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Fine Minds 4 Fine Wine: Effecting change

Sustainability was the dominant theme at the fine-wine think-tank's latest annual gathering in Bordeaux, says **David Williams**

Over the past three years, Fine Minds 4 Fine Wine has established itself as a serious presence in the world of fine wine. Described by the organizers as an “international annual think-tank,” it acts as a kind of Davos for fine wine, drawing together guests from both within and without the industry to debate matters of importance, diagnosing problems and proposing solutions, over three days each July.

After an attention-grabbing first event at founder Nicole Rolet's Chêne Bleu estate in the Southern Rhône, and a successful follow-up in Champagne in 2018, FM4FW decamped to Bordeaux for its third edition, with more than 70 “thought-leaders” from 19 countries coming together at events hosted by châteaux Malartic-Lagravière (Pessac-Léognan), Kirwan (Haut-Médoc), Gombaude Guillot (Pomerol), and

Lassègue (St-Emilion). Celebrated figures from the wine world—such as Fiona Morrison MW, Eduardo Chadwick, Laura Catena, Zelma Long, Sylvie Cazes, and Steven Spurrier—were joined by experts from the fields of data technology, video technology, fine dining, food retail, science and research, marketing, education, diversity and inclusion, geopolitics, and finance.

No mere junket

Although fueled by fine wine and food, the event is no mere junket. Guests are divided into seven groups and spend the weekend in a “cross-cultural and multidisciplinary series of round tables, panels, and workshops,” where they discuss “global trends and their ramifications for fine wine” under Chatham House rules.

Those discussions are nicely condensed for public consumption, first

in an extensive, free-to-all post-event briefing document, and then in a fuller report, including complementary research, that is available to buy the following winter. Reading this year's post-event recap, it's clear that the environment—and specifically the climate emergency—has become perhaps the defining issue of the times for delegates, shaping not only the way wine is produced and distributed but also how it is perceived and marketed.

“Climate change will affect what we think of provenance today,” the report states. “Regions' identities will shift, with [the] plantation of new, non-traditional (sometimes [not yet permitted]) grapes. Winemakers will keep experimenting with new terroirs, new altitudes and latitudes. Appellations as they exist will have to change dramatically or will simply be totally irrelevant.”



Such radical, potentially bewildering changes will need patient explanation if consumers are not to be left behind. “Education is going to be extremely important so that people understand how provenance is actually changing,” the report goes on to say, before outlining some steps toward a new definition of quality where “the people behind the wine and how they interact with the land” will be central, with “all the stories com[ing] back to how we treat the place.”

Another factor shaping the delegates’ mood was the current geopolitical situation, which, the report says, “is the darkest ever. The risk of major markets closing down is real,” as is the “very dark cloud” of regulation, which the report describes as “the

Opposite: All of the 2019 delegates at Château Kirwan. Above: Eduardo Chadwick tasting with Will Berliner.

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overarching theme that stops innovation in our ecosystem. We fear white-label packaging operating on the same model as the tobacco industry.”

One way of alleviating the many restrictions placed on wine producers by increasingly prohibitionist national governments would be to use digital media: “If packaging can’t help anymore,

story-telling will have to become digital,” the report says. Any online narrative needs to recognize that the demographics of fine wine have moved on, however. “Our industry needs to look like our consumers: ethnic diversity, gender-fluidity diversity, generation[all] diversity. We need to create a place of belonging [where] people feel, regardless of their race or age, that they belong in [our] ecosystem.”

Not that the delegates believe that digital media—no matter how sensitively inclusive it may be—is a panacea. “While technology can help tell your story, [it’s] better to have people coming to visit face to face,” the report says. “It is very hard to be a digital-first brand.” Indeed, successful fine-wine producers need to understand that theirs is an industry that is in the midst of a profound shift in its business model, “changing from purely a



production business to a lifestyle and experience business, selling a dream, tourism, and hospitality." Face-to-face contact with customers is enormously important in this new world, which also opens up the possibility of new forms of funding, such as crowdfunding production.

Areni arrives

If much of what emerges from FM4FW each year can come across as a highly cultivated form of brainstorming, this year brought a determination to take concrete action on several of the issues raised in the various talking shops. Participants signed a list of 20 "pledges for action" at the end of the event. And a new organization, Areni, was born to "take the lead" in working through at least some of those pledges.

The 20 pledges reflect the very diverse subject matter covered at FM4FW, both at this year's event and previous editions. They range from the financial ("Create a central online resource to help wineries be

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financially viable"), to the social (a fellowship for "people of color"); and from marketing (the creation of a "market-specific language guide" to "bridge the gap between how consumers and industry talk"), to tech (create a "blockchain primer" to help the fine-wine industry understand the benefits of the cryptographic technology). Some of the pledges are, in the words of FM4FW, "easily and immediately implementable smaller initiatives." Others are "longer-term aims requiring deep research, technological advances, and/or legislative intervention."

The launch of Areni is designed to manage and maintain interest in pledges large and small in what the founders describe as "a year-round global sustainability initiative" that builds on the annual FM4FW events.

"In increasingly volatile times, the world of fine wine needs to be ready to promote change and to adapt," executive director Pauline Vicard said. "If Fine Minds 4 Fine Wines is the ignition switch, then Areni's purpose is to be the motor, helping to bring a year-round global perspective to the world of fine wine, a greater understanding of the forces affecting its future, and to encourage and undertake research and action on the part of all stakeholders."

The intention is to make Areni, which is a non-profit, as welcoming as possible, with membership open and the FM4FW spirit of dialogue and the mutual sharing of information very much the essence of the new organization. In the words of Nicole Rolet, "There is not only an opportunity but also an obligation to come together, collaborate, and effect positive and meaningful change for the fine-wine ecosystem." ■

Above: Dr Laura Catena and Rodrigo S epulveda Schulz enjoying Catena Zapata Mundus Bacillus Terrae Malbec.