

# The glass is half full

Challenges lie ahead for Flemish wine producers, but also great opportunities

Tom Peeters

Flanders lies just above the critical 50th degree of latitude, only under which, common wisdom dictates, the growing of wine grapes is possible. So viticulture used to be a tricky investment in the region. But, encouraged by the side-effects of climate change, a passionate hobby became a flourishing industry. To stimulate the sector, the government of Flanders has, together with growers, just launched a viniculture working group

Hidden behind the Zoete Waters, between the popular walking spots of Meerdaalwoud and the Heverleebos, lies the soft sloping land of Chardonnay Meerdaal. It is winter, so the grapevines are still barren. But earlier vintages here have proven that the sparkling wine produced here, just south of Leuven, can hold its head up alongside that of the Champagne region.

"A recent blind tasting between four top-class Champagnes and four Flemish sparkling wines didn't show any significant quality difference whatsoever," says Joyce van Rennes from the Wine Castle of Genoels-Elderen in Limburg province. "The only difference is price."

Van Rennes was one of the many wine-growers invited to Chardonnay Meerdaal last month by Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters for a first round-table discussion between the wine sector and local policymakers. There's a good reason he mentioned the booming sector in last year's policy document. It is one of the few market segments that's doing fairly well in these times of crisis, even without financial support.

But there's a much bigger potential, and Peeters, whose portfolio includes agriculture and rural policy, wants to actively support wine-growers in facing their particular problems and challenges.

## Little supply, much demand

One of those challenges is, in fact, too *much* business. Van Rennes recently extended her vineyard from 14 to 22 hectares, but it's still not enough to keep up with demand. "Slowly, we built up a clientele of approximately 300 restaurants, wine shops and delicatessens in Belgium," Van Rennes says. "But to supply them all, we had to decide to stop exporting our wines. If a foreign restaurant wants to put us on its wine list, they have to come round for the bottles themselves."

She doesn't see the situation improving, she admits. "Even in three or four years' time, when we can harvest the new vine plants, I don't think we will be able to export more. The Flemish people still don't realise how good our local wines are, but, with the increasing interest,



The Wine Castle of Genoels-Elderen is continuing a wine-making tradition in the area that dates back to Roman times

they will find out, and we will need our stock to supply them."

According to recent data from the Federal Public Service Economy, there are 119 hectares of vineyards in Belgium. Together they produce 468,703 litres of wine a year, of which 90% is white wine. Our climate favours the production of white grapes because the harvest can take place more quickly; for red grapes, you need more sunshine.

Most of the 68 vineyards in the country are in Flanders, and almost all of them produce wine with a controlled designation of origin (appellation) or a protected geographical indication. Since 1997, Flanders has designated four official appellations: Hagelandse wine, Haspengouwse wine, Heuvellandse wine and Flemish sparkling wine, all referring to the specific region where they are grown.

There's also a quality label. Herman Troch from Domein De Kluizen in Herdersem, a district of Aalst, grows this *Vlaamse landwijn* and is delighted with the label. "People used to call it just table wine. That wasn't a very good trademark. Since I received this quality label, which is checked every year, our sales have improved. Restaurants in particular were more eager to put us on their wine list."

As it often goes, Troch inherited the

passion for wine from his father, who considered his 60 vine plants a hobby. Troch the younger started producing wine in 1997 and now has a vineyard of 2.8 hectares.

## Ripe for the picking

Because he can compare past and present, Troch is the right person to explain why the quality of local wines may even be improving. "My father's grapevines blossomed at the beginning of July. My plants are blossoming in June, and last year even in early June," he says. "But we keep on reaping the grapes in October. The grapes grow slowly, and if you pluck them cold, the peel, which contains the tannin, will be thicker. That's the reason Flemish wines have a freshness and a pleasant sourness that even beats wines from the south of France. I'm sure, as the climate changes, more varieties will be introduced."

Currently, 15 varieties of grapes are permitted under the quality label, of which Müller-Thurgau, Chardonnay and Pinot noir make up the majority. But wine producers are not blind to the obstacles in their path. Last year, as a teacher at the Syntra training centre in Ghent, Troch witnessed the first students graduating with a winemaking degree. "The structure of the schooling is just fine, but there's still a lack of practical skills,"

he says. "For deeper practical knowledge we still have to go to France or Germany."

Peeters is aware of the problem. "We already invite foreign teachers to our schools, but of course it would be better if we can implement their know-how here. That's a future goal." Another problem potential wine producers is the scarcity of land. Troch: "Even I have difficulties finding new land: I cannot buy or lease a suitable property in my own neighbourhood. And there are simply no businesses to take over, because everyone's doing so well."

It all depends on where your vineyard is located, says Jos Vanlaer from Wine Cellar Kluisberg, one of the family businesses in the Hageland. "Here, and certainly in the triangle Diest-Halen-Bekkevoort, plenty of fertile land is available." Hagelandse wine is grown over 11 hectares of vineyards, Haspengouwse wine over 25 and Heuvellandse wine over eight.

## Quality, not quantity

According to a recent analysis, the maximum surface for viniculture in Belgium is 600 hectares: That's five to six times the surface of land used for viniculture today. The figure includes available land that has the right soil structure, position in relation to the sun and angle of

inclination.

So there is space for growth, but it's not endless. Flanders cannot compete with other wine-producing countries or regions in terms of quantity; no wonder the main focus of the local authorities lies on facilitating quality.

The new viniculture working group will build a bridge between the sector and expertise centres and investigate more specific problems encountered by wine producers, such as the fungal infection mycosis. The plant disease can cause major difficulties and even ruin entire harvests. "Together with the sector, we want to set up an observatory for an integrated control," says Peeters. "It will be favourable not only for the environment – because wine producers will need fewer chemical products – but also for their wallets." Another action could be an expanded collaboration with Flanders' Agricultural Marketing Board, which recently pursued publicity campaigns for local pears and pork.

But with or without the government, Flemish wine producers know that for a good glass of wine, you don't have to cross a southern border any more. And they're convinced local consumers will soon follow.