

Fine French wine has new use: Fueling cars

By Craig S. Smith

VAUVERT, France: Olivier Gibelin tilts a glass of deep red wine, sniffs and sips at a table set between tall concrete vats of fermenting grape juice in his rustic stone winery here. The air is heavy with an odor of yeast.

"Do you want to try what will be going into your tank?" he asks ruefully, pouring a visitor a glass. "If my grandfather could taste what I'm turning into alcohol, he'd turn over in his grave."

The worldwide glut of wine has become so huge that for the first time in history, France is distilling some of its higher-rated wines into fuel. It is a painful thing in a land where winemaking is

a labor of love and the fruit of that labor is celebrated as much as any art.

France has periodically turned oceans of lowly table wines into vinegar and ethanol. But bottles of quality French wine have been piling up on supermarket shelves and in vineyard cellars across the country, to the point that some of it is now cheaper than bottled water.

By early this year, with some winemakers taking to the streets in protest against low prices, France asked the European Union to approve the distillation of 150 million liters, or about 40 million gallons, of Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée wine. By the end of the year, 100 million liters, enough for 133 million bottles, will have been turned into crystal-clear ethanol.

The ethanol is sold to oil refineries, which use it as an additive that they mix into their gasoline, part of a European campaign to increase the use of renewable fuels. French gasoline already contains about 1 percent ethanol, mostly distilled from France's plentiful sugar beets. That percentage is supposed to rise to 5.75 percent by 2010 to meet European Union demands.

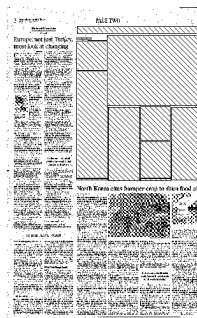
Because France exports gasoline and one of its biggest markets is the United States, by sometime next year, some Americans may be pumping their cars full of gas that includes a bit of Chardonnay or Pinot Noir.

The system of Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée was created in the 1930s to set standards for quality French wines and distinguish them from table wines. The strict regimen of local labels controls everything from what kind of grapes go into the wine to how many bottles of wine a vintner is allowed to produce per hectare.

Châteauneuf du Pape in the Rhône Valley was the first appellation, and there are 467 today, many of them now drowning in wine.

A convergence of two factors has led to the growing surplus: new producers in countries like Australia and Chile and falling demand in places like France, where a crackdown on drunken driving has tempered the traditional intake over lunch and dinner. "What's killing consumption is fear of the gendarmes," said Gibelin, who makes wine in Vauvert.

The downturn in demand left the Beaujolais region swimming in so much



wine in 2002 that it turned 10 million liters into vinegar.

Gibelin's exports to the United States are a tenth of what they were a few years ago, thanks to a strong euro and, to some extent, he says, to the American boycott of French products after France refused to support the invasion of Iraq. Gibelin's biggest market was in Texas.

The glut has led to ruinous price declines. A bottle of modest Côtes du Rhône that used to sell wholesale for about €1.20, or \$1.40, sells today for 60 euro cents. Even bottles of fancier Saint Emilion are going for under €3 apiece.

To prevent the problem from growing, the European Union has kept the land area devoted to vineyards in Europe fixed for the past five years. There are even subsidies available for people who agree to tear up their vineyards rather than keep producing bad wine, known in Europe as plonk. France's state wine regulator, the National Interprofessional Wine Bureau, has also been buying up vineyard rights — in effect, licenses to make wine — and taking them off the market.

At the local distillery near Gibelin's vineyard, a tank truck disgorged frothy Champagne into a vat through a fat hose. Inside, red wine bubbled and hissed through a forest of stainless steel columns and a tangle of steam-spitting pipes. At one end of the machinery, clear ethanol collected in a cistern, while what remained of the wine was separated into water and an inky concentrate that can be used to color food. The dregs end up pressed into pellets of fertilizer.

Maurice Crouzet, who runs the distillery, said hundreds of winemakers in his small region had agreed to turn their wine into alcohol.

Gibelin, a bear of a man, is one. His family has been making wine for generations, but the heraldic emblem embroidered on the breast pocket of his scarlet shirt belies a more pedestrian past: His grandfather and great-grandfather made table wine, much of it supplied to the army for soldiers, from poorer vineyards nearby.

Gibelin sold the vineyard in the mid-1970s, bought better land and planted new varieties of grapes to make wine that conformed to the local appellation contrôlée, Costières de Nîmes.

Life was good until the crisis. On a sunny day last week, he served up tiny shellfish in white cream sauce and

bowls of hearty, black beef stew, two specialties of the region. He lubricated the meal with goblets of his doomed wine.

He has agreed to distill about 100,000 bottles' worth, half his 2004 production, which would have sold for just under \$10 a bottle at retail had it been shipped to the United States. It was a heart-rending decision, "but the market was dead," Gibelin said, adding that he already had unsold wine from previous years and needed the money.

