

Noah Project



Wine growing areas : intangible heritage of humanity

This text formulates the reasons why the Noah Project was created and the goals it aims to reach.

Noah Project is a sustainable development program defining a “terroir” alternative toward an industrial vision of wine and wine growing areas. Its main purpose is to maintain that conservation and development of diversity and a cultural understanding of wine are the key assets of European competitiveness and the only sustainable economic model.

Based on solidarity and knowledge sharing, Noah is open to all European wine growing countries.

Context

A lack of vision and short term “decision making” with respect to the wine growing regions have caused an identity crisis for European wines. Many new labels have been invented that have broken the ties between wines and their “terroir” while adopting so called modern or industrial standard of production. Worse even, sometimes the methods of exploitation and the organisation of production destroy the pillars of the denominations of origin : the local environment, the knowledge of the local environment and the communal know-how.

In stead of trying to escape the current crisis by diluting this distinctive local style, some prefer an alternative way: the reaffirmation of the existence of true distinctive regions and their role in safeguarding a specific social network, culture, nature and unique tastes.

This is a minority movement, but not an isolated one. It is part of a movement that goes beyond the world of wine and is potential most powerfully supported by the concept of the “intangible heritage of humanity” created by Unesco. The “Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage” of 17 October 2003, went into force in the beginning of 2006, opening up new perspectives for all those engaged in this movement and for all those whose future depends on it.



Intangible heritage of humanity: definition

Realising that globalisation and social transformation involve “grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of intangible cultural heritage” the convention creates important measures for its protection, since this heritage is “the mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development”. The convention then states that “this intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity.” It is manifested in notably the following domains:

- social practices, rituals and festive events
- knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- traditional craftsmanship.

Can a wine growing region be an intangible cultural heritage?

This definition and its implications have a bearing on the identity and the spirit of the denominations of origin.

Besides its symbolic value in western culture, wine is the perfect example of a product in which history, collective memory, knowledge of the environment and local know-how come together. Each wine is the product of the combined effort and experience of many generations: particular plots were identified; wine making methods were chosen; pruning techniques were developed and grapes were selected - all to fit their particular environment. The result of this ongoing process is a unique wine and a unique relationship between nature and a community. All this is in line with the definition of intangible heritage of humanity.

What is more, not only the product and its production, but also the character of the environment in which it grows is in line with intangible heritage. Recent research on the characteristics of the concept of terroir has shown that the roots of a vine create physical and micro-biological conditions giving the soil a unique identity leading to a unique taste of the wine. Wine growing areas are more than just countryside; here man has intervened in nature creating a genuine cultural heritage, with the vine as intermediary. This heritage gives the denominations of origin their legitimacy and their reason to exist. This special relation between man and soil is now being endangered by wine making employing industrial methods. Immoderate chemical treatments destroy the micro-biological conditions, unique grounds unfit for mechanical exploitation are abandoned or uprooted and over-reliance on industrial techniques lead to a loss of local practices and knowledge. The infringement of new industrial or legislative standards in this area compromise both diversity and sustainability. As a result the heritage of wine is in serious danger.

Safeguarding this cultural heritage by putting it under the protection of Unesco is therefore completely legitimate: wine growing fits the criteria of the convention and is threatened by the developments mentioned in it.



Perspectives and interests

Protection, promotion, information, campaigns to ensure respect with the public at large, introduction of research programmes; training local actors...

The Convention gives a fairly complete list of measures which are perfectly adaptable to the specific issues of the denominations of origin.

Rebuilding a reasonable discussion about wine and terroir

One of the major issues is the widespread tendency to put the grape variety on the label instead of the appellation, in order to “simplify” the choice for the consumer. This approach is simplistic as it neglects the influence of terroir on the taste properties of the grapes. It is therefore impossible to construct a reliable system based on grape varieties, for wines that have terroir. Adopting these new identities for wine would mean eliminating a significant historical, natural and artisan heritage. Moreover, it also implies the replacement of the diversity of local or minor grape varieties by a much more limited spectrum of well known grapes. It would constitute one step further down to the path that evicts the notion of terroir from the world of wine.

In this context, the recognition by Unesco and the availability of sufficient resources to perform new studies and disseminating their results, proving the existence of terroir and measuring the environmental, cultural, economic and social impacts of its possible disappearance would be a very valuable support against the powers of standardisation.

Recognition by Unesco would create within the wine growing areas a dynamic and beneficial strengthening of identity. It would stimulate the differentiation on the market and the renewal of knowledge and know-how at local levels.

Escape out of a destructive model

The problems of information and its diffusion with regard to wine lead to a destructive system that has an impact on producers, regions and the natural and social environment. The influence of some technical consultants and the imposing of a certain idea of quality has not only lead producers to put aside their knowledge of the environment and their experience; but this has also led to a devaluation of that very knowledge. Results: abandonment of fields or lifting grape varieties “too difficult” to exploit; expansion of appellations into areas unsuitable for wine production; extinction of traditional wine methods replaced by often inappropriate techniques; pollution; and sometimes reduction of the winemaker to a simple producer of grapes.

In wine growing as in many fields an economic logic based on productivity increase follows its normal course: increasing volumes, lowering the value of raw material, dependency of the producer of these raw materials. The wines which result from this system have the same denomination as the wines which do respect the cultural and natural resources of their area but are of considerably lower quality and rapidly come to constitute the majority. At this scale, predation turns into the usurpation of an identity which in stead becomes only a brand devoid of all content.



As a result some outstanding wines and regions are about to vanish. A move back to the autonomy of the profession of winemaker and the reintegration of knowledge into the community are therefore very desirable. The envisaged measures of the Convention give real chances for a sustainable future of wine growing regions. The widening of the certification process would reinforce the identity of the wine in the market and give the sense and dimension the consumer is waiting for. An exterior guarantor would play the role of a guide rail while giving ample value to the initiatives of the concerned winemakers. An initiative with a definite collective character, by its complexity and its targets.

Widening and solidarity

The wine community needs to be aware of the solidarity that is required and acknowledge its collective interest both within and over the boundaries of their own region to make this project a success. Some winemakers who understood the necessity of this have united themselves to defend the integrity of the authentic wines and not only the image of their own region. This important accomplishment that permits the creation of a collective pool of experience and knowledge might be a next step towards the convention. At the same time, privileged relations with research centres and universities would add a multidisciplinary and scientific approach. A number of studies have been realised already.

Even though the movement will be based on an European network, the local instead of a global approach is desirable. A focus on "The European Wine" would be too broad and risks being counter-productive to the central idea of striving for the protection of uniqueness and diversity. Besides, the inclusion of a large number of regions in the same project at the very beginning would imply complicated decision-making among actors whose interest and motives may differ. The emergence of projects based on local initiative and self-determination that can spark off projects at other areas seems to be the most flexible and efficient way to initiate the movement. A collective approach, for example a roads strategy, would be the final result of the success of these different initiatives.

Going to a new economy model

Solidarity, sharing of knowledge, a focus on local practices... these terms do not fit in the currently dominant theories of economics. But the weakness of the premises of this economic theory is beginning to show, especially in the food industry.

This initiative of the wine community toward Unesco will represent a voluntary return to an economy where necessary limits are put in place and where financial objective are made subordinate to more important objectives. An ethical economy assuring respect for the diversity of cultures. A responsible economy where actors, ranging from producers and distributors to consumers, guarantee sustainability. A return to the Greek sources of the term "economy" which stands for "administration of the house", or, in other words, of the heritage.

Fundamentally Unesco calls for such reforms when pointing to globalisation as a cause for the intangible heritage disappearing. Will we be able to hear this call in time ?