

The revival of emerging Belgian viticulture

Good afternoon, dear members of the academy,

My name is Joyce Kekko and I'm for the last 35 years the winemaker of our family winery in Belgium.

Most people when they think of Belgium, they think of Beer.

If they hear about Belgian wine, they expect it to be new.

They suppose Belgian climate is too cold for wine and

they have an image of some amateurs making wine in their garage.

It's an honor and challenge to present to you today the real story of Belgian wine:

- The Romans brought wine culture to Gaul, up to the North of France and Germany, to Belgium and even to the South of Holland and England, not all the way to Hadrian's wall but as far as 52°N.
- 4th C Roman poet named Ausonius wrote "good wine by Tongeren", oldest city in Belgium.
- First serious writing: 815 Liège (Prince-Bishop)
- First winegrowers were bishops and monks at castles and monasteries, 14th C most cities had their own vineyards within / outside city walls.
- Document dated 1473 Louvain Export 10.000 Hl of wine, communal presses in the city
- Hoegaarden white beer – Cru vineyards
- King of France and Dukes of Burgundy owned vineyards in Belgium (1794-1815 France)

Medieval Warm Period in the North Atlantic region 5th-10th-13th-16th C (1°-2° warmer), less warm than since 1970. Map with villages where vineyards were cultivated before the 19th C.



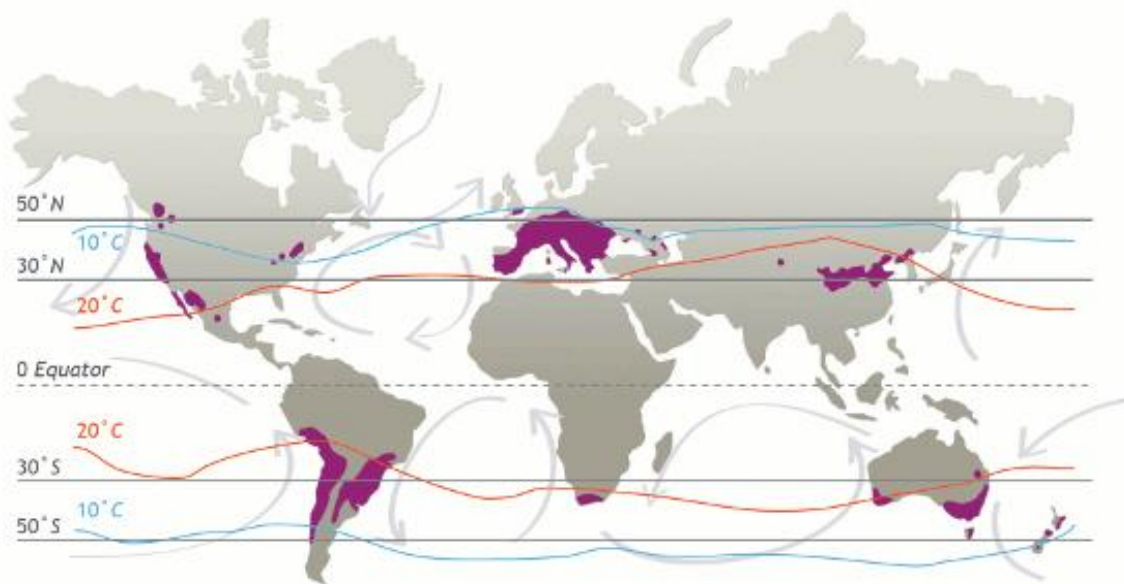
Little Ice Age, cold intervals 17th – 19th C: 1°-2° colder

- **Yield** went down drastically 6-11 Hl/Ha, not profitable.
- Romans – 17thC: **Verjus** condiment with herbs and spices for cooking.
- 18thC **Beer** + hops storage life prolonged eventually supplanted wine as a cheaper and the most common bacteriologically safe beverage in regions where wine was difficult to make
- 19thC vineyards have almost disappeared in Belgium after it was common.
- Better roads, trucks and railroads brought **commercial wines** to Belgium

CLIMATE CHANGE mainly influenced History + stimulus for recent revival

- Temperature most critical element $T^{\circ} 11.3^{\circ}\text{C}$
- Northern border for viticulture – Both hemispheres **wine belt** 30° - 50° latitude the least challenges ($1^{\circ} = 111 \text{ km}$) – no straight line – influenced the **Warm Gulf Stream** (maritime climate)
- Belgium 49° - 51°N , no harsh winters, enough sunlight and longer daylight
- Challenging **low yields**, profitable: spring frost after bud break, Precipitation 700-730 mm: humidity risk of fungal diseases (biodynamic / organic), rains during flowering + autumn
- Challenging ripeness: high malic acid, low tartaric acid, lower Ph, lower alcohol content, low phenolic maturity with greener tannins > more white wine and sparkling wine

