

Is organic production becoming a prerequisite for fine wine?

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By Arabella Mileham

A quick check of the wines in the Liv-ex Power 100 would suggest that many of the world's top wines on the secondary market are now organic. Arabella Mileham asks what is driving this trend, and if organic is becoming a prerequisite for fine wine.



According to French fine wine auctioneer iDealwine's recent annual Barometer, organic and biodynamic wine has also been "thriving" at auction over the past few years, with the rankings of the most expensive organic and biodynamic wines at auction bearing a "striking resemblance to the overall rankings of the highest-priced wines in 2022", particularly at the top of the list.

It showed that 15 of the top 20 highest-selling wines at auction in the Barometer came from Burgundy, along with two from Bordeaux (Château Palmer and Château Latour), however this the data reflects the growing demand for Burgundy rather than a specific consumer-led demand for organic wines – particularly as the region is by no means the largest or the most advanced in terms of organic production.

As iDealwine's co-founder Angélique de Lencquesaing notes, this trend "does seem to be more producer-driven", with a raft of high-end producers moving to organic production and many top producers, such as Leroy, Château Latour, and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti becoming certified as organic.

For example, in June, Burgundy's Maison Joseph Drouhin, which is aiming to be fully certified by 2028, announced it had started to convert the recently acquired Château de Chasselas in Saint-Véran to organic viticulture, while St Émilion grand cru Château Fleur Cardinale in Burgundy is also undergoing conversion, and is expected to be fully certified organic by 2024. The Vranken-Pommery group in Champagne is in the process of converting, while Champagne Telmont announced its aim to convert 100% of its cultivated areas, comprising both its own 24.5- hectare Telmont Estate vineyards (of which 72% is already certified) as well as those of its partner winegrowers, to organic agriculture by 2031.



Champagne Telmont's president, Ludovic du Plessis, explains that while converting Telmont's own estate to organic was relatively simple, the challenge facing all Champagne producers lies in persuading grower partners who supply grapes to also go organic as well, making it easier for up-and-coming grower Champagnes to do, given their control over their own supply. This is evidenced by the number of the top grower champagnes that are already organic, such as Cedric Bouchard, Ulysse Colin, and Frederic Savart, along with larger icons such as Louis Roederer's Cristal, and Leclercq Briant's Abyss.

But this also highlights a truism in that there is huge variation between wine-growing regions, with individual regions and producers facing very different climatic challenges when it comes to the implementing organic practices.

"For example, Burgundy is a region where the quality of terroir and microclimates makes up a great deal of the demand, yet organic production was still only found on 15% of the surface area as of 2020," de Lencquesaing explains, whereas "in Provence organic vineyards already represented over 43% of the total surface area."

"Burgundy's climate presents more challenges throughout the growing season than that of Provence, which helps explain the difference," she says.

For many organic producers, organic viticulture is synonymous with the idea of quality. Spanish wine producer Artadi sees the terroir as inextricably linked to soil health, and farming organically is key to this. As export manager Ana Rodríguez says: "Organic is not an argument, it is a must. If you want to get the profile and character of the wine, to have the possibility of a wine with respect, and to have 'honest' wines, then growing on an organic basis is a must."

Others, such as Olivia Bodle, global head of events at wine investment company Cult Wines, see more nuance in the argument. "I think that organic doesn't necessarily equal premium," she says. "There are other things which winemakers are doing which are much better for the environment, using products that they are still allowed to be used with organic certification. It's not necessarily making the biggest impact on the environment."

“For example, Château Cheval Blanc employs agro-forestry practices in its vineyard, which involves planting trees and bushes among the vines, which can have a positive impact on the water, climate and quality of the soil,” de Lencquesaing agrees.

At its most basic definition, organic production means the strict adherence of eschewing chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides, however the ethos tends to fit into the broader philosophy of sustainable agriculture, with a commitment to eradicate monocultures and introduce more regenerative farming practices including cover crops, hedges, and increasing biodiversity. “That is a huge step in the right direction,” Bodle argues. “It would be difficult to find a high-quality winemaker that does not take environmental concerns into account during the production of its wines.”

It is perhaps this complexity that makes some merchants and fine wine platforms apparently reluctant to build organic search facilities into their online platforms. The websites of Cult Wines, Bordeaux Index, Berry Bros. & Rudd and BBX, or Liv-ex, for example, do not have the option for consumers to search explicitly for organic wines.

“If you tried to buy only organic wine through Cult Wines, I think that you’d find it very difficult. The information is out there but determining the accuracy, and how accessible it is, is very challenging,” Bodle admits. “It’s very much on a region-by-region basis.”

“And where do we draw the line? Do they count as an organic producer because they’ve been following these principles for 15 years? Or do you only count the ones who have the certificate as a ‘bona fide’ organic producer?” she questions.

Bodle cites Château Montrose in Saint-Estèphe, which is in the process of converting to organic, noting that there is no mention of the word ‘organic’ on the producer’s profile, and out of 10 critics’ reviews, only James Suckling mentioned organic grapes. “The organic movement is very much being led by the producers in Bordeaux, and if merchants and critics aren’t mentioning it, then it’s not being passed on to consumers and it’s not on the radar of people who are buying wines en primeur.”

“But does converting to organic make the wines any better, or are producers already making the very best wine and they’ve just added another string to their bow?”

With such a layered debate around organics at the top end of the wine market, it seems likely that where the producers lead, the consumer will follow. As iDealwine concludes: “When it comes to dealing with the wines that attract the highest prices, organic or even biodynamic production methods are somewhat of a prerequisite.”

Organic producers in the Liv-ex Power 100

- Domaine Leroy, Burgundy – farmed organically and biodynamically from the start and now certified by Ecocert.
- Domaine Arnoux-Lachaux, Burgundy, Côte de Nuits – has used an organic and biodynamic approach to farming since around 2000. It has been certified since 2016.
- Domaine Leflaive, Puligny-Montrachet: grands crus are cultivated biodynamically, premiers crus and villages organically, without certification, because it “doesn’t hesitate to make a chemical treatment if necessary”.
- Domaine Armand Rousseau, Gevrey-Chambertin, Côte de Nuits – is noted for its dedication to organic farming and sustainable practices, which include using wild rather than cultivated yeasts.
- Domaine Prieuré Roch – “does not use any synthetic product in the vineyard (biodynamics) or in winemaking” but is not certified organic.

- Dom Pérignon – while neither organic or biodynamic, the Champagne house is reportedly making changes to work towards organic certification, including halting its use of herbicides.
- Louis Roederer – the Champagne house began biodynamic farming in 2000, and by 2021 more than half of its estates were certified as organic. 2012 was the first vintage of flagship cuvée Cristal to be produced entirely from biodynamically-grown grapes (though is not certified as such).
- Domaine De la Romanée-Conti – Since 1985, this Burgundy icon has practised organic farming in the vineyard, certifying as organic and biodynamic. Traditional winemaking methods are used, including the use of only natural yeasts.