

# West-Vlaanderen Werkt

The pulse of the  
West Flemish economy

2025

**SPECIAL EDITION**  
**Viticulture**

West Flemish  
wineries are  
on the rise

Interviews with wine  
entrepreneurs

Viticulture focuses  
on sustainability

# West-Vlaanderen Werkt

## Special edition Viticulture 2025



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### Special thanks to

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Dear reader,

West Flanders has long been known as the agricultural province par excellence, but nowadays we are also increasingly becoming a true wine-growing province. What's more, nowhere else in Flanders is the growth in wine-growing area as strong as it is here, as shown by the sector study that you will find later in this magazine. In this special edition of West-Vlaanderen Werkt, we zoom in on the remarkable growth that has characterised the sector in recent years.

In this issue, we present a thorough sector analysis that clearly illustrates the state of the West Flemish wine-growing sector in figures. For example, the total wine-growing area in our province has more than tripled in the past six years. We also give many winegrowers themselves a chance to have their say. They talk about the advantages and disadvantages of growing wine in our region and about their unbridled passion for the profession.

You will also learn how farmers, entrepreneurs and hobbyists are professionalising, collaborating and focusing on "oenotourism", as wine tourism is also known.

We highlight the role of knowledge institutions such as Inagro, government subsidies and the recently created BelBul quality mark in the further development of this niche market.

Yet we certainly do not shy away from the challenges. Agricultural land is often expensive and scarce, and the Belgian wine sector is eagerly searching for its own identity. Finally, climate change is also a factor that is difficult to ignore. Surprisingly, however, it also offers some advantages for West Flemish winemakers.

This publication is intended to give the sector visibility and provide insight into the economic dynamics of West Flemish viticulture. We hope you enjoy reading it, and who knows, this edition may whet your appetite for more.

**Arno De Wispelaere**  
Editor-in-chief

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**Published by**  
Stijn Lombaert, provincial clerk, Provinciehuis Boeverbos, Koning Leopold III-laan 41, 8200 Sint-Andries (Bruges)

**Design and printing:** Digital Design & Production Section, Province of West Flanders

**Other photo sources for this special edition**  
Entre-Deux-Monts Winery, Hoogenhove Winery, Ravenstein Winery, Sentier 74 Winery

**Cover photo:** Hoogenhove Winery, Thomas Moens Photography



# West Flemish vineyards tripled since 2018

Tanja Termote, policy officer Data & Analysis, Province of West Flanders

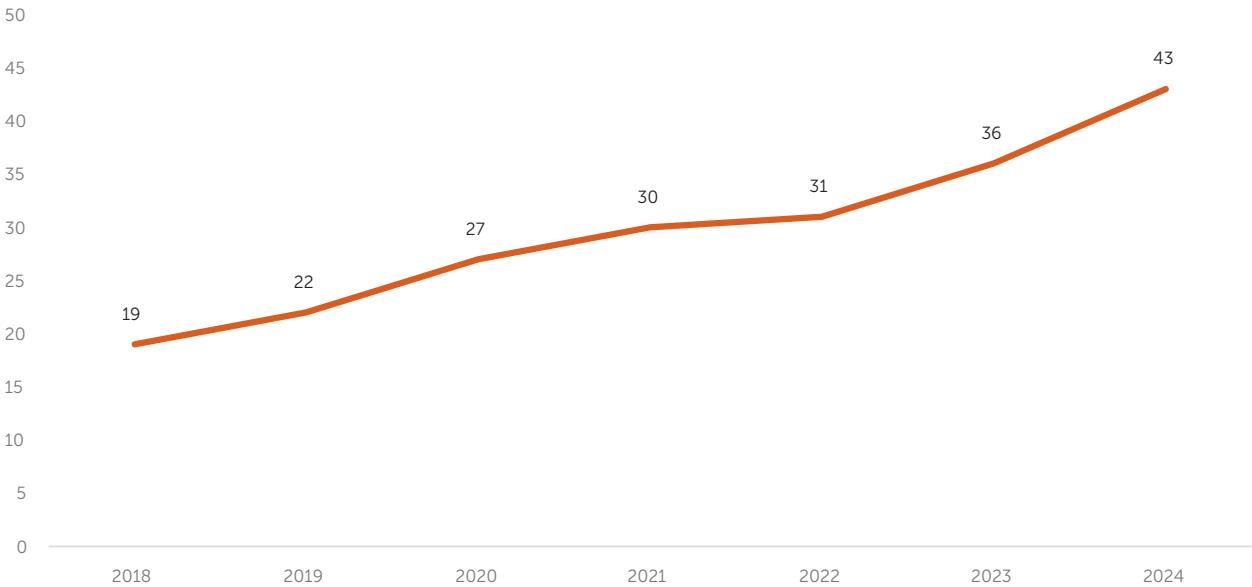
West Flanders makes delicious wine. Three West Flemish wines were recently awarded a Belgian Wine Award, Gault&Millau's biggest accolade. West Flemish wines also regularly win prizes at renowned wine competitions. In this sector analysis, we highlight the size of the wine sector in West Flanders, a still small sector in full growth, where quality takes precedence over quantity.

The number of West Flemish wine growers is growing year after year. In 2018, the Federal economic department had 19 winegrowers registered in West Flanders. That number rose to 43 in 2024 (Figure 1). These are all winegrowers for whom winegrowing is a commercial activity and thus do not make wine just for their own consumption. Both professional and semi-professional winegrowers are included in the figures. We find West Flemish wine estates all over the province, but there is a concentration in Heuvelland. Since 2005, Heuvelland has been officially recognised as a wine-growing region with a PDO quality label (PDO stands for 'protected designation of origin'). The slopes and unique soil composition with iron sandstone make Heuvelland a favourable location for viticulture.



Dirke Talpe, wine domain Ravenstein. © Ravenstein

Figure 1: Evolution of the number of wine growers in West Flanders, 2018-2024



Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.

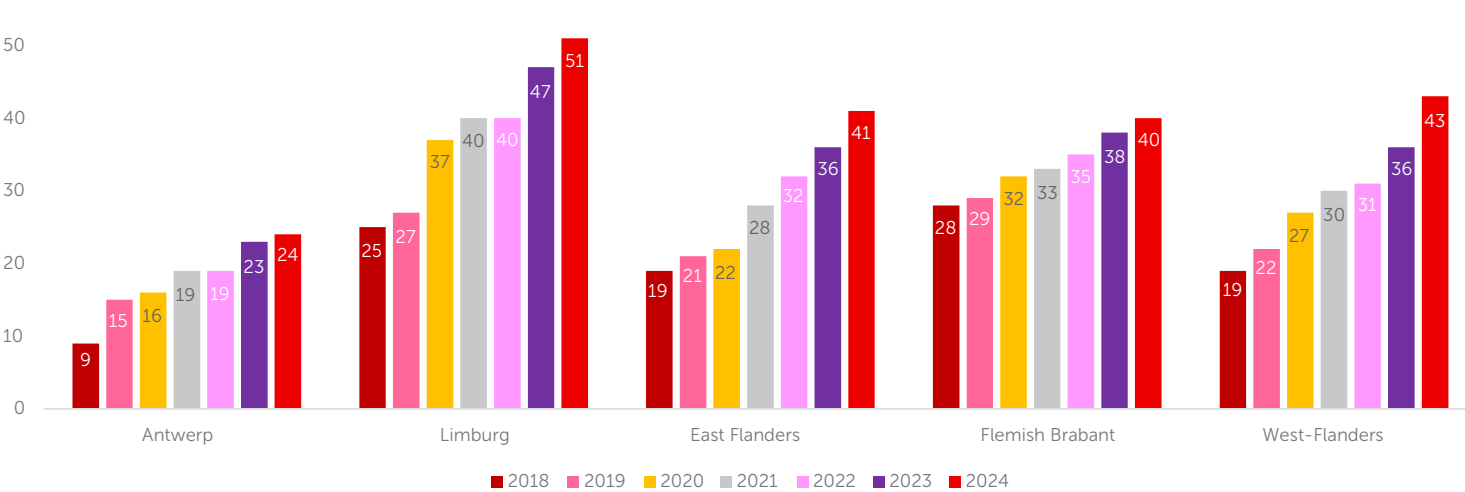
There were 199 wine growers in the Flemish Region in 2024. The largest number (51) can be found in Limburg. West Flanders ranks second with 43 winegrowers, closely followed by East Flanders (41) and Flemish Brabant (40). The province of Antwerp has 24 winegrowers. Until 2023 Flemish Brabant had slightly more winegrowers than West Flanders (Figure 2). A similar upward trend can be seen in the number of hectares planted for viticulture. In 2024, 142 hectares were

planted with vines in West Flanders compared to 43 hectares in 2018 (Figure 3). In no other Flemish province is the area for viticulture growing as strongly as in West Flanders. As a result, the planted area in West Flanders in 2024 was almost as large as in Limburg, while Limburg still had more than twice as much planted area as West Flanders in 2018 (Figure 4). In 2024, the Flemish region had 489 hectares of land used for viticulture. In 2018, it was only 235 hectares.



