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Policy Brief

EASTERN ALPS | Organic wine production for premium wines

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 862739

Eastern Alps: Organic wine production for premium wines

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Summary

In Trento Province grape cultivation for quality wine production covers more than 12 000 ha, 14% of which is 500 m or more above sea level. The farms behind the quality wine labels are often very small-scale, often smaller than 1 ha, but a large company collects and processes the grape, maintaining small farmers' activity thanks to good prices for the grapes and through technical advisory and bureaucratic assistance. The value of the final product and consumer demand pushed for an increasing environmental engagement, which led to a wide adoption of organic and low-input production systems.

Grape production in Trento Province is strongly intertwined with other agricultural production and with other economic activities, such as tourism and forestry.

Know more about the Eastern Alps Reference Region, its selected value chain and the regional multi-actor platform (MAP), **here.**

Key policy messages

- Enhance support to ecological systems and practices.
- Test and adapt alternative certification methods to avoid losing small farmers.
- Support collective and intersectoral actions.

1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

The Eastern Alps Mountain Reference Region (MRR) includes the Alpine and pre-Alpine chains of Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Slovenia. The MRR is quite heterogeneous, with higher forest coverage in the east, with land becoming progressively more agriculturally managed to the west. Agriculture activities include cattle production on pasture, mainly for milk production, feeding high-quality Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) cheese value chains, such as Trentingrana or Montasio; fruit production, especially apples but also some berries; vegetables; and grapevines. Large parts of the MRR forests were devastated by a storm (Vaia) in 2019. It destroyed or intensely damaged forest stands over about 42 500 ha,

producing 8.5 million m^3 of wood that was partly reclaimed for use. The analysed value chain (VC) is in the autonomous Trento Province, where the more intense agriculture takes place but where also tourism (in winter for skiing, and in other seasons for biking, climbing, hiking, etc.) has a relevant role in the local economy and land management. The province includes 3 Natural Parks, a UNESCO reserve (Dolomites) and several protected areas, about one-third of the province's territory is protected and hosts several endangered animal species, including wolf and brown bear that may create some conflicts with agricultural activities, as well as thousands of plant species.

2. Resilience and innovation

Grapevine cultivation in Trento Province has a long tradition but it was mainly grown for family use or for a very local market. Since the 20th century wine production has become a more professional activity, and nowadays there are about 10 000 ha of grapevines cultivation in Trentino, all for wine production. Of these, 32% are in areas less than 200 m above sea level, 39% between 200 and 350 m, 15% between 350 and 500 m, and the remaining 14% above 500 m. White varieties are predominant, and there is an interesting link between the cultivation of autochthonous/local varieties and the higher cultivation areas. In the early 1900s, the oenologist Giulio Ferrari started to produce the Metodo Classico sparkling white wine. That was the basis of the world-renowned Ferrari Vini brand. Except for a few large farms, grape production still takes place on very small farms, often smaller than 1 ha, where also apples are often grown and many of them are organic. The wine producing company collects the grapes and processes them into quality wines (Trento PDO, Trentino PDO), and also offers technical advisory and bureaucratic support to farmers.

In the last 10 years, grape production has progressively moved to organic and integrated production systems, despite some difficulties in the certification process due to the very small plots/farms. At the same time the company started to test the production in higher areas, in order to cope with climate change effects on grape characteristics.

3. Value chain contribution to sustainability and resilience of the MRR: barriers and opportunities

In the MRR, grape production could lead to a conflict between producers and inhabitants (as has happened in other typical wine areas), but the good technical level of public and private advisory services allowed the testing of low-input systems and is now making possible a large share of organic management and the spreading of low-input (integrated) systems. Grapes are also grown on thousands of very small farms, as their economic value allows the survival of small-scale producers, together with the provincial rural support policies. The production is very professional, but it does not lead to a monoculture, like forestry and other agriculture activities,

because apple or berries production are often intertwined with grape cultivation. International varieties are largely grown, but the share of autochthonous ones is increasing and getting the attention of quality markets. The market for Trento PDO wines is international and it is highly regarded, and relies also on the promotion of the territory. Local restaurants and hotels play a relevant role in this promotion.

Vineyards are shaping the landscape of Trento Province, so forging the prerequisites for touristic activities, especially if grown with the typical “pergola” trellising system. The challenge nowadays is to maintain the wine quality traits in a changing climate. One of the options is to move the production uphill, in areas now covered by forest or used as pasture.

4. Policy relevant considerations

Rural development policies in the province have always supported: (i) small producers and their collective initiatives; (ii) quality productions (mainly PDO); and (iii) research for the improvement of local agriculture. An integrated system of agriculture, tourism and other economic activities is in place, even if there is still room for improvement.

Points of further development could include:

- Stronger support to ecological systems (i.e. organic farming and diversification);
- Testing of alternative certification methods to avoid losing small farmers (i.e. group certification);
- Support for collective and multi-actor actions (i.e. biodistretto), and development of the MRR, and the need to act.

Reference

La viticoltura in Trentino, 2018. A report on wine production in Trentino Province, referring production and market trends:

https://www.palazzoroccabruna.it/sites/default/files/uploads/roccabruna/documents/osservatorio/Vitivinicoltura/Vitivinicoltura%202020%20web.pdf

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