Precipitation 700-730 mm - $T^{\circ} 11.3^{\circ}\text{C}$, Record high 40°C , Record low -20°C - Sun hours 1734



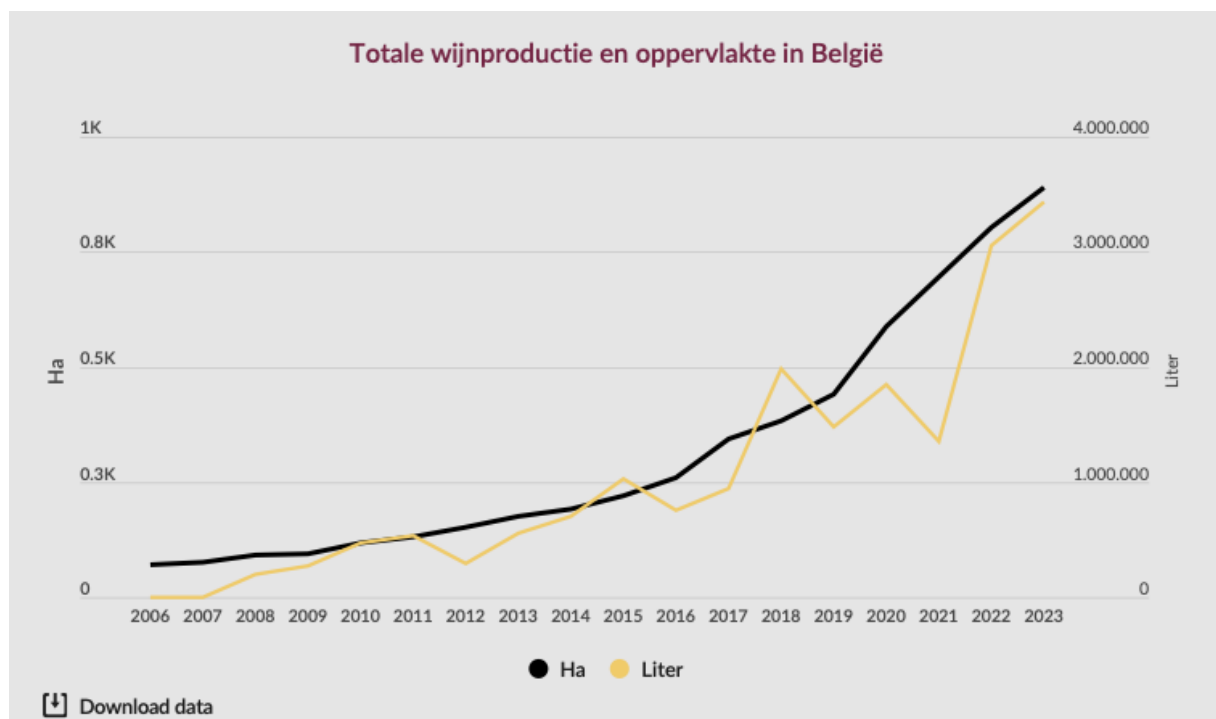
- Timing ideal ripening window N hemisphere mid sept-mid oct, high quality fruit: balance, high in organic acids, high in aromas, give wine potential to age.
- Grape varieties: shorter ripening cycle, align with climate conditions
- Favorable locations: slopes with max sun exposure, min humidity and spring frost
- Higher vineyards for more leaf surface for photosynthesis
- Defoliate grape area against fungal diseases

REVIVAL



- 20th C Jean Bellefroid – II-WW Germany – since 1950 – Mussel chalkstone drainage – passionate – inspired – amateurs in Belgium and Holland – warmest part Belgium – Huglin index 1500-1600 – Müller Thurgau and Pinot varieties.
- 1990 my parents bought the Castle of Genoels-Elderen, private residence Prince Bishop from Liège, 25 Ha of vineyards, bring the estate back old glory, experts, **global warming**, terroir, 1991 Chardonnay.
- Minimum 10 Ha, 10 years and 10€ a bottle
- 2006 – 15y - 14 Ha – total 72 Ha Belgium
- Visitors guided tours and tastings – Winning medals at international contest Gold 1996 - Wine list Michelin restaurants

Build RESILIENCE Climate: interannual variations are immense: Diversify to make quality wines: Cool years ideal for sparkling, Warmer vintages better still wines, stock management strategies: buffer for availability and stability (8Ha + storage cellar), controlling our sales allocations.