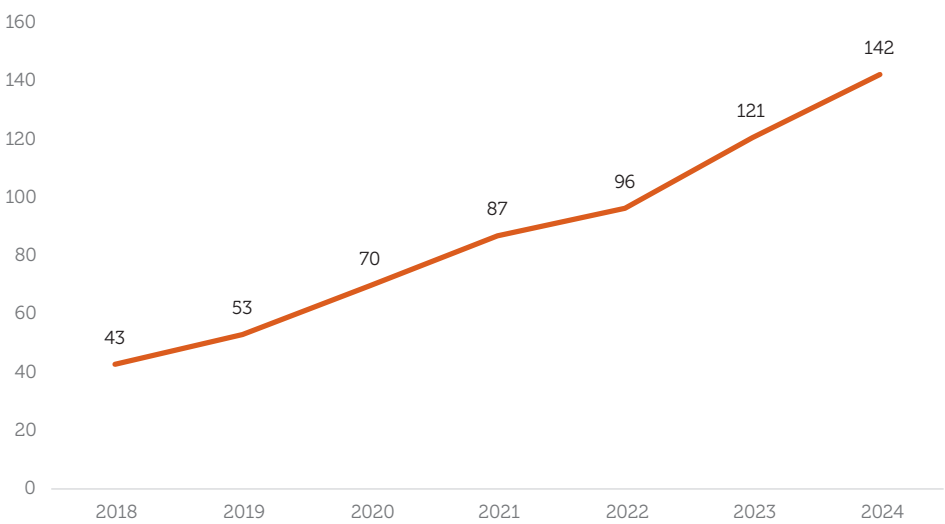
© Filip Lanszweert

Figure 2: Evolution of the number of winegrowers in the Flemish provinces, 2018-2024



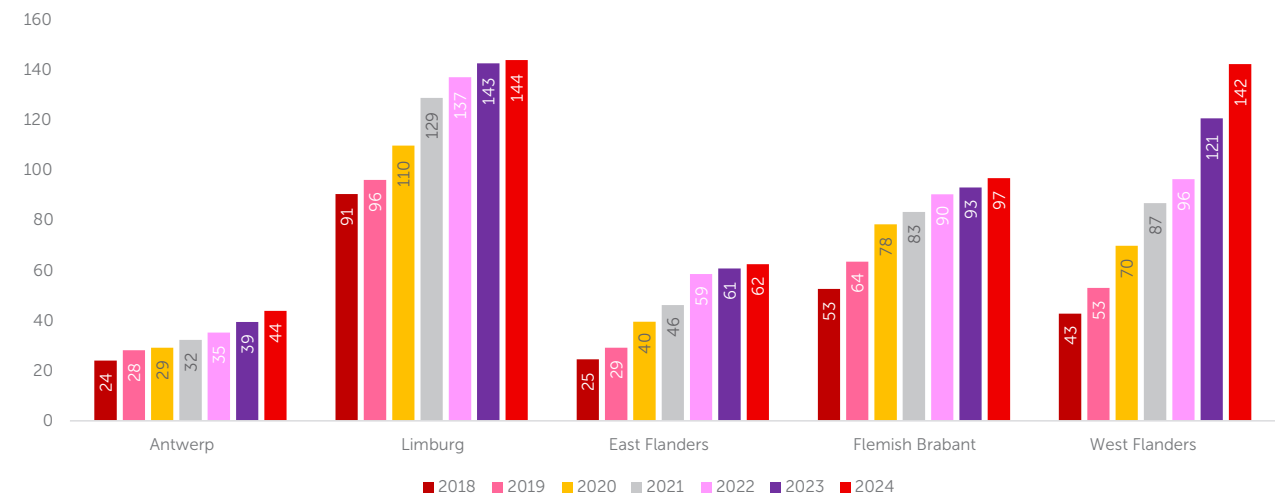
Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.

Figure 3: Evolution of the number of hectares planted in West Flanders, 2018-2024



Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.

Figure 4: Evolution of the number of planted hectares in the Flemish provinces, 2018-2024



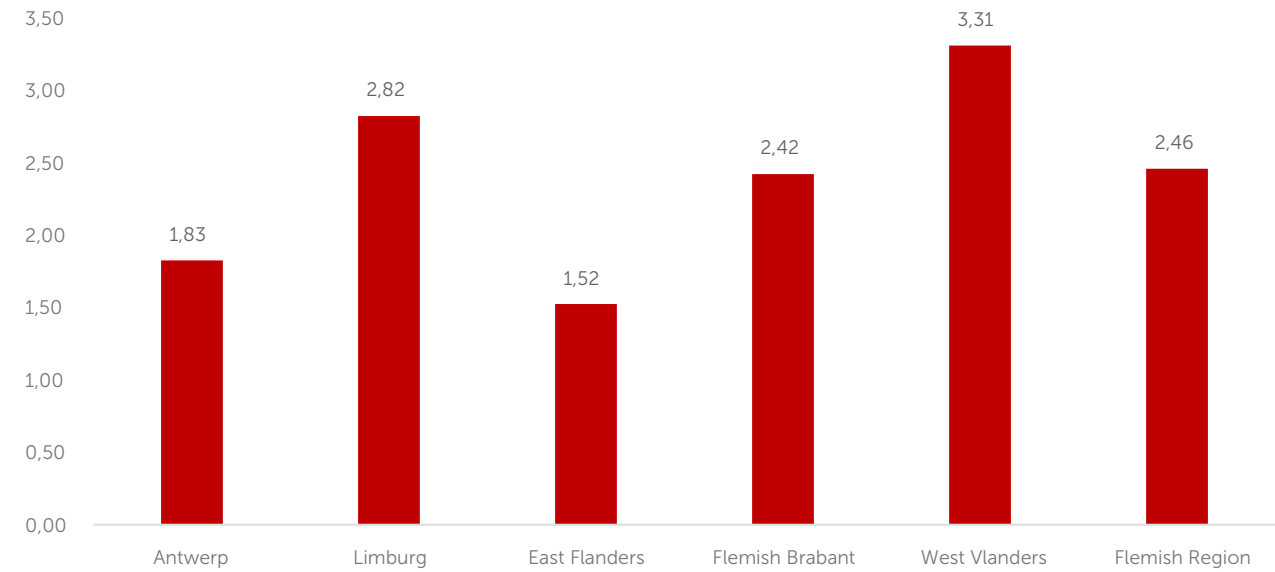
Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.

In 2024, an average of 3.31 hectares per winegrower were planted with vines in West Flanders. In the Flemish Region, that average is slightly lower, at 2.46 hectares per vintner. Especially in the province of East Flanders, the average planted area per winegrower is low (1.52) (Figure 5). "In Belgian viticulture, it is assumed that a minimum of 3 hectares is necessary to make viticulture possible

as a main occupation," says Koenraad Marchand of Wijnbouwers Oost-West, a non-profit organisation for winegrowers from the East and West Flanders. "Below 3 hectares, you mostly see wine growers in a secondary occupation. The fact that West Flanders scores above that 3ha limit on average shows that the professionalisation trend is definitely present among us."

Although the number of wine growers and the land used for viticulture in West Flanders have shown a continuous, strong increase in recent years, production has had a much more erratic evolution. In a number of years, the number of litres of wine produced fell compared to the previous year (figure 6). This has everything to do with the weather conditions in these years.

Figure 5: Average number of planted hectares per wine grower in the Flemish provinces, 2024

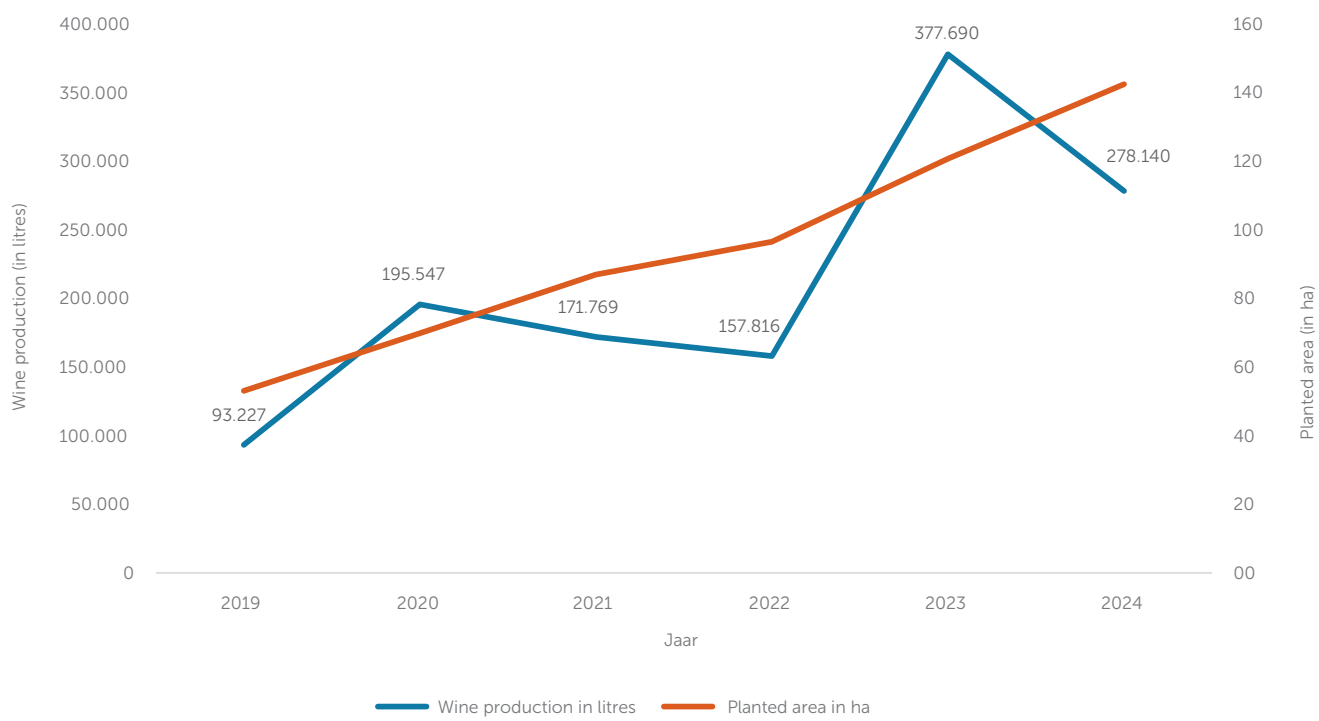


Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.



In 2024, for instance, we experienced a very wet spring and were still confronted with night frosts at the end of April, resulting in the loss of new shoots and a sharp drop in production in all Flemish provinces.

Figure 6: Total wine production and planted area in West Flanders



Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.



In 2024, 278,140 litres of wine was produced in West Flanders, that amounts to 1,954 litres per hectare. Of all the Flemish provinces, West Flanders had the highest wine production. However, production was almost 100,000 litres lower than in 2023, down 26.4%. But the percentage drop was much smaller in West Flanders than in the other Flemish provinces, where it fluctuated between 56.7% in East Flanders and 83% in the province of Antwerp (Figure 7). "This has to do with the moderating influence of the North Sea," says Koenraad Marchand. "An effect that plays much less in the province of Antwerp and Limburg."

