

Forbidden Fruits: The fabulous destiny of Noah, Othello, Isabelle, Jacquez, Clinton and Herbemont



ARCHE NOAH, Brussels and Vienna, 2017

Noah, Othello, Isabelle, Jacquez, Clinton and Herbemont are six of the wine grape varieties whose turbulent history in Europe begins with the invasion of the vermin *Phylloxera* (*Viteus vitifoliae*) – commonly known as “wine blight” – in the 19th century. Given their natural resistance to *Phylloxera*, these varieties (among others) were imported from North America during the crises to help counter the plague. They were both used as rootstocks onto which European *Vitis vinifera* varieties were grafted and in resistance breeding programs to infuse their *Phylloxera* resistance into *Vitis vinifera* varieties. The varieties were also directly planted in winegrowers’ fields – this particular practice gave them the name “direct producers” or “direct producer wines”. This term came to cover native American species such as *Vitis aestivalis*, *V. labrusca*, *V. riparia*, *V. rupestris*, but also the first generation hybrids obtained from crossings (either between each other or with the common European species *Vitis vinifera*) all the while maintaining the resistance to *Phylloxera*.

THE CURRENT PROHIBITION OF DIRECT PRODUCER VARIETIES

Today direct producer varieties are grown in several European countries and wine is still produced from their harvest. Strangely though, the planting of some of these varieties for the purpose of wine production is forbidden. Over the course of the direct producers’ 150-year history in Europe, first national and then European laws have adopted a dramatically restrictive and unfairly discriminatory approach to certain direct producers and hybrids, starting mostly in the 1930s.

The main barrier to the development of these wines in current European law relates to the so-called classification system for producing “quality wine for marketing purposes”. Article 81 of the EU-Regulation 1308/2013 establishing a common organization of the markets in agricultural products reads:

1. *Products listed in Part II of Annex VII and produced in the Union shall be made from wine grape varieties classifiable in accordance with paragraph 2 of this Article.*
2. [...] *Only wine grape varieties meeting the following conditions may be classified by Member States:*
 - (a) *the variety concerned belongs to the species *Vitis vinifera* or comes from a cross between the species *Vitis vinifera* and other species of the genus *Vitis*;*
 - (b) *the variety is not one of the following: Noah, Othello, Isabelle, Jacquez, Clinton and Herbemont.*

RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY OF DIRECT PRODUCERS AND RECOMMENDATION

In a detailed paper, ARCHE NOAH conducted research on the background to the political and legal discrimination of these varieties in five European countries: Austria, France, Germany, Portugal and Spain. A brief summary of our key findings can be found on the following pages.

Our conclusion is: The EU prohibition of direct producer varieties cannot be justified from today’s perspective. Wine regulation should contribute to promoting and protecting a vital cultural heritage, instead of destroying it. The direct producer varieties have fans, thus they have a market. They can create employment. Furthermore, thanks to their inherent resistant characteristics, they can help to preserve the environment through more sustainable wine growing practices.

ARCHE NOAH calls for the deletion of all references to specific wine grape varieties in Article 81 of the EU Regulation No. 1308/2013.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our research sought to answer the question: *Is the current prohibition of certain wine grape varieties in wine production appropriate for modern legislation which is committed to promoting rural development rooted in sustainable, resilient, and environmentally-friendly practices in agriculture?*

In our country case studies, we examined the logic behind the discrimination of direct producer varieties and analyzed the most common arguments for their prohibition.

HISTORY OF DIRECT PRODUCERS IN EUROPE

Direct producers and associated wine grape varieties have been controversial ever since their first encounter with the European wine landscape in the 19th century. The divide was clear between those who viewed them as an opportunity to go forward in the evolution of European wine-making and those who considered them a threat. Although they never proved, direct producers were accused of having brought additional, and perhaps even more devastating organisms, to Europe. The voices of the latter group prevailed in the tense socio-economic and cultural context of the time, characterised by overproduction, under-consumption and cultural supremacism. The arguments used to justify a prohibition on direct producers differed on a national scale and reflected the specific circumstances that lay behind the legal provisions in the respective countries.

The history of direct producers in Austria as an example

The introduction of the direct producers to Austria goes back to the end of 19th century, when the spread of *Phylloxera* destroyed great parts of the Austrian wine growing business. The rise of direct producers in Austria is mainly attributed to the economic advantages they entailed. Their vine shoots were cheaper than those of European varieties. Their cultivation was less work intensive, since they did not have to be grafted. Their resistance against *Phylloxera*, powdery and downy mildew saved money that would otherwise be needed for chemical plant protection products. After the *Phylloxera* catastrophe and the First World War, these were the main features in which the growers of direct producers were placing all their hopes.

