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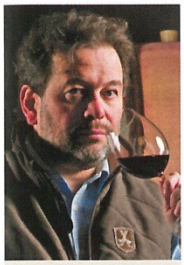

Michel Chapoutier has estates in France, Australia, and Portugal

GUEST COMMENT

Michel Chapoutier

'This research should be taken with a pinch of salt, or sense of humour'

THE UNIVERSITY OF Texas study, 'Climate Change, Wine and Conservation', published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* shocked me. Why? Because the writers – researchers in climatology – draw conclusions from specific and cultural cases that may be true in the New World, but are far from being general and do not apply to us in the Old World. I do not question their knowledge as researchers, but their conclusions are surprising.

By 2050, the study suggests that suitable grape-growing areas in Mediterranean Europe could drop by 68%, and in parts of Australia by 73%. Chile's existing premium wine-growing regions will be equally hard hit. Suitability is projected to fall in Tuscany, Bordeaux and the Rhône. New Zealand's suitable area, by contrast, will more than double, as will parts of northern Europe.

This seems simplistic. To say that there will be no more Syrah in the Rhône because we will start to plant Syrah in Burgundy is unfounded and purely gratuitous. The vine is a Mediterranean and sub-Mediterranean plant used to hot and dry climates and can adapt to environmental and climatic changes. In the worst case, if we look at the temperature forecasts for the next 50 years, climate change does not put us in danger. In other wine regions of the world, with warmer climates than we experience, Syrah and Cabernet grapes flourish. This is particularly the case in California, Australia and the Middle East, and it does not prevent those regions from making very good wines.

The research ignores several key points. First, there is always the opportunity to modify the proportion of different grape varieties in any blend. Bordeaux may reduce its proportion of Merlot, just as the southern Rhône may reduce the proportion of Syrah in favour of Grenache. Then, irrigation systems – which the researchers seem to think are universal – do not exist in Bordeaux or the Rhône. Therefore, root penetration is deeper and roots are more drought resistant. Plus, remember that great French wines were made in the extravagant 2003 vintage when temperatures were at the highest in our history and well beyond the temperatures expected for the next 50 years.

This research should be taken with a pinch of salt, or a sense of humour. By drawing general conclusions from specific instances as these researchers have done we could even prove wine consumption could affect the reproduction of pandas in China.