Of the 278,140 litres of wine produced in West Flanders, 137,833 litres, or about half, are white wine and 89,555 litres, or about a third, white sparkling wine. The vast majority of West Flanders wine production is thus white wines (81.8%). 7.1% of the wine produced is sparkling rosé, 5.6% is rosé and 5.6% is red (Figure 8). The other Flemish provinces also produce mainly white wine (Figure 9).

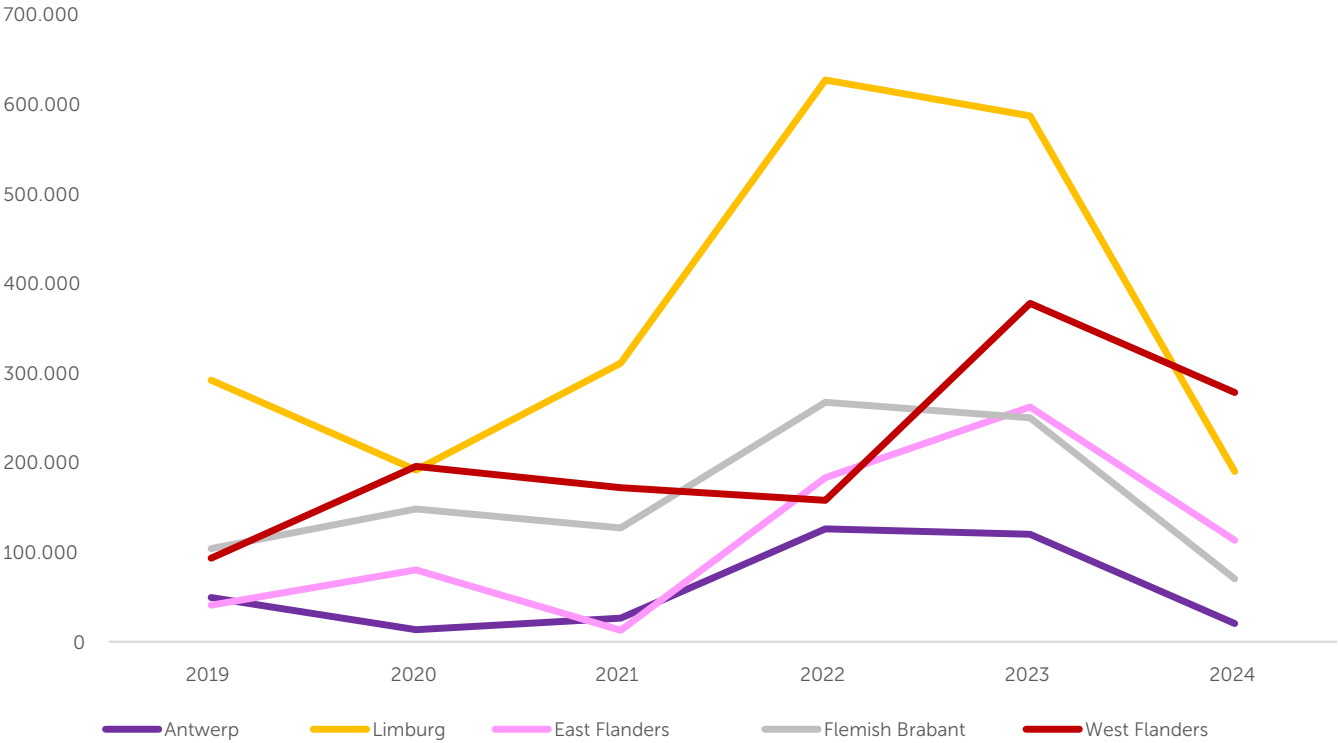
In Flemish Brabant, 84.9% of production is white or sparkling white, in East Flanders 83.8%, in Limburg 81.6% and in Antwerp 74.5%.

In 2024, a total of about 672,000 litres of wine (or 6,720 hectolitres) was produced in the Flemish region and about 1.2 million litres (or 12,000 hectolitres) in Belgium. This is very little compared to countries like Italy and France, the two countries with the largest wine production in the world. Italy produced a whopping 44.1 million hectolitres of wine in 2024 and France 36.1 million hectolitres. The total production of all vineyards in the world is 225.8 million hectolitres of wine (according to figures from the international wine organisation OIV). West Flemish winegrowers, and by extension Flemish and Belgian ones, have a very limited share of that. West Flemish winegrowers do not aim for quantity, but rather for a high-quality regional product in which they also focus on offering a total experience around winegrowing.



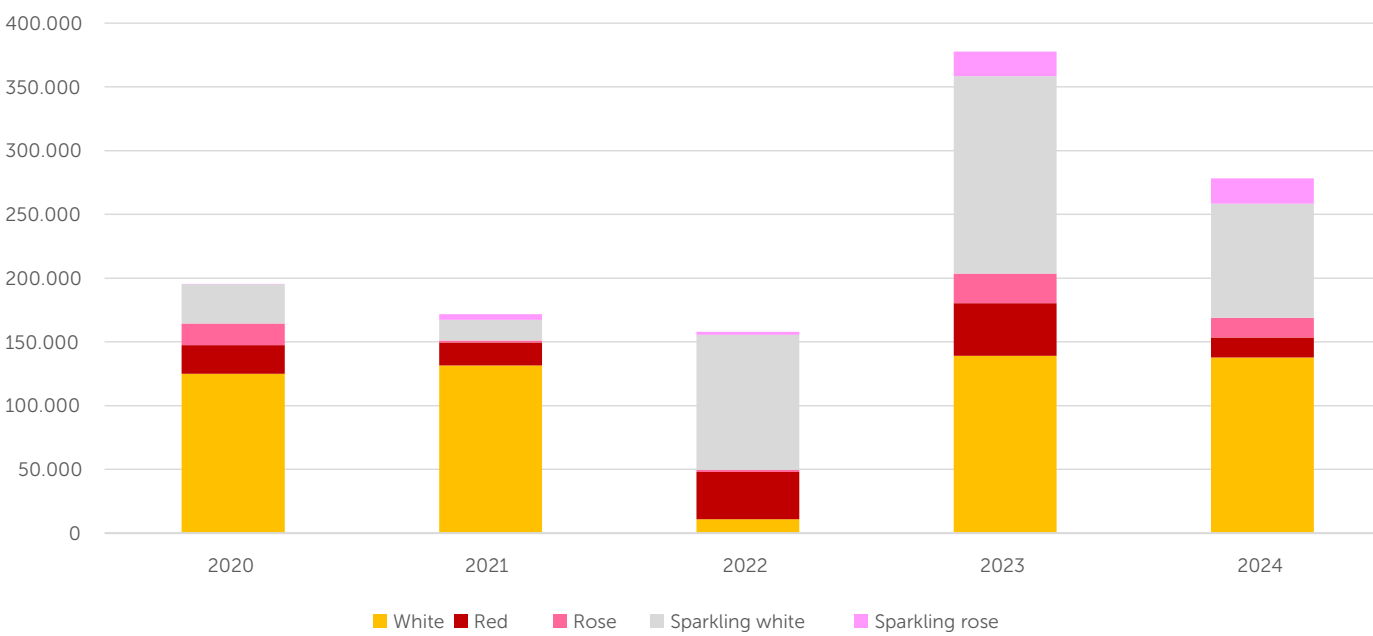
Emiel Everaert, wine maker at wine domain Hoogenhove.  
© Wijndomein Hoogenhove, Thomas Moens Photography

Figure 7: Number of litres of wine produced in the Flemish provinces, 2019-2024



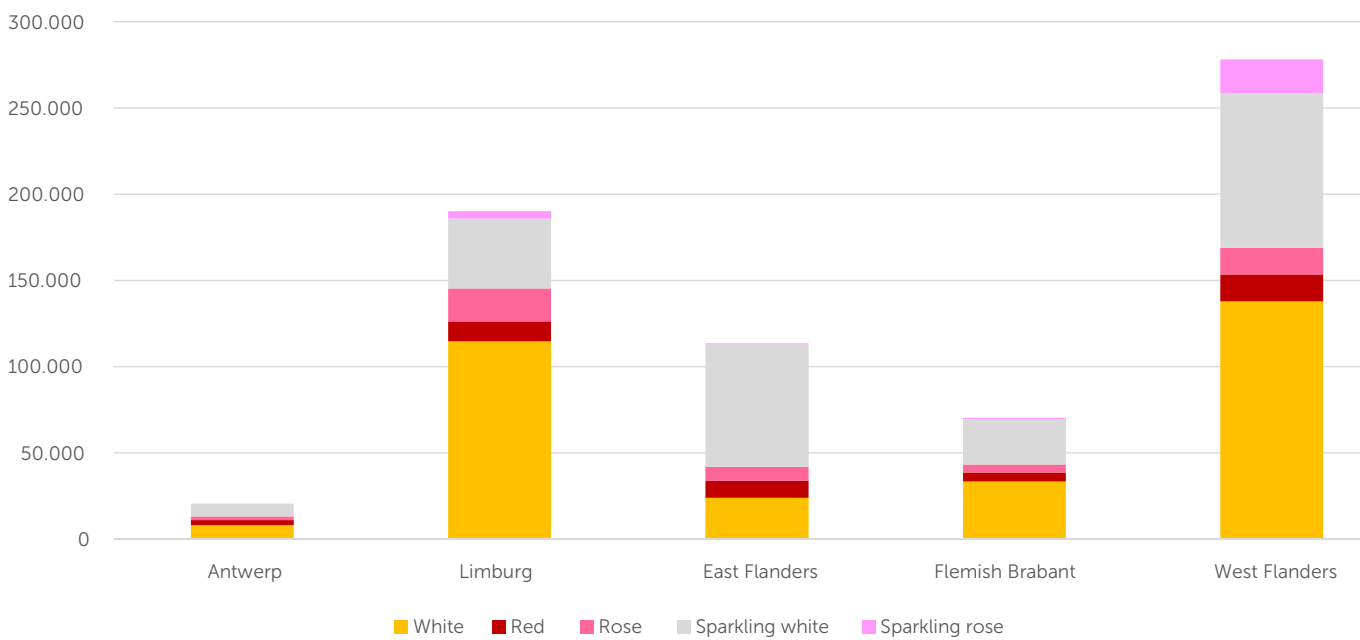
Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.

