

Winemakers use technology to cut power, water costs

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South Africa's wine producers are increasingly using modern wine-making technology in a bid to reduce power and water costs, says winemaker Johan Weidenman of Spruitdrift, in the Olifants River wine district.

Weidenman said his winery had spent about R18m importing new grape-crushing machines from Germany.

The machines reduced the process by at least three steps, cutting down on the amount of water used for washing and extracting grape juice.

"The savings are such that the machine pays for itself within three to four years," he said.

While this meant that two or three jobs could be lost, winemakers felt they did not have much of a choice due to rising costs, especially energy prices.

The issue of automation is also likely to take centre stage as wine producers and grape farmers deal with the worker unrest in the Western Cape that started more than two weeks ago.

For Len Knoetze, production manager at Namaqua Wines in the Western Cape, the new machines have brought in new skills, which meant there had been new training and skills development for employees.

Ernest Janovsky, head of Absa Agribusiness, said machines were the future for the industry and would also make it possible for wine makers to increase their output. This would improve the quality of bulk wine.

"In the recent past, wine-making was an art and it took a rare skill to produce the best quality wines in small quantities.

"Today, the technology is making it easier for bulk winemakers to reach the same levels of quality wine production that used to be the speciality of small-scale winemakers," said Janovsky.

"It also means that the small-scale winemakers would soon have to form joint ventures or consolidate if they are to survive the impact of an industry that is consolidating fast to keep up with production expenses."

Janovsky said bigger producers were also equipping their sellers with experimental facilities that encouraged creativity among their workers.

"Due to financial constraints the smaller producers are not able to establish similar facilities, which adds to their challenges in an industry that is making it difficult for them to compete," he said.

Driaan van der Merwe, a winemaker at Namaqua Wines, said every producer had to reduce production costs.

As a result, many farmers were reviewing production processes. Firms were not only focusing on lower input costs but were buying storage and mixing facilities to improve efficiency.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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