

Wine war in Tuscany as growers warned that vines damage environment

Wine makers in Italy are up in arms at a regional government development plan, which warns that vines harm the environment and could usher in restrictions on the planting of new vineyards



Vineyards around Montalcino, Tuscany, Italy Photo: Alamy

By **Nick Squires**, Rome

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Tuscany would not be Tuscany without its gently sloping hillsides covered in rows of vines, but the region's winemakers have been warned that too many vineyards could damage the environment.

In what one newspaper described this week as a "wine war", Tuscany's regional government has told vintners that the use of pesticides and fertilisers can lead to the pollution of groundwater supplies and that too many vineyards could contribute to soil erosion and landslides.

The warning is contained in a 3,000-page development plan produced by the regional government which is now being studied by producers of Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino and the other prized wines for which Tuscany is famous worldwide.

The report warned that around the classic hilltop town of Montalcino, which produces the eponymous Brunello di Montalcino – regarded as one of **Italy's** finest wines – vineyards had increased the risk of erosion.

In the countryside around the village of Bolgheri, in the lowland Maremma region of Tuscany, "the aquifer is not protected and the intensive use of fertilisers has released nitrates into the groundwater," said Stefano Carnicelli, a scientist who contributed to the report.

The document, compiled by experts from the universities of Florence, Pisa and Siena, said that planting too many vineyards produced a "monoculture" that was unhealthy for the environment.

The row comes a month after a fatal flood in the Prosecco-producing region of northern Italy was blamed by some experts on woodland being cleared to make way for new vineyards.

Critics said the clearing of forested areas had made the region's hills less able to absorb heavy rainfall.

The debate was prompted by a violent storm which caused a river to burst its bank, sending a torrent of water through a local beauty spot and drowning four people.

"We're not trying to impose an outright ban on new vineyards, we're just saying that the impact of vineyards on the environment needs to be taken into account, particularly in the light of the floods in the Prosecco-producing area," a spokesman for the Tuscan regional government told The Telegraph.

"There's been an increase in recent years in the number of vineyards and the area under cultivation for wine."

But winemakers said they are more than capable of looking after a landscape that has bewitched foreigners, including British expatriates and second home owners, for decades.

They fear that the planning document could herald restrictions on the planting of new vineyards and the expansion of their estates, at a time when wine sales are booming, particularly in new markets such as China and other parts of East Asia.

"For us there is a harmonious bond between the production of wine and the countryside, and it's wrong to consider vineyards as a danger to the environment," Fabrizio Bindocci, the president of a consortium that represents producers of Brunello di Montalcino, told La Repubblica newspaper.

Supporters of the wine industry dismissed the report's warning that expanding vineyards threatened to diminish the region's biodiversity.

"People who come to Montalcino expect to see vineyards, not fields of wheat," said Silvio Franceschelli, the mayor of the town. "Wine tourism brings great benefits to this area – unemployment is close to zero."

Giovanni Busi, the president of a consortium of Chianti producers, said a vineyard could be worth up to 50,000 euros a hectare.

"You really think they would be planted if there was a risk of landslides?"