Figure 8: Number of litres of wine produced in West Flanders, by type of wine, 2020-2024



Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.

Figure 9: Number of litres of wine produced in the Flemish provinces, by type of wine, 2024



Source: Federal economic department, processing: Data & analysis, Province of West Flanders.



Dirk Talpe and Patricia Lenoir, Ravenstein wine estate

# "We aim to cultivate according to nature's way"

Christina Van Geel, Voice & Pen

The Ravenstein wine estate of Dirk Talpe and Patricia Lenoir is located on the southern flanks of the Amerikaberg in Kruiseke (Wervik), with stunning views over the valley of the Leie. Originally, Dirk and Patricia ran an ecological florist's shop but they retrained as winegrowers a couple of years ago. In 2024, Ravenstein received the 100% West Flemish quality label. Sustainability, passion and experience are at the heart of everything Dirk and Patricia do. With love and craftsmanship, they make quality wines and invite visitors into their story. A itinerary starting in the vineyard and ending in the glass.

**Dirk:** I remember cycling around the region as a young lad and thinking, "We're a stone's throw from the French border here. How come there are no vines here?" Becoming a wine grower myself was not a concrete plan then. But how to turn a simple fruit into a tasty drink did intrigue me. As a child, for instance, I once tried to make wine from rhubarb. That failed miserably (laughs). I had bottled the wine and stored it in our cellar. Towards the end of the summer, it got warmer and warmer in the cellar and the wine started fermenting. I probably hadn't sealed the bottles properly, because one night the corks flew off with a huge bang. My mother thought 'the Germans' had invaded again. Our cellar reeked of that rhubarb wine for months. I had to promise my parents never to try anything like that again (laughs).

My parents were dairy farmers. But I was always more into plants. From childhood, I was sowing flowers and taking cuttings. As a little boy, I collected seeds of marigolds. I planted those seeds and every day I went to see how they sprouted and grew. So it was predestined that I would do horticultural studies. I am one of those people who is said to have 'green fingers', whereas actually they are brown. There is always soil under my nails. I feel at home in nature.

## From florist to wine estate

**Patricia:** My father was a cattle trader. But I was afraid of cows. So I was over the moon when Dirk announced that he didn't want to take over his parents' dairy farm (laughs). The very day I met Dirk, he said, "I'm going to start my own business, take it or leave it." Being his own boss really was his life goal.

Dirk: Entrepreneurship is in my blood, that's the truth. I like to do my own thing. I won't tolerate anyone looking down on me and telling me what to do. After horticultural school, I set up Floristry Talpe together with Patricia. That was our first 'baby'. In fact, plants are not that different from animals: they both need your care. You live with the seasons and you work with the elements of nature. You run a business, but a living one. It's a very natural yet intense existence.

As entrepreneur one is always looking for new opportunities and challenges. And on the 5th of May 2017, we planted our first vine. I remember it well, it was a sunny Friday. We were Wervik's first professional winegrowers. It took three years for our production to take off. We expanded the wine estate and gave up floristry. A compromise between our craft and the good life. We converted my father's former cowshed into a tasting room. So breaking the promise to my parents, I started making wine again.

But this time I was prepared (laughs).

## We borrow the land from our children

**Dirk:** My knowledge of nature comes in handy for winemaking. I know every bird that flies around here. I know the danger as well as the usefulness of insects in our vineyard. Many winemakers see an insect and immediately whip out the pest control. While that insect could just as well be a natural enemy of another, harmful insect. For instance, parasitic wasps, ladybirds, dragonflies and hoverflies are very useful insects. You shouldn't simply exterminate them. Nature guides me in growing wine. "With respect for nature" was also our florist's slogan. We've always done it that way.

"Wine growers are still very much experimenting, which explains why Belgium does not have a wine identity yet."

Dirk Talpe

As a wine grower, I want to walk around on my property without feeling that I am harming nature. Our wine boxes say, "We don't inherit the land from our parents, we borrow it from our children". That is important. That life remains possible when we are gone.

**Patricia:** Making wine in itself is not difficult if you have good grapes. And for that you need to befriend nature, constantly anticipating it. You will never succeed in manipulating nature. You will always lose that battle. Nature always wins. Our work in the morning is determined by the barometer. You have to be flexible and, weather permitting, change your schedule completely when needed.

## The potential of a beautiful wine country

**Dirk:** The Belgian climate is cooler than, say, France's or Spain's, and this has implications for viticulture. Our climate is

ideal for white and sparkling wines with lots of aromas. Pinot and chardonnay are varieties that thrive here. We need to respect that. You shouldn't try planting southern varieties like tempranillo or shiraz here. The chances of success are slim. Yet those varieties are sometimes cultivated.

Growing wine has become a hype. Belgian wine growers are still experimenting, which means that a national wine identity does not yet exist. In Burgundy, you find chardonnay and pinot noir. In Bordeaux, you find merlot, cabernet franc and sauvignon. You know what wines those regions are known for. In Belgium, we cultivate approximately 70 different varieties of vines. Everyone searches and tries. As a result, our country is not (yet) visible on the international trade market. What makes for a typical Belgian wine? It takes time and expertise to build a strong Belgian identity.

## The magic of terroir

**Dirk:** More and more the importance of terroir matters to me. It's a complex concept, impossible to translate. Terroir is soil, location, habitat, weather and climate, and the way you deal with those and everything nature gives you as a winemaker. In tasting our wine, the terroir is very clear. We mow and hoe the soil so no soil herbicides are necessary. By planting mixed hedges, we give shelter to the natural enemies of harmful insects. People are often surprised by the minerality you taste in our wine, while our vines are still young. The reason is our 200% respect for our terroir.

"The border for making good wine keeps shifting northwards."

Patricia Lenoir



**Patricia:** When you smell our soil, you smell living soil. And in our wine, you taste nature. It's quite magical: when you make wine from apples, you taste apples. Wine made from rhubarb, tastes like rhubarb. But wine made from grapes, tastes of all kinds of things. Herbs, flowers, tropical fruit, ... People sometimes say, "I taste mango. So do you put mango in your wine?" No, of course we don't put mango in it. That's the magic of terroir!

**Dirk:** We lack professional winemaking courses in Belgium. Completing an 80-hour course gets you a wine farmer's certificate. That's how the craft is lost. I retrained as a wine grower via a three-year course at Syntra West. And I am still learning every day through additional courses, books and conversations with winegrowers. You can't do it with enthusiasm alone.

Without proper knowledge, many vineyards are planted for emotional reasons, often on a totally unsuitable terroir, often by people with money. They think a vineyard would look nice along their driveway. But you make good wine with good grapes, not with money. And those good grapes require knowledge, patience and craftsmanship.

**A mood board full of future plans**  
**Dirk:** I have a curious mind. I am constantly looking for what could be done differently and better. I'm currently reading a book on viticulture in Belgium during 1852. Certain methods from then are now out of use. Is this because the climate has changed, or because they have become too expensive or have fallen out of fashion? In my vineyard, I have just planted two historic grape varieties. One is from 800 AD and was rediscovered in Germany in the early

2000s. If it has lasted this long, it must be a very tough variety. There have been climate changes in the past. Breeds that survived, may well be the answer to today's climate change. This year, for the first time, we will have a limited harvest of that historic variety. I am very curious to see the result.

I will never see all my dreams come true. That is the nature of entrepreneurship, there is always another or a further goal. You have to keep thinking ahead, improving, reinventing yourself. In my office a mood board with all future plans is on display. Our daughter dreams of having her own restaurant on the estate. I would love to have a real wine cellar. Nature willing, we will enjoy some very nice (wine) years ahead.

# Martin Bacquaert, wine estate Entre-Deux-Monts

Christina Van Geel, Voice & Pen

On the sloping flanks between Rodeberg and Zwarteberg, right in the heart of Heuvelland, wine grower Martin Bacquaert has a mission: to grow the best possible Belgian wines, in all modesty and with deep respect for nature and climate. Three generations Bacquaert stand at the cradle of wine domain Entre-Deux-Monts: grandfather Jean, father Yves and (grand)son Martin. Authentic West Flemish entrepreneurial DNA that fizzes like a fresh sparkling Belgian wine.

## A maturing passion

Already as a child, I was fascinated by nature. I went exploring through fields and hills near Vlamertinge, the village I grew up in. Or I went camping in the wild with friends. From an early age, I was interested in everything to do with plants, soil and climate. I was not predestined to become a wine grower, but I knew I would work with nature. That was my childhood dream. Apparently I was also very interested in my mother's cooking pots. I obviously had a strong fascination for flavours and aromas.

I studied to become a bio-engineer, the study of living sciences. Bio-engineering is the study of animals, plants and micro-organisms and their interaction with the environment. This type of knowledge comes in handy as a wine grower. Before I went into wine, my father already owned a small wine business. During my studies, I went grape-picking in the Bordeaux region with a supplier and friend of his. This friend clearly saw something in me and I was allowed to help him making wine. During an Erasmus year in southern Spain, I ended up in the middle of grapevines in Cordoba. The local viticulture fascinated me. There I realised that growing wine actually complemented my studies as well as my love of nature. The seed might have been planted much earlier, but then the passion had begun to blossom. After my studies, I specialised in Oenology, the science of wine, in

Montpellier, France. There, I also learned to drink wine. Fellow students were experimenting with their own brews, a very interesting experience (laughs).

## A gentle but decisive push

I didn't think about growing wine in Belgium back then. I was going to move south, to Spain, Chile or even Australia. I would work on a large wine estate there and develop new flavours or optimise existing ones. That was the plan. But surely the ultimate dream of a student in viticulture is to make his own wine. And thanks to my grandfather, I was given that opportunity. Halfway through the last century, my grandfather had managed to buy a beautiful piece of land, located on the sloping flanks between Rodeberg and Zwarteberg. Ideal for viticulture.

