system that’s been there for 30-40 years.” He tells me. “We try to help them make the necessary changes.” In some cases, this is as simple as starting a proper filing system, or a webpage. Whilst they encounter some resistance, positive change is happening largely due to the fact that a new generation are taking over many of the family wineries.

“The wine business is getting younger - the typical customer is dying out. Many wineries used to sell 90% of their wine to people who visited them. Their fathers sold to them.” Nicolas explains. “Most of our members are early 40s, not that old. Most are family businesses inherited in the last few years, so they want to put their own stamp on it. For them, sustainability is a good option.” Over the next 10 or 20 years, Nicolas is confident that sustainability will be a growing trend; he thinks it’s a unique selling point for winemakers to work on, but it’s also an interest to them.

Perhaps, then, it would be better for wine businesses to bypass the entrenched older generation, and focus instead on capturing the attention of the younger generation, who have already proved themselves interested in sustainable innovations.

What power do the younger generation have?

An international study by VINEXPO, organiser of the world’s biggest wine and spirit exhibition found that respondents believed good wine to be expensive, and felt that wine culture and vocabulary excluded them; lacking understanding of the many different wines and wine styles, younger people are more likely to be bewildered by choice and confusing labels. Add the minefield of sustainable certification to that heady mix, and would the younger generation feel able to demand more environmentally-friendly wines, if they lacked confidence to begin with?

Finding new ways to engage.

Whilst the wine industry may lose some elements of its identity in modernising, it is gaining new ones - and change isn’t always bad.
Considering how people - especially younger people - want to be communicated with could be key to giving wine’s stuffy image a bit of upgrade. At Wiesbaden wine festival, Patrick points out that his stall - HAMM winery - employ a lot of young staff for the festivals, to encourage younger people to approach them, telling me; “We want young people to come to us, to try our wines!”

Using social media and the internet are not necessarily a bad thing, either - they spread awareness and provide new ways of connecting with the consumer. “Young people may not be attracted to wine because of the lack of communications,” Carol suggested to me during our meeting; going on to tell me of an Austrian wine company, recently sold to Germany, which had struggled because they weren’t accessing the younger markets. “Now they try- and I hope it’s not too late- by hiring a social media consultant.”

For Carol, it’s crucial that the wine business accepts the need for social media. And, in some areas at least, the wine industry is agreeing with this; adopting new marketing strategies in order to engage with the international market and the generation of technologically-advanced, knowledge-thirsty wine consumers, in ways that add to- rather than usurp- the imbedded traditions.

In Milan, for example, Miriam has found great success in taking the traditional (and very happy) marriage of food and wine, and recalibrating it to appeal to a younger, more open-minded market. Her tour, Walk&Taste Milan’s best veggie food, takes tourists around markets in Milan, to try vegan-friendly foods alongside wine pairings.

“I decided on vegan food because it’s a very interesting niche for travellers. It gives them the opportunity to taste some very good Italian foods that aren’t meat. It’s actually a very good place for vegetarians, as Italy used to be a poor country - they’re used to being plant-based!”

It’s a great choice, really. Not only does it demonstrate that Italy has more to offer than the stereotypical pizza and meaty pasta, it encourages tasters to think about wine differently. Entwining wine and food has long been centred on meat-based dishes - but, considering the shift in perspective across the globe towards a more sustainable, plant-based lifestyle, this is something that the wine industry ought to rethink, if it hopes to keep the public’s attention. Ask many part-time wine drinker about food pairings, and they’re likely to suggest meat for red, and fish for white. I’ve yet to meet anyone who could tell me what wine complements sweet potatoes, or mushrooms. (Gewurtztraminer for roasted sweet potatoes, and Chardonnay, or an earthy Pinot Noir, for meaty mushrooms, if you were curious). But, seen as the number of people adopting vegan and plant-based lifestyles has risen to 3.5 million in the UK (43), and 168,00 people took part in the...
‘Veganuary’ at the start of 2018- 60% of them under 35 - it presents a new opportunity for the wine industry. It’s likely we’ll soon start to see people experimenting with wines that pair well with vegetables, rather than traditional meat and cheese, and a rise in styles that allow for this. Authors Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page certainly seem to think so, anyway.

