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A fight over land and livelihood in Tuscany

MONTALCINO, ITALY

Winemakers oppose plan that would limit use of fields to curb soil erosion

BY GAIA PIANIGIANI

Its gentle sloping hills, olive groves, cypresses and sunflower fields have made Tuscany a muse to writers and artists for centuries. But the region is equally renowned for its verdant vineyards and their wines, some of the most prized in Italy and the world.

So when Tuscany's regional government recently approved a new rural preservation plan, saying that too many vines had been planted and warning of the risks of soil erosion, winemakers did not take it lightly. In fact, the plan has set off something of a war here.

"We perceive it as a strong threat," said Patrizio Cencioni, producer of the Brunello wine "Capanna" in Montalcino and a third-generation winemaker. "Under the new plan, certain fields, like those lying on clay, could become off-limits to us."

Mr. Cencioni pointed to a nearby ochre-colored slope. "You see that?" he said. "I asked for the permits to plant a Sangiovese vineyard there a month ago. I don't know what is going to happen now."

Next week, wine producers will ask for parts of the plan to be scrapped, a move likely to open a new chapter in the heated debate.

"We do obey the laws," Mr. Cencioni said. "But we won't give up. People come to Montalcino for the landscape that our work has contributed to create."

Only about 8 percent of Tuscany's agricultural land is planted with vines. But the regional authorities fear the impact of high-intensity vine cultivation for both its possible pollution from fertilizer and pesticide runoff and its potentially destabilizing effect on the region's clay, sandstone and limestone hillsides, which help give wines their special flavor but are also especially delicate.

The new plan encourages growers to go back to pastures and fields when possible and discourages the creation of new vineyards in some areas. It also re-

commends a return to terracing to avoid the vertical rows of vines down hillsides that allow tractors and people to pass more easily but may contribute to landslides — an increasing problem in a number of winegrowing regions.

Last month, a flood in the northern region of Veneto claimed four lives, and critics pointed to the expanding vineyards of Prosecco as having destabilized steep slopes and inhibited their ability to absorb heavy rainfall.

Winegrowers here, who pride themselves on being sentinels of the land, fear that the push for new regulations not only threatens their land's recent profitability but also tries to turn back the clock.

While today the wines they produce are a \$1.5 billion industry, it was not long ago — even as late as the 1960s — that the families who lived here were mostly sharecroppers or subsistence farmers. Over the years, wine production became the most valuable agricultural activity, and many of the farmers who did not migrate to the cities, unlike so many others, stayed because of the business.

Fabrizio Bindocci, 59, president of the consortium of Brunello producers, is old enough to remember when the region was impoverished, and he insists that it is in the interest of the growers to preserve the land.

"We have vineyards with olive trees in between, we have a channel for the water at the bottom of every slope, we breed cows and clean up the countryside," said Mr. Bindocci, general director of Il Poggione, a vineyard that has belonged to the same family since the 1890s. "We care because we live off of this. This place is our identity."

Enrico Rossi, 56, president of the Tuscany region, said that he, too, could remember the old days, but added that his government had no intention of restoring an ancient Tuscan landscape. The goal, he explained, was to safeguard the region's heritage and enhance its sustainability and to better define the national laws on landscape protection, some dating back to the 1920s.

Tuscany is one of the first regions in Italy to have a database of protected areas with clear borders and regulations. Those rules used to be so vague that they spawned a tangle of interpretations and paradoxical enforcement at the provincial or municipal level, like allowing villas to be built on otherwise undisturbed beaches, while requiring the owner of a warehouse, in one notorious case, to apply for special approval to create an indoor window.

"We are applying and simplifying the

national laws that already existed," Mr. Rossi said. "This is transparency. It's a clarification, not a restriction or a vexation."

Such words have done little to reassure winegrowers, who fear the recommendations will confront them with yet another layer of onerous bureaucracy.

"The so-called guidelines leave room for any kind of interpretation by the local municipalities," Mr. Bindocci protested from his vineyards, where the harvest was delayed this year because of rains. "We spend the entire year trying to work as well as we can, acting with or against the force of climate and nature that can transform an excellent year into a good one. Now we have to battle with new norms, too?"

If it is any consolation, the debate over what kind of vineyards are most compatible with the environment has been taking place here since 1300, said Anna Marson, a council member who was the architect of the regional plan.

Indeed, in his frescoes from the 1330s known as the Allegory of Good and Bad Government, Ambrogio Lorenzetti depicted the Tuscan countryside with vines and olive trees circling the hills on terracing, trees, fields, cavaliers on horses and scarce housing.

"We don't want to hamper any change," Ms. Marson said from a 17th-century palazzo overlooking Filippo Brunelleschi's dome at the cathedral in Florence. "We want to channel it."

Mr. Cencioni, who runs a midsize vineyard in Montalcino, said winemakers were likely to continue resisting state-directed change, for reasons of both pride and profit. He has 65 hectares, or about 160 acres, 12 hectares of which are producing Brunello wine, but he would like to turn five hectares of fields northeast of Montalcino into a vineyard as well, to allow some of his most intensely cultivated fields to rest for a few years.

"If I can start planting Sangiovese vines here," he said, "I can avoid losing grapes for the years that I need to grow new vines. Otherwise, I will lose three to five years of production."

One year's production is worth \$100,000 to \$200,000.

"No one from Florence can tell us how to cultivate our land here," Mr. Cencioni said. "This is our land, the one we want to protect and leave to our children."



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PAOLO MARCHETTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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