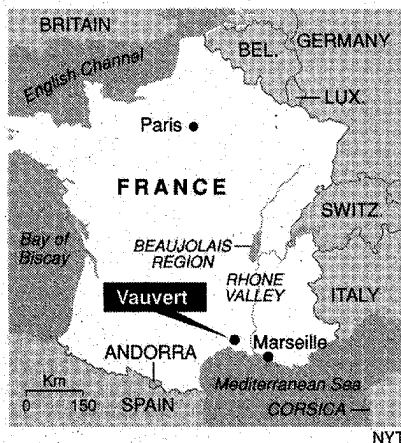
He said he would get only about half of what his wine would have sold for in a normal market, "though there's no normal anymore." He complained that wine wholesalers, knowing that vintners have to wait six months for the money the European Union gives for distilling, are offering cash at below-market prices for wine, depressing the market further.

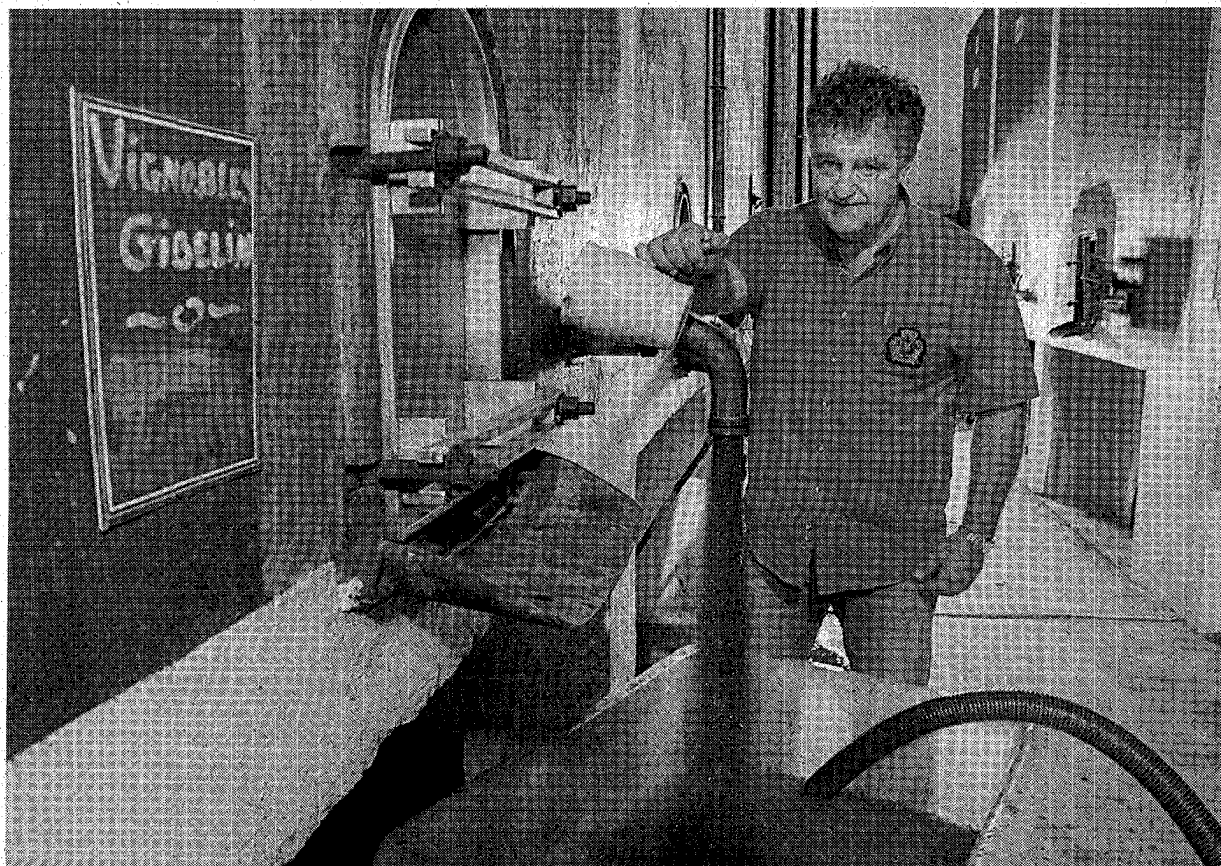
Raising a glass, he tried to shake off the somber mood. "Conviviality," he said. "You don't get it with Coke."

Momentarily revived, he rushed away from the table and returned careering from around a corner behind the wheel of a forklift, with which he lifted one of his workers, a steel pipette in one hand and an empty bottle in the other, to the top of a vat. A moment later, the man was back on the ground with a bottle of fresh red wine that would normally carry the winery's now ironic label, Château d'Espérite, or Castle of Hope.

He said he had until December to send the wine to the distillery. "It's like going to a funeral. You don't rush."

The New York Times





Laurent Giraudou for The New York Times

Olivier Gibelin, a winemaker in the south of France, is turning his good wine into ethanol because it cannot be sold.

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