Spurred on by my father Yves, we planted our first thousand vines in 2004. My father never pushed me to become a wine grower myself. But he sensed my passion and gave me a gentle but decisive push in the right direction. At our first harvest in 2008, it became clear that my grandfather Jean's terroir had the right qualities to make Entre-Deux-Monts into a fine wine estate. The grapes were of excellent quality. The result was a wine that connected three generations.

## Pioneering in the Hill Country

Entrepreneurship is clearly present in our genes. My father, for instance, had always dreamed of planting a vineyard

on his father's land. And along the way, I started dreaming along with him. His support and encouragement were important, because building up a wine estate in Belgium is not simple or without risk. Those first years were a serious learning curve for me. First, one has to invest a lot and exercise patience before reaping the rewards of all your efforts. It's important to keep believing in yourself and the project you have in mind.

We were pioneering. We may not have been the first winemakers in the area, but there were no authorities and hardly any fellow winemakers we could turn to for advice. There were moments of doubt, I felt alone at times. Before the first real harvest, the hard work and big investment is not particularly motivating either. Will the grapes ripen nicely, will I be able to produce a good wine and will I be able to sell it? Will it all be profitable? A genuine struggle with a lot of questions and uncertainties.

As a winemaker, you need to know your way around. From choosing your terroir and your vines, to the whole chemical process of winemaking, to finally marketing your wine. From the plant in the field to the bottle you sell, quite some boxes have to be ticked. If you want to live off the proceeds of your wine estate, you certainly shouldn't underestimate that last step. A bad wine doesn't sell, that's a fact. But a good wine is no guarantee of success either,



Dirk Talpe(left): "An entrepreneur is always looking for new opportunities and challenges. This is how we became the first professional wine farmers in Wervik."



if you don't market it well. Of course, all these different aspects make wine growing incredibly fascinating. And fortunately I now have a strong team of seven people around me, each with their own expertise.

With modest pride

We make wine with modest pride. We are proud of our grapes and of our wine, of where we are today. But we remain subdued and modest, with our feet firmly on the ground, because some things are out of our control. We control and influence what we can. But weather and climate are not to be controlled.

In recent years, we faced increasing challenges due to the capriciousness of nature. Exceptional drought and heat, extreme rainfall, wind, frost and hail are external factors that must be taken into account more and more. This summer, for example, there were fierce hailstorms in Germany. These pose big risks for viticulture. You can only hope to be spared from them.

Advantageous climate

The proximity of the North Sea and the almost constant wind ensure that extreme temperature differences are rare on the slopes between Rodeberg and Zwarteberg. Yet in the back of our minds we do take climate change into account, we have to. A cool climate like ours is perfect for making sparkling wines.

The classic, more southern wine regions are gradually getting into trouble, it is getting too dry and too hot for making fine wines. More and more water is needed, which at the same time is becoming increasingly scarce. At some point, no water will be available for certain wine regions because priority will be given to the more essential agricultural crops. This will not happen here. As a nature enthusiast, I find it contradictory that climate change could have a positive impact on the quality of



Martin Bacquaert: "Wine tells you the story of a whole year's work. A story of pruning, weeding, mowing, harvesting, ripening, fermenting and bottling." © Entre-Deux-Monts

our still wines. For the planet, climate change has a negative spin. But purely from a cultivation point of view, we do not experience any disadvantages.

Belgian bubbles

Belgium has the potential of becoming a small and fine, quality wine country. Perhaps comparable to a country like Austria. And then mainly for bubbles. There has been modest attention in Belgium from abroad. That attention is now being fuelled by BelBul, a

collective name for Belgian sparkling wines. In France you have Champagne, in Spain cava, in Italy prosecco. BelBul is the hallmark for Belgian sparkling wines made according to the 'méthode traditionnelle'. The label stands for superior quality and local craftsmanship. It applies strict criteria regarding origin, production methods and quality, and offers consumers the guarantee that they are choosing a Belgian sparkling wine of exceptional quality.

This collective name also helps winemakers raise their profile at home and abroad. As a wine country, we could easily be more chauvinistic. We see that Belgian customers reach for foreign bubbles in restaurants too easily. Really, we should be more proud of our Belgian quality.

Connecting with nature

Our country has more and more good winegrowers, although we notice that this trend is gradually stagnating. That's a good thing, quantity should not overshadow quality. Soon we will have reached a national production of five million bottles, quite a lot for a small country like Belgium.

Some people start growing wine for romantic reasons. But making wine is

more than posting a moody bistro table at sunset on Instagram. You need be well informed before you start. It requires blood, sweat and sometimes tears. Wine making is a craft and a passion, not an exact science. Joy and sadness alternate. It is hard work, but there is also enjoyment.

I love walking among our vines. There are few professions where you are closer to nature. Last summer, I went camping among the vines with two friends and our children. That is bonding with nature and with each other, blissful!

A story in itself

Wine is a fantastic product. When you taste wine, you taste the past. You taste the terroir of the year before. This summer, we bottled the 2024

wine. That wine tells you the story of a whole year's work. A story of pruning, weeding, mowing, harvesting, ripening, fermenting and bottling. We share that story with the people who come to visit us. That glass of wine we present to them is a story in itself.

My grandfather died two years before the first vines were planted. He was my godfather, we had a unique bond. His love for nature and for a good glass of wine is something I share with him. It is very sad that he will never know the many beautiful things growing on his land every year. But his DNA lives on in the wine we produce every year with all our passion.

Martin Bacquaert: "I love walking among our vines. There are few professions where you are closer to nature." © Entre-Deux-Monts





Scale, collaboration and offering a total experience drives winegrowing in West Flanders

# “We are performing better and better in terms of value for money”

Bart Vancauwenberghe, freelance journalist

West Flanders viticulture is young but growing fast. Entrepreneurs are switching to more professional vineyards, seeking economies of scale while at the same time betting on quality and wine tourism or 'wine tourism' by offering clients a total experience. Their stories show the challenges of expensive land and labour-intensive work, but also the power of collaboration, innovation and support from partners and government. "This is how the sector is gaining recognition and growth perspective," say the West Flanders wine growers we spoke to.

Carine Hoedt and husband Wendy Vanhecke started their own brasserie and tearoom in Beselare in 2010. "When we raised the standard of business to restaurant quality, I felt it was essential to be able to better inform people about our wine list" says Carine Hoedt. "For that reason, I took a sommelier course in 2011. This was also a real turnaround for me personally as I had never drunken alcohol until then. Just at that time West Flanders winegrowing was starting to grow steadily."

Hoedt's interest grew. Together with her husband she started planting 119 vines in the restaurant's garden in 2021. "These initially had a decorative function. In the meantime, our site in Beselare has become a magical place, because two other winegrowers have started vineyards around our property. Wine & Dine Merlin is now literally among the vineyards. There is really no better statement indicating the growth of this niche sector in our province."

## Career switch

Marc Dewulf is also writing a remarkable story with Mikken Urban Winery. "In 2017, I took a course at Syntra West to become a wine grower and winemaker,"

he says. "Initially this was mainly a hobby which I was able to bring to life on a 2,500-square-metre plot in Moorslede. When we had the opportunity to buy additional land and grow the vineyard to one hectare during the corona period, we eagerly took advantage of it."

"At that time, I was still working as a client manager for large clients in the pharmaceutical sector," Marc Dewulf continues. "When the corona virus was under control, the combination of having a full-time job and a part-time job on the side became unsustainable and I decided to focus completely on the wine sector. With 6,000 bottles annually, I do earn a living with Mikken, but the main source of income is Ardennesque. That one-man business focuses on the import and distribution of winemaking equipment and harvest containers for the Belgian market. My sales experience and strong bilingualism come in handy here, especially now that many people in Wallonia are also turning to winemaking."

## Perception changes

In West Flanders, 43 professional winemakers represent 142 hectares of vineyards. Dewulf: "You have to be bitten by the bug, because the winegrowing

business is subject to a lot of challenges like climate change, the unpredictability of the weather and the capital-intensive nature of the profession. If you already have land available it is still doable, but the scarcity of land makes every square metre you still have to buy incredibly expensive. In Wallonia it is a bit easier, because you have more contiguous vineyard plots there and there is less fragmentation than in Flanders."

To put the sector more prominently on the map investing in brand awareness and promotion is capital. "Everything is about perception," Carine Hoedt says. "Ten years ago people barely knew West Flemish wines existed. You can only change that feeling by putting wines from your own region on the menu as a restaurateur, which unfortunately is not yet the case everywhere. The sector has had its growing pains - the quality back then was not what it is today - but a lot of progress has already been made."

The Wine Moments with Carine, every first Wednesday evening of the month at WijnResto Merlijn, are the best example. "During these Wine Moments we organise a challenge for the participants where we weigh up a number of wines

from a specific wine country against West Flemish wines during a blind tasting. We notice that the products from our region score very well every time."

## The bar is set high

It shows that the bar is already set very high, Marc Dewulf also says. "In terms of quality many wines from our province are no longer inferior to foreign products. People appreciate that quality and have no problem paying a bit more for it. At the moment, our products are inevitably slightly more expensive than wines made abroad on a much larger scale - 'mass is cash' - but in terms of value for money we are scoring better and better."

A lot of knowledge has been acquired in a relatively short period of time. "Ardennesque and other distributors of necessary materials have an important function in this by providing wine growers with targeted information. We

notice that there is a lot of investment in high-quality materials such as pumps and stainless steel barrels."

A lot of winemakers also prefer a biodynamic approach. Most no longer 'indulge' in so-called calendar spraying but let nature consciousness prevail. "The observation that sprays cost a lot of money of course also plays into this," Dewulf continues. "Biodiversity can also be stimulated by opting for natural ground covers. With these you cover the 'black strip' where the roots of the vines are once the vines are rooted deep enough."

## Project grants

WijnResto Merlijn spares no expense to promote the overall wine experience. "Fortunately, we get a lot of support in the development of wine tourism, which is crucial to raise the brand awareness of the products," says Carine Hoedt. "Westtoer is making a lot of efforts in

that area. In addition, I have recently had confirmation that we will also receive help via a project funded by the European LEADER programme. This project stimulates knowledge sharing on the overall tourist experience and short-chain initiatives, so that local wines can become more visible and stronger in the market. That way we can get up to 65% of our investments back."