Accepting that technology has a part to play is also important. Visiting wineries in person, to taste wines drawn straight from the barrel by the winemaker, is an important tradition. I meet many who consider this sacrilege, and remain heavily suspicious of the wine industry becoming digitalised at the expense of such a longstanding tradition. But, we live in the Age of Social Media, and this progression is inevitable - it may also be crucial in the wine industry’s ability to successfully introduce sustainable-accredited wines, and wines made of new breeds, in a way that non-plussed consumers can trust. At Fair’n Green, Nicolas had told me that they encourage their members to display the facts of their certification on their website - or other media if they don’t have one.

To combat the dilemma of labels, which provide very little space for information, and excessive (and not very environmentally friendly) packaging, some businesses are even exploring modern options; such as QR codes. All the customer needs is a smartphone, and they can decipher precisely what the label on the bottle in their hands is telling them. In Freiburg, QR codes on the Grüne Weinbox create a new way of experiencing the wines inside - much like Marko described, it’s almost like a virtual interview with the winemaker. Scanned, it leads to the Staatsweingut website and contains both technical and descriptive information; alongside growing methods, ABV and residual sugar levels and biography of the winemaker, curious consumers will find tasting notes and food pairings.

“VIVA digital label foresees absolute transparency in the relationship between producers and consumers: a first and important step in the direction of sustainability.”

Like the Italian VIVA label, Freiburg’s Grüne Weinbox project uses new marketing techniques to engage the consumer on a more personal, and informative, level; each box has a winemaker biography, QR code, and signed section. The picture (R) is an earlier model - during our meeting, Lia tells me they have transferred most of the information to QR codes, to save packaging.

We have really educated people coming to the wine business, who know a lot about sustainability and know to ask questions. They travel a lot, doing internships in New Zealand, Australia, and come back with new ideas - for example, using small sheep to trim the grass between the vines, rather than cutting it!”

Lia

One of the world’s leading grape and wine research organizations, Geisenheim university collaborates with organisations in Germany - such the Staatsweingut and Weinbauninstitute - as well as institute in France, Australia, Switzerland on research project. It, and its graduates, are continuously looking for ways to further, and protect, the global wine industry.

Hochschule Geisenheim attends all major wine festivals, like the Rheingau Wine Festival in Wiesbaden, to attract aspiring wine makers.
Ultimately, Lia thought that the digitalisation of the wine world was good - not only for business, but also increasing the demand for sustainable wines. “Because customers are getting more involved with social media and the internet, they learn that certain practises are bad, like using the same vineyard year on year until the soil is stripped of its nutrients. So the winegrowers are forced to be more sustainable - especially because you are now getting more people visiting, who have done their research and ask more questions. It encourages people to ask what the customers need and want, it breeds new thinking, and they have to adapt”. Although no-one I met said it, I wonder whether their decision to avoid websites and scannable barcodes might be due to fear that it would incite expectations that the winemakers do not have the ability to fulfil.

With the new wave of wine graduates flooding in now, however, Lia thinks this is inevitable. Internships abroad are common - in fact applicants to Geisenheim are required to have at least 6 months experience beforehand- and give young winemakers awareness of the global wine market, making them more open to trends and changes. I ask her if she thinks wine is a very accessible industry to get into, as a young person who doesn’t come from a wine-making background. “Yes!” She enthuses. “It’s easier than ever to get into wine, because it’s so diverse. You have to be determined and work hard. You have to good at physics, chemistry, but also love it. Without love, no wine is getting made.”

