

# Case Study: Viticulture Durable en Champagne



## Background

Sustainability has become a major focus of Champagne winemaking due to change in consumer preferences and the pressures associated with climate change threatening the region's ability to maintain market dominance for traditional method sparkling wine. The warming conditions have meant that harvests are getting earlier, and it is harder for viticulturists and winemakers to produce grapes under the parameters of the very strict PDO.

In response to this, Comité Champagne and Ministry of Agriculture introduced the Viticulture Durable en Champagne (VDC) framework in May 2015, to minimise the impact of viticulture on the environment. In total, there are 120 points covered ranging from air, soil, climate, water, biodiversity and terroir.

It is a voluntary approach encourages winemakers to focus on three main areas:

1. Biodiversity footprint
2. Carbon footprint
3. Water footprint

## Principles

To qualify for VDC certification Champagne growers and wine producers must be able to satisfy certain criteria including:

- Vine protection and breeding strategy to ensure longevity of the industry
- Fertiliser management
- Biodiversity preservation
- Preserve and enhance landscape/terroir
- Manage winery waste
- Reduce CO<sub>2</sub> footprint
- Exceed targets set by French Grenelle Act II

## Targets

- Reduce carbon footprint by 75% by 2020
- Zero herbicide use by 2025
- Encouragement of circular economy within Champagne
- 100% land covered by environmental certification by 2030

## INDUSTRY

**Vines planted:** 33, 821 hectares  
**Number of Champagne houses:** 360  
**Number of Growers:** 16,100  
**Varieties:** 38% Pinot Noir, 31% Pinot Meunier, 30% Chardonnay  
**Annual Production:** 301 million bottles  
**Market Value:** €5 billion

According to the Comité Champagne over the last 15 years, even before the introduction of the VDC scheme, Champagne producers have been focusing on sustainability which has meant significant reductions in carbon footprint per bottle, pesticide and nitrogen fertiliser use as well as improved practices in waste treatment.

## Adoption

As of 2020, it can be argued that although there has been a shift in focus to sustainable practices, adoption is still relatively low:

- 20% of Champagne vineyard area has environmental certification
- 15% of vineyards in Champagne has attained VDC certification since 2015

## Learnings and Takeaways

The low rate of adoption despite the voluntary nature and shift of consumer preferences to more sustainable products, raises the question as to the structure of the industry and if these percentages are made up of the larger Champagne houses or Grand Marques, (Moët & Chandon, Taittinger, Bollinger, Krug) rather than the smaller growers who will not have the luxury to invest, or do not have the motivation to appear more sustainable.

Wine production in Champagne is a centuries old industry with many generational, small family businesses. As a result, these may be difficult to persuade to change practices, both from a lack of knowledge or financial ability.

While the scheme is voluntary, the 120 point audit is a potential barrier to entry for producers as this is time consuming and there is no guarantee that becoming certified will increase profitability. Although there are many benefits to having stringent rules, including the reputability of the scheme, it could be considered prohibitive especially to smaller producers, showing the importance of an inclusive scheme that is attainable by all.

## References

**Comité Champagne**, 2020, Viticulture Durable en Champagne [online] available at <https://www.champagne.fr/fr/developpement-durable/viticulture-durable/certification-vdc>