Westtoer for example organises half-day wine safaris in collaboration with wine growers and restaurants, where tourists tour the region by scooter and visit various wine estates. "The small scale of this niche market is an absolute asset," Hoedt believes. "People can still really talk to the wine grower, taste different wines and enjoy vistas on the vineyards. The recently created hiking and cycling routes also allow this new form of tourism to grow enormously."



**“A lot of wines from our province are no longer inferior to foreign products.”**

Marc Dewulf,  
Mikken Urban Winery

© Filip Lanszweert





Marc Dewulf (pictured, next to Carine Hoedt): "2024 was a disastrous year, but 2025 will make up for a lot and allow winemakers to build a buffer." © Filip Lanszweert

## "The small scale of our niche market is an asset in terms of tourism."

Carine Hoedt,  
Merlin Wine & Dine

Marc Dewulf also feels this support. "There is also a lot of support in other areas. The West Flemish winegrowers invest a lot but there is also practical help from for example ILVO (the Institute for Agricultural, Fisheries and Food Research), the Research Centre for Fruit Growing for the treatment of plant diseases and lab analyses from Inagro, which is a great help. Wallonia regularly opts for crowdfunding to finance projects, something you don't yet see in West Flanders viticulture."

### Room for more hectares

Marc Dewulf and Carine Hoedt view the future of the sector positively. "At the moment our country has about 1,000 hectares available for viticulture," Dewulf said. "There is definitely still room to grow to 3,000 to 4,000 hectares. There is also still a lot of potential in Wallonia. Much will depend on climate sensitivity. For a new wine grower who has just invested significantly, three to four bad vintage years in a 10-year period are too much of a good thing. 2024 was a disastrous year but 2025 will make up for a lot and will allow winemakers to build a buffer."

Carine Hoedt felt a sigh of relief from a lot of colleagues in recent months. "A good year like 2025 gives people courage and promotes the creation of nice dynamics in the ecosystem." But you can't avoid that occasionally someone stops. "Don't forget the

physical and mental aspect," Dewulf underlines. "It is a labour-intensive sector, especially on smaller areas most of the work is done manually. You have to be fit to keep doing it. Mentally, you have to deal with the impact of the climate and the stress that investments bring and find time to accommodate people. This is precisely why my wife and I organise the tastings exclusively during the week. We keep the weekends free to maintain a work-life balance. At the moment this is the ideal approach to grow our business steadily."

## Wine estate Hoogenhove: "Joining forces with local wine growers"

Wine estate Hoogenhove, the business of the Everaert family from Aarsele, is structured as a private limited company with the four family members - father Hans, mother Katty, son Emiel and daughter Michelle - as shareholders. Their vineyard currently measures 10 hectares.

Emiel Everaert: "In 2018, we planted our first hectare, followed a year later by the second. Those hectares currently produce around 15,000 bottles of sparkling wine and 3,000 to 4,000 bottles of 'still' wine. We planted another 8 hectares in 2024, mainly to anticipate future scale. It will be some time before we can effectively get started, but the plantings are in excellent condition. Our new wine barrel room is designed for more than 10 hectares, in the cellar we are maturing 450,000 bottles."

The vineyards are located entirely behind the family home, and there are still opportunities for expansion. "A number of farmers in the area are likely to stop farming at some point and are interested in selling the land to us. So we cannot complain about land scarcity."

Everaert welcomes the excellent cooperation with other winegrowers. "Both my father and I did internships with the people at Entre-Deux-Monts wine estate in Heuvelland at the time. We share the same vision of expanding the West Flemish wine sector. Manager Martin Bacquaert is also our oenologist-counsellor. We have invested together in a defoliator machine and we borrow each other's machines. We also have excellent relations with the seven winegrowers in the Tielt region. We join forces to promote the sector in our region. It is also nice that local restaurants have included our wines in their assortment. We have made our glasses available to them for this purpose."

Moreover, Inagro's analyses offer great added value, while government support - especially in terms of sustainable working - is very welcome."

## "We planted another 8 hectares in 2024 to anticipate future scale."

Emiel Everaert



© Wijndomein Hoogenhove, Thomas Moens Photography



## Wine estate Den Nachtegael: "Expansion of wine tourism is of capital importance"

Den Nachtegael, led by winemaker Dirk Syx, combines scale with a focus on professionalisation. Besides producing wine, the company emphasises marketing and wine tourism as an engine for growth and brand awareness.

Den Nachtegael is the holding company above the various companies associated with Dirk Syx's wine estate. "The division of the various activities is there for fiscal, legal and operational reasons. That way we can manage aspects such as customs formalities, taxes and liability optimally. In terms of scale, we were lucky to start on an 18-hectare property, with the potential to grow in the future. That is not the main focus at the moment, we are mainly aiming for additional efforts in terms of sales and marketing."

The purchase cost of land is one factor that can make it difficult for winemakers, though. "Prices of up to 140,000 euros per hectare are no exception. Add to that the cost of the vines and the fact that you can only sell your first bottles after seven years, then you realise that this is not for everyone. It is a challenge that other farmers are also struggling with."

Den Nachtegael sells through several channels. "First of all you have to get name recognition, for that the expansion of wine tourism (wine tourism) is of capital importance," says Dirk Syx. "By regularly hosting groups here we can gradually build the

brand name. Besides selling our wine in our own shop we also distribute our product to catering businesses and wine wholesalers. We currently have 30 to 35 distribution points in Belgium for our Sinnebec brand. Since mid-September we have been stepping up our efforts with someone dedicated purely to sales. We produce 120,000 bottles of wine a year. We really can't sell them all in our own shop."

Den Nachtegael, among others, enjoys support from the VLIF (Flemish Agricultural Investment Fund). "Now that viticulture in our country has risen from roughly 10 to 400 companies support from the government for promotion is also growing. This could for instance be done through a cooperation between Belbul and VLAM, the Flemish Centre for Agro and Fisheries Marketing. Through participation in European Interreg projects we are also putting ourselves more explicitly on the map."



© Sentier 74

**"Land prices of up to 140,000 euros per hectare are no exception."**

Dirk Syx, Den Nachtegael wine estate

# Sustainability, quality and cooperation strengthen West Flanders viticulture

Bart Vancauwenberghe, freelancejournalist

Within West Flanders, viticulture is rapidly becoming a sector with sustainability and quality at its core. By choosing resistant grape varieties and smartly reusing residual flows, wine growers are investing in biodiversity, regenerative agriculture and circular energy. Yet they also face challenges, specifically in the choice between classic grape types and resistant varieties or the need for upscaling.

The focus on sustainability is one of the great common denominators in West Flanders viticulture. Guido Van Imschoot notes with satisfaction. Van Imschoot, president of the VVS (Association of Flemish Sommeliers) for 11 years, helped found the Best Belgian Wine competition in 2005. "Already at the start-up and planting of the vineyards, winemakers pay adequate attention to soil research and nature-friendliness. Especially within new domains, insect-friendly shrubs and trees are being planted to encourage biodiversity." The VLM (Flemish Land Agency) launches regular subsidy calls subsidising the planting of such woody borders.

"Within agriculture, viticulture stands out: organic possibilities are picked up faster than in other sectors," Stijn Goemaere continues. He works as Unit Manager at Inagro, the West Flanders practice and research centre for agriculture and horticulture. Their analyses of soil, water, manure and crops are very valuable for the viticulture sector.

**"Winemakers pay a lot of attention to soil research and nature-friendliness."**

Wine expert Guido Van Imschoot

"The 'youthful' nature of the sector is a plus: the sector started only 25 to 30 years ago, which means that as a brand-new wine grower, you start off with the right know-how. In addition, the sector is simply responding to consumer demands, which favour the ecological identity of a luxury product like wine. The production of organic wine is certainly not cheaper than making traditional wine, but fortunately many consumers are willing to pay just that little bit extra for an organic bottle. Such signals are quickly picked up by winemakers through wine tourism, also known as

'winetourism'. When walking past a vineyard where a sprayer is at work, it might leave a foul taste in your mouth." The Agriculture & Marine Fisheries Agency's Biorapport 2024 also notes that the viticulture sector is one of the most important 'biogrowers' in Flanders.

The fungus-resistant PIWI grape varieties are a bonus for wine growers. "Among the 135 varieties authorised in Belgian viticulture today, you have quite a few PIWIs. On the other hand, other varieties have better survival rates during longer dry or wet periods.



© Luc Demiddele





## "Working organically is being picked up faster in viticulture than in any other sector."

Stijn Goemaere,  
Inagro researcher

It is a great way to revalue those residual streams and avoid food waste."

The fact that less or no use is made of conventional crop protection means more organic alternatives. One example is kaolin. "This white clay is sprayed over the grapes forming a fine film, acting as a physical barrier against the suzuki fly. This makes it harder for this insect to recognise or puncture the ripening soft fruit and prevents it from laying its eggs in it. Kaolin also reflects sunlight, creating a cooler microclimate around the grapes. This natural and residue-free solution is very suitable for sustainable, organic vineyards. Normally it rains enough before harvest time, for the kaolin layer to wash off," says Stijn Goemaere.

### Regenerative agriculture

Overall, winemakers want to work according to the principles of regenerative agriculture as much as possible. Stijn Goemaere: "This method of cultivation aims to actively improve soil health instead of just maintaining it. In viticulture, this means that the vine takes root in a vibrant soil full of organic matter, micro-organisms and biodiversity. Green cover crops, compost use and minimal tillage help to secure carbon and store water better. This makes vineyards more resilient to drought, heat waves and heavy rain."

Even so, at times conditions are so adverse that harvests are jeopardised. "In those cases, to blindly let nature take its course, is not always the smartest choice," says Gido Van Imschoot. "Fighting a 'sensible battle' means intervening only when really necessary, using the least harmful means, such as targeted biological control instead of broad chemical applications. That way you guard the soil and the grape in the long run, without completely ignoring the short term. It's about finding a balance between trusting nature and intervening responsibly."