I also asked Patrick, who started working for Hamm only a year ago, if it was hard for young winemakers to get jobs in the industry. “In Italy, certainly.” Was his answer. “It’s like, if you don’t have a vineyard back home, why are you trying to get into wine?” The reason for this, he suggested, what that “Italy doesn’t buy into wine education like Germany does - they don’t have Geisenheim”. Patrick worked for Hamm part-time during his studying, and became assistant winemaker afterwards. I wondered to him whether young winemakers struggle to be taken seriously in the job market; if it’s a constant battle not to get passed over for older, more experienced winemakers who perhaps don’t have the same fancy ideas and global perspective that the recent graduates do. Whilst not sure, he does know that it’s important to find a good mixture of old and young winemakers- and that both have value. Whether he would have had problems if he hadn’t had his foot in the door with Hamm already, he doesn’t know. “But that’s why Geisenheim have contacts in the industry,” he pointed out - which is true. Like Fair’n Green and Staatsweingut, Geisenheim has a put a lot of work into developing a network of connections which its graduates can take advantage of, and the courses are designed to give students a broad-ranging education in wine business, in preparation for the competitive job market.

Festivals, Community Spirit, and Charity Work

Although the main focus of this report has been on how the industry is proactively trying to becoming more environmentally sustainable, each of the sustainable standards I encountered valued another pillar of the industry very highly; “sustainable

€100 buys you your very own pinot noir vine at Staatsweingut, Frieburg’s State Vineyard. €60 goes Fördergesellschaft Forschung Tumorbiologie cancer research charity, and the remaining €40 act as a prepayment for five years’-worth of special-edition ‘Rebate’ wine bottles. Once a year, on the first Friday of July, adopted vine parents are invited to the Blankenhornsberg cellar buildings.
“Usually the family-run wineries are a big part of their community - they’re on the village council, they do things with the schools... they’re all so woven into their community”

Nicolas

society’. In Old World countries where wine producing is in their very blood, it’s a key part of their socio-economic makeup; across the trip, I am told that children grow up knowing about wine, everybody has a passion for wine, and everybody chips in to help their neighbours. Part of Fair’n Green’s 150 criteria included unpaid voluntary work (like the scenario Britta told me about, where the town donate man power to each other to get all the pheromones into the vineyards in a few days) and ensuring that works were paid fairly, and the company gave back to their community.

Staatsweingut hosts summer picnics, and its ‘Adopt a Vine” programme donates 60% of the proceeds to charity. It invests heavily in the Freiburg community, and hope to improve communicate with the city’s restaurants over the next year or so-partly so they can appeal more to young people. “A lot of our customers are older,” Lia explains. “Initial prices are quite high, therefore not attractive to young people - we are trying to change that.” Lia tells me they offer 20% discounts to students and, as German students are required to take 3 courses not related to their degree subject, they have the opportunity to do a short course at the Weinbauinstitut. The course, which offers insight into every part of the wine industry, is available to everyone else for just €30. “We don’t want to earn money off of it” Lia tells me. She “We see it as a service.”

Rather comfortably, this is in spite of researchers like Cristina Santini, Alessio Cavicchi and Leonardo Casini, writing in their paper Sustainability in the Wine Industry: Key Questions and Research Trends, theorising that any proactive approach the wine industry takes towards become more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable is motivated purely by the desire the capitalised on a niche in the market, or by the findings of large-scale research bodies:

Many of the people I met spoke about passion, rather than profit, when it came to making their wines. But, Santini et al were more focused on bigger organisations; The Weinbauinstitut, for example, did use their government-funded research to help smaller wineries make sustainable choices. (48)

“We have the whole range of motivation. The optimal winemaker is one who wants to do good, and wants to help - usually it’s a bit of both”

Nicolas, on whether he thought members apply for Fair’n Green for profit, or for passion.

“Where family-run - you have to be (part of your community) because if you don’t have passion, it can’t be done.”