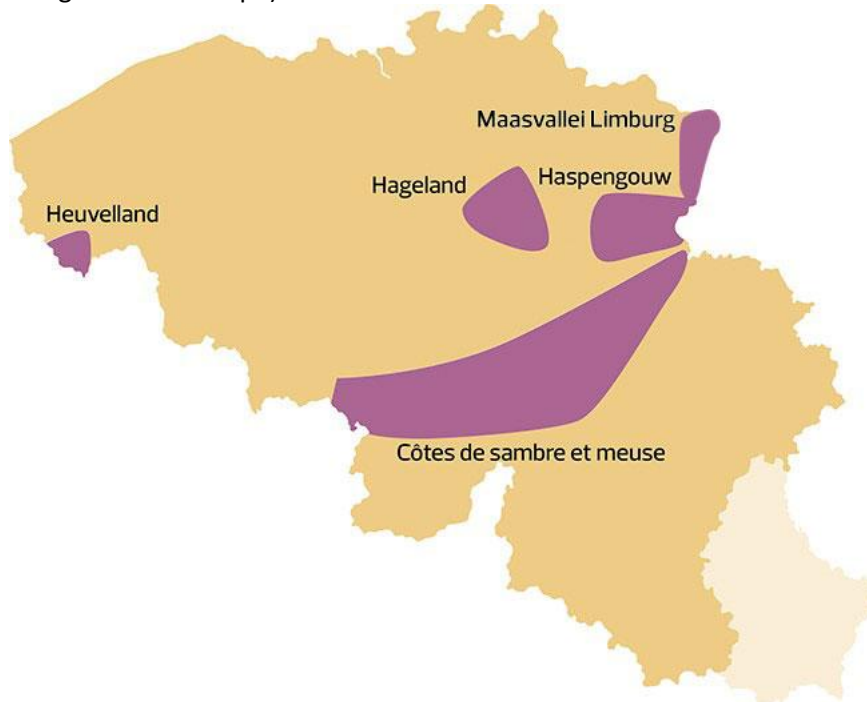


- 2025: about 325 winegrowers +1000 Ha (Netherlands +350 Ha, England +4500 Ha)
- +130 grape varieties
- 75% Traditional Vitis Vinifera, 25% hybrids
- Top 5: Chardonnay 290Ha, Pinot Noir 111Ha, Johanniter 70Ha, Pinot Gris 41Ha, Auxerrois 36Ha

WHERE

- North: Low <100m (flat and sandy)
- Central Belgium 100-200m (rolling hills, mussel chalkstone & loam, iron sandstone and slate, the Meuse valley)
- South: High 200-700m colder, rocky (pine forests)

Wine regions **Protected Designation of Origin**: Hageland, Haspengouw, Heuvelland, Maasvallei Limburg
 Limburg (covers 2 banks of the Maas River in Belgium and the Netherlands, the only cross-border designation in Europe) en Côtes de Sambre et Meuse.



- 40% <1Ha, 30% 1-3Ha, 25% 3-10Ha, 5% >10Ha
- Average 3Ha (< France 10Ha, = Austria England Luxembourg, > Germany Spain Italy Portugal)

WHO

hobby to side job to professional wineries

Heritage sites (Castles / historical sites)

Entrepreneurial

Companies with Agriculture / Fruit growing orchards diversify into vineyards

Collaborative

All family businesses 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation

MARKET

Domestic market:

- Belgium has the highest concentration of Michelin star restaurants in the world
- Belgium population 11.000.000, consumption 400 million bottles of wine per year, the 10th largest consumer of wine in the world.
- Has been Per capita the largest consumer of Cava, the 2nd largest of Champagne (after France)
- 2023 record production 4.500.000 bottles, 1% of consumption (Planting rights >50.000Ha)

- Tourism, experience, wine with a story, local and authentic: generate loyalty, sales and visibility
- Average consumer price: Red rare 28,5€, Sparkling 27,5€, White 21€ and Rosé 14€
- Belgians are proud of local wines, A lot of positive media attention, Local sommeliers and gastronomy, environmentally responsible.
- Property 50.000-100.000€/Ha, Planting 25.000€/Ha
- Salaries high
- Lack of manual labor
- Excise tax on sparkling wine 2,5€ and 75cents on still wines

Foreign market:

Export:

- Present last 5y at ProWein and the last 2y Wine Paris with a Belgian stand
- Build Image? (Freshness, elegant, sparkling) Unity in diversity, Cool climate / Nordic, Belgian craftsmanship in addition to beer and chocolate

2025 unite Belgian producers of quality Sparkling wine under one collective name **BelBul**

Latest project: Creating a Wine route connecting different wine regions in Belgium and the Netherlands with hubs and entrance gates where information and maps are provided.

I do not dare to make any predictions for the future.

This was my story about Belgian wine. I was not looking forward to preparing and presenting this subject, because I could not imagine bringing anything interesting or inspiring to this audience. I did not know much about Belgian wine because I never looked around. As a pioneer one thinks one is always ahead. I always looked at great examples in the rest of the world like at many of you here present. Through this quest for information, I have realized that there is one thing we all have in common. We all must face extreme challenges. It is good we didn't know this before we started. But we all face these challenges again and again for the same reason and that is because we can make truly amazing wines in Belgium.

Thank you for your attention and if anybody has any questions, I will try to answer them.