### Small scale

Also in other areas, our viticulture works as green as possible. "Using solar panels and making plants more energy-efficient makes invoices lighter. More importantly, this sector is very water-intensive, partly due to the rinsing of barrels. Purification of used water streams makes it possible to reuse the water. This sector prefers short chain work. By selling the wine as much as possible within our own region, transport costs and fuel consumption can be limited," says Goemaere.

This is an advantage especially for small-scale winegrowers. Van Imschoot: "The bigger you get, the more production it generates and the less likely you are to be able to fit everything into a limited selling radius. If in the future, we continue to move towards large-scale winegrowing, the question arises to what extent Belgian wines are wanted abroad. Then good promotion becomes essential."

Although not a natural trait for a farmer, Gido Van Imschoot also makes a case for more cooperation. "Because most wine growers operate on a relatively limited area of three to four hectares and their production is proportional, to invest in their own picking machine, pressing plant or other necessary equipment, is not always easy. Today, most processes are still done manually, thanks to the

willingness of available family and/or friends. It is better to consider joining forces by buying equipment together and making clear agreements on its use. Working together through a cooperative or other means could bring significant benefits."

## "Working together through a cooperative could bring significant benefits."

Wine expert Gido Van Imschoot



This ensures less climate dependence and more business security," Van Imschoot points out. "Even so, that choice is not always obvious, because consumers are not very familiar with fungus-resistant varieties and therefore more likely to reach for classics such as chardonnay or pinot noir." According to the report "The Belgian wine growing sector in numbers" from the Federal economic department, four of the 12 most popular wine grape varieties in Flemish viticulture are resistant varieties.

### Limited footprint

It is no coincidence that the planting of vines is mainly done on grassy fields - often on south-facing slopes. "Those locations give soil a stable structure that prevents erosion and enables better water retention," Goemaere knows. "Grass also limits the growth of weeds and encourages deeper rooting, making vines stronger. It also creates healthier

soil microflora and helps to maintain biodiversity, enabling the use of biology to your own advantage."

It doesn't stop there, quite the contrary. Stijn Goemaere: "Attention increasingly goes to the valorisation of residual streams. For instance, pilot projects reusing grape pips and skins are starting up. The seeds contain, among other things, oils that could be used in the cosmetics world. The residues from pressing can act as fuel for the production of biogas, which you can then reuse locally for energy consumption."

France goes one step further, Gido Van Imschoot says. "There, as a wine grower, you are obliged to hand over the must and wine surpluses to the state, who then distils them into industrial alcohol, for example for disinfectants, perfumes or other extracts.



## Den Nachtegael works circularly

Since 2018, Dirk Syx has been combining his roots as a farmer's son with his expertise in automation, in his wine estate Den Nachtegael (Zonnebeke). Thereby, he adopts a circular approach.

"For example, we generate all the necessary electricity ourselves via solar panels and a combined heat and power system, and we work with battery storage," Syx says. "I even removed myself from the grid. We process the prunings from the vineyard into chips, which we use as a raw material for our heating. We filter the recovered rinse water to function as sanitary water. From the press residues we make grappa, or we throw it into the fermenter as fuel for generating electricity."

For optimal soil quality and crop protection, very little or even no herbicides are used. "We work mainly with machinery for mechanical weed control and with micro-organisms to strengthen the vineyard. A vacuum tunnel for crop protection sucks the atomised liquid right back to the installation during spraying. This way, we only hit the crop and hardly any product gets lost in the air or on the ground. By circulating and reusing the spray liquid, we save up to 90% of the product for the same protective effect."

The very clean environment - "easier to create because we could build this domain from scratch" - and a CIP approach promote storability and optimal conditioning. CIP stands for cleaning in place and refers to an automated cleaning system where installations, pipes and refrigerated tanks are cleaned without dismantling them.

"As co-founder of BelBul, the official label for Belgian sparkling wines, we emphasise this. The label guarantees end users Belgian bubbles of

exceptional quality, made according to the méthode traditionnelle that is specific to champagne. The strict terms also stipulate that the wine is 100% Belgian, produced in Belgium on Belgian family wine estates. This needs to become more ingrained, but quickly

improves when I playfully correct people when they ask for, say, two bottles of our 'cava'," Dirk Syx laughs.



Dirk Syx: "We process the prunings from our vineyard into chips, which we use as a raw material for our heating."

© Filip Lanszweert

## Ecology at Hoogenhove

Wine estate Hoogenhove in Tielt is a family business of the purest kind. Father Hans Everaert, mother Katty, son Emiel, daughter Michelle and son-in-law Bram Lobbens started the business in 2018, making mainly sparkling wines. The focus lies firmly on working ecologically, although this is not as easy for everything.

"We spread the few residues that remain after pressing back onto the vineyard," explains Emiel Everaert. "We also shred the prunings for reuse: they form a natural mulch layer that retains moisture, suppresses weeds and adds organic material to the soil. We invested in circularity with solar panels on our cuverie (where the wine barrels are stored, ed.). These largely cover our electricity needs. A one-million-litre rainwater cistern is crucial for air-conditioning the cuverie. We also have a pond, which we often use as a source for irrigation of the young plants."

The soil quality of the wine estate in itself is quite good, as it naturally contains a lot of nitrogen. "If anything is added, it's mainly magnesium, calcium and potassium. These enhance soil fertility and mineral balance, leading to healthier vines and better quality grapes. We protect the crops by removing weeds with a machine. This is not possible on younger plants, as they are not strong enough yet. In general, we work with organic means as much as possible. Targeted disease anticipation works even better, for example by using a good combination of pruning and foliage management to allow more light and air to flow through the vineyard."

In function of storability, sulphite use is kept to a minimum at Hoogenhove Wine Estate. "In time, we want to reduce sulphite use even more, but in order to do so we need a healthy harvest and our cuverie has to be ready."

The Everaert family achieved the 100% West Flemish label for its products and was one of the co-founders of BelBul. "This cooperation is crucial to achieve an even better quality and to further promote the reputation of Belgian (sparkling) wines," Emiel Everaert concludes.



The soil quality of wine estate Hoogenhove is quite good in itself, as it is naturally high in nitrogen. Photo: pater familias Hans Everaert.

© Luc Demiddele



Lieven Callens en Els Destoop, wine estate Sentier 74

# “Being busy among the grapes calms us down.”

Christina Van Geel, Voice & Pen

In the West Flemish town of Deerlijk, along an ancient footpath, stand the vines of Sentier 74. Here, Lieven Callens and Els Destoop have been working on their dream for several years. With respect for soil and nature, their grapes are given time to mature in peace and quiet before being hand-picked. A hobby that got out of hand, Lieven calls it. Call it a passion. With love, attention and skill, Els and Lieven make beautiful, crisp wine of high quality.

**Els:** Lieven and I are great wine lovers, we love a good glass of wine. Still a bit of a prerequisite when you become a winemaker (laughs). When we used to go on holiday with the family, we often went to the famous wine regions in France. That whole process from grape to bottle fascinated us. That's how the passion gradually grew.

**Lieven:** I am a self-employed painter by profession and I enjoy my work immensely, but I had been looking for a suitable hobby for a while, preferably outdoors in nature. With our passion for wine in mind I took a viticulture course at Syntra West in Ypres. That three-year course was very instructive. You learn the whole process of wine making. I had a very inspiring teacher and he motivated me to set something up myself. When a plot of sandy loam land became available within walking distance of our house, we didn't hesitate for long. In 2018, we planted a first batch of 450 vines. We currently have 1400 vines in production. In May of this year, we expanded the vineyard to one hectare with nearly 4,000 vines that will yield the first grapes within three years. Because we don't use herbicides, we used to weed by hand. But weeding one hectare of weeds by hand is very bad for the back (laughs), so we recently bought a new tractor. A bit of mechanisation is necessary.

### The harvest festival

**Els:** The wine story was originally Lieven's project, but now I'm fully involved in it. I am a kindergarten teacher and after a normal working day we are often together working among the vines. We are both workers, the work ethic is in our blood. The vineyard requires a lot of time and energy even on weekends and holidays. We do it with love and pleasure. We never dread it, on the contrary! Being busy among the grapes calms us down.

We have three children who help with the grape harvest. We always turn that into a celebration, family, friends and neighbours come to help pick. We provide food for the pickers and in the evening we have a drink together. That day is very important to us. We don't do this just for commercial reasons. The atmosphere and the contacts, the connection between people is just as important to us. Wine connects, they say. That connection starts when the grapes are picked or during a visit or tasting. It is very nice to be able to share our passion with others.

### Nature as an ally

**Lieven:** Belgium is increasingly becoming a wine country to be reckoned with due to global warming. For white, rosé and sparkling wines conditions are good especially if you compare it to some regions in France. There some regions a gradually becoming too hot and dry to

be able to produce light, crisp wines. The heat gives you heavy wines with a very high alcohol content.

2025 promises to be a very good wine year. There was plenty of sunshine, the temperature was ideal, neither too hot nor too cold. There also was no night frost in spring and it rained just enough, a grapevine does not like too much wetness.

2024 was a disaster year. On 23 April, I remember it well, we had an hour of night frost that decimated almost the entire harvest. Ninety per cent loss, that's hefty. Nature is a big and important player in the whole story. As a wine grower, you are a farmer, and therefore dependent on nature. That makes it exciting but also fascinating.

# “Belgium is increasingly becoming a wine country to be reckoned with due to global warming.”

Lieven Callens

**Els:** Manipulating nature doesn't work. So you have to see nature as an ally in the process. If you do it right, nature will give you a hand. For example, we try to preserve biodiversity in the vineyard with a mixed hedge that attracts beneficial insects, such as ladybirds and ichneumon wasps. They are the natural enemies of aphids that do harm to the vines. Between the vines we also sowed

# “We try to preserve biodiversity in the vineyard with a mixed hedge that attracts beneficial insects.”

Els Destoop

flowers to create a nice environment for the non-harmful insects.

**Lieven:** No herbicides, insecticides or other chemical pesticides are used here. I took a preventive organic programme where you learn to anticipate possible diseases as well as an agricultural course, so I am effectively a farmer (laughs). Seriously, you need to have quite a bit of knowledge of nature before you become a wine grower. Without a course or training, it's better not to start.