Britta

I didn’t find either to be the case at all. Every town and village in Austria and Germany holds wine festivals to promote local winemakers and grapes, and foster a passion for wine in their younger inhabitants; Christian hopes to continue his Bioweinfestival next year, to continue championing organic Austrian wine, PiWi grapes, and orange wine. Many anoint Wine Queens in recognition of their region’s female winemakers. The international business Carol works for, selling Italian wine to Germany and Austria, works closely with WineAid, a charity which
uses the profits from donated wine to finance therapies for disadvantaged children and adolescents in Austria. On a smaller scale, Jean Stodden host winter barbecues and charity fundraisers, donating €1 for every Fair’n Green bottle they sell. They’re also planning a short-course in winemaking, held at the estate, or on the school’s vineyard, to teach the older students how to work a vineyard and to prepare them for a future in wine or hospitality. When they graduate, they’ll be gifted a bottle as a keepsake. The most interesting thing Britta tells me about is the “Vino Casino” - a games event designed to help teach younger people to smell and taste wine properly. Like casino games, players have chips, which they can use to make guess about the wines on a particular table; each table has a theme, with questions such as “which is a real champagne? Which is an oaked red wine? Which wine is less than €10?”

All of these events and activities are designed to be fun, engaging ways of educating customers, and fostering a healthy relationship between their younger population, and their cultural heritage. By encouraging new ideas and properly preparing their younger generation for careers in the wine industry, as well as using social media to open a dialogue with the world’s environmentally-conscious millennials, these businesses concede that some aspects of the wine industry’s rigid traditional personality must be relinquished, in order to protect its future.

At their Vino Casino event, Jean Stodden serve wine in black glasses to make guessing the wines more of a challenge for their knowledgable young wine tasters, who grow up immersed in Germany’s wine culture.
Conclusion.

Winemakers and wine drinkers alike are scared of the change presented by sustainable innovations, confused by an onslaught of new information (or lack of it) and wary of trusting something still in its infancy. Using the support that is evidently there, and growing, winemakers must accept these risks however. Likewise, wine drinkers need to decide whether sustainability is an important factor in their wine choices, and commit to this fully. Only then will we start to see some rapid improvement in the sector.

Whilst I discovered much in my travels round Europe, this report is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to sustainability in the wine industry, and it has a long way to go yet. First and foremost, it is imperative that the wine industry lets go of its preconceived notions of how wine ought to be. Pride in one’s craft and the cultural heritage of a wine-producing country deserves to stay, but those holding the stoic belief that wine can only exist in glass and cork must acknowledge the unfounded basis- and, to be frank, disastrous consequences- of these claims, if they hope to pass a lifelong passion for wine onto their children and grandchildren. In order to succeed, quality must predate sustainability; but this isn’t really an issue, given every single person I met was proud of the wines they made and sold. And the wine industry must continue to invest in new innovations, such as breeding grapes, and nurture its younger generation; either by opening their arms (and ears) to young graduates and winemakers with new ideas, or engaging with wine drinkers in ways that appeal to them. Neither element stands to strip the industry entirely of its traditions and cultural identity, so should not be treated with hostility.

In reality, industrial innovation is not a new concept, and many of the problems facing the sustainable wine industry mimic those of any other. It’s impossible to say whether the efforts currently being undertaken by government-funded research facilities and family-run wineries alike will be successful; there’s no telling whether wine will completely lose its identity in the process (though this is unlikely) and it is unclear whether the coming years will mark an increase in wine drinkers, or decrease. But threats such as climate change are very real, and people are acknowledging this; there’s no doubt that the wine business is trying to build the foundations for a more sustainable future, and is prepared to be open-minded to new opportunities, and new experiences.

Bibendum have already released their predictions for 2019(52). It looks like the trend for lighter, fruit-driven reds (exactly the kind Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page predicted) will see Cabernet Franc come into play, offering opportunity for plant-based wine enthusiasts to experiment with vegetable pairings. No. 3 was “the rise of indigenous Italy” which promises more of a spotlight on previously overlooked areas of Italian wines- especially whites. In fact, several of the predictions are focused on indigenous grape varieties across the globe, suggesting that wine consumers have become more willing that ever to try wines made from grapes they’ve never heard of (best of luck, then, PiWi!).

