



Combining research and practice to trigger change in French wine production

"I don't use any herbicides, none at all" a 'conventional' winegrower said at a local working group meeting. Initial reactions to this out-of-the-box idea were not what you could call positive, in fact the general feeling was relatively critical. This is a group which brings together winegrowers, researchers, advisors, nature conservation associations and other people from the supply chain and focuses on how to make wine production in the area more environmentally friendly. The group's policy is to always listen to and analyse every suggestion in detail using a specific method of collective participation for innovation. Even if the discussion which followed the no-herbicide comment started negatively, it went on to produce so much interest that the winegrowers made a collective decision to try out the approach.



A new plough at work: One of the approaches for soil maintenance used to replace herbicides

Adjusting to new demands

Consumers, people from the political, scientific and agricultural world, and society as a whole, are now looking to wine producers to move towards practices which use fewer chemical solutions. The implementation of national and European environmental programmes, and the rise in demand for healthier, greener (and organic) products, calls for action from wine producers.

Sharing knowledge and experience

In 2011 in the East of France, a group of 25 conventional, organic, and biodynamic winegrowers who were inspired by other nearby activities based on combining research and practice, decided to set up a working group to develop more environmentally friendly practices in wine-production with a focus on the health of the vine. The winegrowers invited researchers, advisors, nature conservation associations and other people from the supply chain to join. They began to hold meetings where each of the winegrowers tells 'stories' of their own experience of wine production and the stories are then analysed collectively by the other members. The group gained funding from the French ministry of ecology and sustainable development under the REPERE programme (*Réseau d'échange et de projets sur le pilotage de la recherche et de l'expertise*) and became the *Group REPERE-Westhalten*.

Involving different generations of winegrowers

Right from the beginning the group decided to also involve their parents, who are former winegrowers themselves. This was to bring a new or, rather, old perspective to the discussions, looking back to how they tackled weed problems with a long term view, at a time when there were very few herbicides.

Changing perspectives

Just at a moment when the members of this group had formed an effective group dynamic with some good results, the no-herbicide story temporarily changed the atmosphere. The winegrower who suggested not using any herbicides on the vines at all received quite a lot of criticism at first. But then he was given the opportunity to explain himself and he described how he had re-thought his whole approach to wine-growing, re-structuring the way he ran his farm. All because of a personal desire to use environmentally friendly practices...

Leading to an innovative holistic approach

An interesting exchange followed. The situation was completely turned around. The group made a collective decision to go down the same road as the winegrower and test a no-herbicide production system which was reinforced and diversified, thanks to the group's collective debate. In this new approach, instead of giving themselves the sole objective "to abandon herbicide use", their focus was "to protect the health of the vine" considering the vine itself, the soil, stopping weeds, and generally taking a holistic approach. They therefore had to accept being in a situation of uncertainty. In the changing context, they would have to adapt their management as necessary, while seeking advice, help, and solutions from the group. In the group, scientists and wine-growers develop new knowledge together to solve problems and truly change their approach to wine-growing.



Hieracium pilosella plants block weeds without competing with vines: One of the approaches for soil maintenance used to replace herbicides

Resulting in more environmentally-friendly winegrowing

Jean Masson, Director of research at INRA at the University of Strasbourg says "Thanks to the collective approach used, the group transformed conflicts and disagreement between the members into a strength, the cooperation and knowledge-sharing led to innovation and on a large scale". The collective power of the group meant that they were able to re-think long-standing practices in wine production and tackle existing obstacles to change. As a result, the winegrowers have already applied the no-herbicide approach to 40 hectares, a quarter of their land. The next stage is to implement the same innovation approach to achieve a significant reduction of synthetic fungicides. The winegrowers will also involve local people, and their general view on wine production, in re-thinking wine growing in the region.

This group which brings together research and practice is still going strong. The programme REPERE has now ended, but Westhalten, and other groups of wine-growers which were inspired by them and their collective approach, are now

supported by INRA (Institut national de la recherche agronomique, métaprogramme SmaCH ZINNLE, <http://www.smach.inra.fr/Toutes-les-actualites/Projets-SMaCH-2013>).

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