### The Belbul label as a sign of quality

**Lieven:** Before we planted the first vines we had a soil analysis done. We are on a sandy loam soil here, very suitable for viticulture. The soil also contains a lot of glauconite, a mineral that indicates the presence of iron sandstone. Very good for the minerality of our Pinot Blanc.

At Sentier 74, we have some French classics, mainly Pinot Blanc and Gamay and also Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and a little Pinot Meunier for the sparkling wines. We launched a sparkling wine for the first time in 2023, which sold well. Bubbles are very popular in Belgium. So we are super happy that our application to join the Belbul label has been approved! To bear that quality label you have to meet a number of strict requirements. Being admitted means that the quality of our sparkling wine is very good.

In Belgium there are few regulations when it comes to planting grape varieties, you can basically do whatever you want. In Champagne, for example, as a wine grower you are limited to certain varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Everything is much stricter: the planting per hectare, the height of your foliage, the maximum yield per



Lieven Callens: “As a wine grower, you are a farmer, and therefore dependent on nature. That makes it exciting but also fascinating.” © Sentier 74, Lynn Fotografie



hectare. In Belgium we haven't gone that far yet. Everything is possible and allowed, which also makes it harder to find your own identity as a wine country. In Alsace for instance you are not allowed to use just any bottle for your wine. The long, thin bottles of Alsace wines are a sign of quality on their own. You know what to expect by only looking at the bottle.

**Quality over quantity!**

Lieven: People sometimes don't understand that an imported South African wine is sold here for six euros while you pay 15 to 20 euros a bottle for a Belgian wine. For now, a Belgian wine is still relatively expensive because it is made here in smaller quantities. Not comparable to mass production in South Africa, Chile or California, where they grow wine on estates covering thousands of hectares.

The higher price must of course be compensated by very high quality, so the bar is high for us.  
Many countries also work with a

cooperative system, where people share equipment so that not every wine grower has to invest in the same expensive machines. We now need a machine to turn the iron cap on sparkling wines. Every wine grower needs such a machine! If we unite in cooperations in the future that make joint purchases, we can reduce costs.

**The farming DNA**

**Els:** Next to our vineyard is a footpath, every day walkers and cyclists pass by, stopping and having a chat. That path has already led to many pleasant encounters, apparently it has been there for centuries. When we looked at old maps at the municipal archives, we saw that the path in the early 19th century was named Sentier 74 or walking path No 74. 1974 also happens to be the year of Lieven's birth! We didn't have to think long, the name of our wine estate was chosen. It is also symbolic, 'sentier' stands for the new path we have taken as winegrowers.

I am a farmer's daughter myself, I inherited the love for the land from home. My dad is now 81 and he still drives around with his tractor. Our vineyard fascinates him, it is a crop he does not know at all. If it has been dry for a long time then his beets are completely limp. "Those vines, they are so green!" he then says. "You must be watering them like crazy" (Laughs) He doesn't understand that our grapes have very different needs to his beets, but he is secretly proud of what we do. When we drink a glass of our wine together, we see him gloating.

I will never marry a farmer, I said as a child. It didn't seem like the most charming life to me then. My parents were tied to their farm, getting up early every day to tend the cows. If we went to the sea on a sporadic day, we had to be back on time because the cows still had to be milked. But look, in the end here is a farmer sitting next to me! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. That must be entrepreneurial DNA, or farmer DNA!

Dirk Syx, Wine Estate Den Nachtegaele

“A product stands or falls with enthusiasm and passion”

Christina Van Geel, Voice & Pen

Entrepreneur Dirk Syx turned his life around in 2018. He sold his successful company Syx Automations, market leader in software automation solutions for sports, culture and entertainment sectors, and plunged into winemaking. Near the iconic Tyne Cot Cemetery in Zonnebeke, he converted an old farmstead into a modern winery, Den Nachtegaele, in three years time. And even though making wine is more his passion than his profession, he does it like a purebred entrepreneur.

**Dirk Syx:** In many companies, the entrepreneur has all the knowledge and skills. Without him or her, the enterprise is an empty box, so to speak, forming the basis for problematic valuation and capital. The irreplaceability of the entrepreneur blocks the company's success. I was only 12 when I realised this. Even so, I then told my father, "I want to build a business that doesn't exclusively rely on me, in order to pass something on to the next generation."

My motto is: I need to be replaceable. I surround myself with the right people in the right places. I've always trusted my instinct. With the wine estate, it's no different. I may be the manager who's in charge, but one day I won't be here anymore. That's just the way it is. At that particular point, the right people have to be able to take over. I value this greatly and act on it as well. For instance, I train and educate people continuously. The company has to be able to survive after I'm gone. C'est la vie.

“I want to be replaceable. The business should be able to continue after I’m gone.”

My parents were farmers. Early on, I knew this was not my career path. A farmer farms his fields, ignorant about the world, and not interested in sales and marketing. In the meantime, farm life has evolved. However, it remains a mainly local activity, whereas I wanted to see the world. At the age of 14, my school bag was already full of electronic components traded at school. For which I was sometimes punished (laughs). But so be it, I discovered my passion for sales early on and the world was allowed to be bigger than our farm.

**The Syx Sense**

"Grab it, stick it on the wall and make sure it hangs straight." This life lesson I got from my father and I gladly pass it on to my children and my employees. No whining and complaining, just get the job done. This applies to all the things I do. Taking charge and sticking with it.

My father was a real technician. Very rational, too. On the other hand, my mother was incredibly 'smooth', a great commercial talent. I am a mix of both. Commercial yet very technical. I have now been teaching viticulture for three years and I tell my students, "A good product is the basis." Whether you make a handbag, an automation system or a bottle of wine: if the product is only average, it will not sell. Making a good product is not that difficult, you just need to attract the right people. Knowledge and expertise can be hired.

But enthusiasm, passion, the 'fire' of the entrepreneur: this makes or breaks the sale of a product. Your product may be of superb quality, if you can't inspire and convince people to buy it, it's worth nothing.

That is what I call the sixth sense, or the 'Syx sense', with a nod to my name. The magic you create around your product makes it a success story. It makes an entrepreneur a top entrepreneur, someone who can inspire with knowledge, skill and passion.

**Story Telling**

I have no illusions: even if my wine is rated the best in the world, sales will not happen overnight. This used to be possible, but these days for every good product there are at least ten alternatives. As an entrepreneur, you need to ask yourself, "What makes people buy my product? How do I make a difference?" Quality is one thing. But the right combination of factors determines whether your product becomes successful. In the case of our wine, it is the experience, the labels, and the surrounding story.

Our wines are known as Sinnebec, the name of the very first settlement here and a precursor of the current town name of Zonnebeke. According to historic literature, the first local habitation was the Augustinian Abbey, built in 1072. From the very start of my



Els Destoop: "We don't do this just for commercial reasons. The atmosphere and the contacts, the connection between people is just as important to us." © Sentier 74, Lynn Photography





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**“My hobby was wine, my profession automation. Now it's the other way around.”**

working with people. CEO, to me that means Chief Entertainment Officer (laughs). I love to entertain and inspire my employees. You have to pay your people well, that's obvious. But it doesn't stop there. There are several places where you get paid well. It is of equal importance to feel good in a company, to feel like a part in a bigger story.

Den Nachtegael's staff consists exclusively of pensioners. I am sixty myself. I know that you're not yet written off at that age, even though society sometimes tells you so. From the day you retire, it's from hero to zero. I experienced that myself when I passed on the torch. The day after, no one calls you. For these people, this work gives new purpose. They feel involved, they are part of a community and they are helping to build this story. I see their passion, their joy, their energy and that makes me immensely happy.

**Thinking globally**

For me, an ending is always a new beginning. That too is typical of an entrepreneur. I have achieved something which is great in itself, but in the meantime I am already working on the next project. I need people around me who can continue what we have achieved, who can consolidate it. I am not an operational person myself. I am an innovator and a creator. I am never satisfied with where I am now. I always want to go further, to innovate, to reinvent. That is not always easy. That's why a few years ago I had to decide to pass the company on to the children. I

had run out of steam. The candle had burned out. A passion also takes energy.

It was my dream to return to farming one day, because after all, I am a farmer's son. But I didn't want to farm by default. I wanted to keep thinking globally, albeit with a very local product. Soon I will leave for Italy to market our wines there. I want to be an international wine estate. That's why our company is also called Sinnebec, in Japan a name like 'Den Nachtegael' will not work! The idea was to unwind among the vines. This didn't work, because I can't

do 'a bit of business'. Den Nachtegael has since grown considerably into an eighteen-hectare estate. We make 120,000 bottles of wine a year, no longer a small story. I have to be careful again. My body is telling me to slow down. But that is easier said than done. My passion overtakes me every time. It's my nature.

The desire to build is boundless. Getting up every morning to build that story, to watch those grapes grow, literally and figuratively: that is the meaning of my life.

**“I am never satisfied with where I am now. I want to move on, innovate, reinvent.”**



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wine studies, I toyed with the idea of making 26 wines, one for each letter of the alphabet. Each type of wine bears the name of a monk from the abbey: Noëlla, Prélude, Isaac, Joannes ... Marketing studio GBL from Kortrijk designed a drawing for each character: one with the head of a nightingale. A reference to the name of the farm that used to stand here.

All of life is a story. Ever since childhood, we have yearned for stories. It's in our genes. Dry information about alcohol percentages and sulphites does not interest people. However, pour that info into a story and your product comes alive.

**Chief Entertainment Officer**

Den Nachtegael is a smart wine estate. Not a day goes by without me

programming. After I've done something manually three times, it triggers me to automate. For example, we do not harvest by hand, but with an optical machine. It selects and picks the grapes the moment they are ready while filtering out the bad grapes and leaves. That way, we harvest one hectare an hour. Doing this manually, it would require 40 people for one hectare a day.

Vineyard weed control is also done automatically. Thanks to a sprayer with a vacuum system, 10 times less product and water is needed. I made my hobby my profession and vice versa. My hobby was wine, my profession automation. Now it's the other way round. I continue to combine both passions.

But what I will never, ever automate is contact with my people. I love



# Wine estates in West Flanders