However, these advantages were also responsible for the direct producers' demise. Because they had the potential to significantly lower the price in the mass wine segment, they were accused of being a threat to the economic existence of other winegrowers. The European wine market was trembling under the threat of overproduction and under-consumption. As a reaction to these conditions, the use of certain wine grape varieties for wine production was prohibited at federal state level from 1924 onwards and at the national level in 1936.

It is difficult to say exactly why the state chose to destroy direct producer vineyards, rather than simply regulate the total number of vineyards. It is likely that subjective arguments relating to quality and taste, as well as the political influence of winegrowers in the federal state of Lower Austria and of Fritz Zweigelt played a crucial role in the prohibition. Notwithstanding the restrictive approach of lawmakers, a strong tradition of wine-making under the name *Uhdler* persists in the easterly Burgenland region.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST DIRECT PRODUCERS

In the course of the 20th century, a lot of arguments were found to justify the prohibition of direct producers. In our paper, we are able to demonstrate that these arguments, which were questionable ever since, are completely untenable today.

First, direct producers have been attacked for **their quality**, linked to their inherent "fox tone", described at times as strange, disturbing, sweet, or grassy. Since it is unquestionable that the issue remains a subjective one, it should never warrant exclusion of these varieties from the general classification regime. As for the quality wine aspect, it is safe to say that modern direct producer wine that is organized through a professional association like in Austria maintains high and constant standards in production.

Probably the most long-lasting arguments are linked to **human health risks** caused by the consumption of direct producers, including anger excesses, hysteria, hallucinations and paleness – concerns have been linked to these wines’ alleged high methanol content. Not only have the studies used to develop these arguments been debunked by more recent science, they have also shown that the methanol content of all direct producers are within the limits warranted by the International Organisation for Vine and Wine (OIV). The same goes for the toxicity concerns raised in some Member States.

With regards to **plant protection issues**, the direct producers’ resistances to disease have been at times used against them, most recently in debates surrounding *flavescence dorée* in Austria for instance. As these varieties seem to sometimes show signs of the disease later than their *vitis vinifera* counterparts, their opponents have jumped on the occasion to discredit them for no reason, since all vines are potential vectors of the disease.

In the 1930s, the most resonant arguments were linked to **economic considerations**. The European wine market was experiencing a major crisis caused by overproduction as new countries like Algeria started to produce wine, and under-consumption linked to the general economic crisis, tax rises, and the prohibition movement in America and some parts of Europe. The leap from the crafting of wine propaganda, quality premiums, and limiting the quantity of wine, towards a prohibition of direct producers was already an excessive one during these challenging times.

Today, not only are overproduction and under-consumption no longer an issue, the production potential of direct producers would by no means threaten the balance reached within the general wine sector. Direct producer wines are, like other niche products of the sector, not in direct competition with mainstream wines. They have to be considered as not a competing but as a complementary product.

THE POTENTIAL OF DIRECT PRODUCERS IN TODAY’S VITICULTURE

The study concludes that the potential of direct producers is still not appreciated today:

First, there is a **market for direct producer wines**. These wines are produced with modern technology and have developed a quality comparable to other wines of the lower price segment. In the regions of Europe where direct producer wines are still being produced (and there are some), they have a large fan base. In Austria, people travel to the Burgenland region just to drink the famous *Uhdler* wines.

As a result, direct producer wines have significant potential to contribute to **rural development**. In the last century, they were a product for lower income populations and planted on small farms by poor farmers. Today, they help make these regions thrive, like in Austria’s Burgenland, where two thirds of the tourists link their visit to the tasting of *Uhdler* wine. Elsewhere, direct producers have become an integral part of **local traditions**, for example leading to celebratory fairs in the Venetian region of Italy.

These varieties could also have tremendous potential in **tackling current and future environmental challenges**. On account of their tolerance to powdery and downy mildew, direct producers do not need farmers to resort to chemical plant protection products. Direct producers can thus be considered a low-input plantation.

With regards to **agricultural biodiversity**, the preservation of direct producer varieties should be a clear priority to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets of the international Convention on Biological Diversity and all correlated European policies. Not only is the diversity of vines very important for the resilience of our viticulture, they have to be preserved for the future, not only in research facilities but also *in situ* by farmers. The preservation of the diversity of cultivated plants and its constant development can only be ensured by their sustainable use. This use should not be constricted by a relic of history.

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