“Becoming sustainable is not a must in the next 5 years, but businesses who don’t consider it or respond to changes- like climate change- will face big problems.”

Nicolas
Taking the No. 4 spot on the list is vegan wines, according to Bibendum buying director, Andrew Shaw:

“Consumers are all rightly aware of what they eat and drink, and the trend of veganism has become profound in wine. Many of our leading producers recognise this and produce vegan-friendly wines.”

The Drinks Business hasn’t officially published their predictions yet, but they have released some speculations; still on the rise is “Ethical Wines”, summarising organic, natural, biodynamic and vegan into one homogenous category, after they’ve found that “sales of eco-friendly vino are also up by 36% year-on-year at Waitrose”. Alternative packaging may be down to 8 (from 4 last year), but it hasn’t gone anywhere. The last 2 years have been good for alternative sparkling wines, and this is expected to only grow in strength as- again- consumers begin to cast off tradition for tradition’s sake, and look around for cheaper and more novel experiences than Champagne. Its lowly French cousin, Crémant, offers new grapes at half the price, and it’s very possible that English sparkling wines like Furleigh Estate and Nyetimber will grace more UK shelves following Brexit- though nobody really knows that effect this is going to have on importing wine to England.

At Jean Stodden and Staatliche Weinbauinstitut Freiburg, both of which reside in Southern Germany, I heard that climate change is forcing them to move away from Riesling. Whilst it is unfortunate that rising temperatures are making it impossible to grow the iconic Germany grape there, it does mean they have opportunities to grow different things; in the next decade, we might see Northern areas of Germany or other countries turn to Riesling, whilst Southern Germany starts to cultivate a reputation for Pinot Noir, or even Merlot.

Taking into account the opinions and observations given to me by the many people who were kind enough to talk to me, it’s easy to see that the means, the demand, and the aspirations are all there - we will just have to see how the next couple of decades shape up. Many who spoke to me reminded me that the wine industry moves slowly - and we should be thinking not in months and years, but decades, if we expect to see any real developments. With a lot of hard work, ambition and not a little risk, hopefully we will all be enjoying wine, for a very long time.
2. 5 PREDICTIONS FOR 2018 WinelIntelligence. (https://www.wineintelligence.com/5-predictions-for-2018/)
10. “ITALY” Section: Discover Sustainable Wine Website: http://discoversustainablewine.com/italy/
11. Sustainability Made in Italy for the World of Wine. EQUALITAS Website- Mission (https://www.equalitas.it/en/mission/)
15. Viticoltura Sostenibile web page (http://www.viticolturasostenibile.org/EN/Home.aspx)
16. FAIR’N GREEN Logo, FAIR’N GREEN Website (http://www.fairandgreen.de/en/)
17. Summary from Athenga website, with permission from Nicolas. (https://www.athenga.de/das-team/)
19. Ecovin Logo, Ecovin Website. (https://www.ecovin.de/)
21. Quotes, head shot of Clemens Busch, Fair’n Green website, permission from Nicolas. (https://www.fairandgreen.de/en/advisory-board/)
23. Logo and Headshot. Jean Stodden website, permission from Britta Stodden. (https://stodden.de/das-weingut/den-winzer/)
26. Staatliche Weinbaunstitut Logo, Staatsweingut Website. Permission from Lia. (https://staatsweingut-freiburg.de/weinbaunstitut/)
27. Headshot of Tamara and winery logo, permission of Tamara. (https://www.weingut-koegl.com/home)
28. Photograph, business card screenshot, and Bioweinfestival logo, with Christian’s permission. Weinbau Waltl Website. (https://www.weinbauwaltl.at/)