Norway’s wine market is changing colour. For Italy, red is no longer enough

scritto da Stefano Montibeller | 28 Agosto 2026

Norway’s wine market is undergoing a structural shift towards lighter, fresher drinking. Tone Veseth Furuholmen MW explains why Italian reds remain resilient, where indigenous white grapes and traditional-method sparkling wines could grow, how small producers can access Vinmonopolet, and why lighter packaging and broader sustainability commitments will become increasingly important.

Vinmonopolet sold **40.9 million litres in the first half of 2026**, 2% less than in the same period of 2025. Yet the decline itself is not the most revealing figure. What matters is the **changing composition of demand**. Red wine remains Norway’s largest category, but white wine, beer and alcohol-free products are gaining ground. For Italy, still the leading source of red wine sold by the monopoly, this is both a warning and an invitation to rethink its offer.

Wine Meridian spoke to **Tone Veseth Furuholmen MW**, Senior Product Manager at Vinmonopolet with responsibility for Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece and Lebanon.

Vinmonopolet's sales fell by around 2% in the first half of 2026. Are Norwegians simply drinking less, or are they changing what they drink?

The decline is probably the result of several factors: **increased cross-border shopping**, the recovery in international travel and airport tax-free sales, a colder-than-normal spring and major sporting events. We recorded a fall during the Winter Olympics. During the FIFA World Cup, some consumption may have shifted from retail to the on-trade, although we will need the complete figures before drawing a firm conclusion.

The bigger story, however, is not simply that people are drinking less. Their choices continue to change. **Red wine is losing share to white wine, beer and alcohol-free alternatives**, while spirits remain relatively stable. Products perceived as lighter, with less alcohol, sugar and fewer calories, continue to gain ground. White wine is holding steady despite the overall market decline and now outsells red wine in twelve Vinmonopolet stores in central and western Oslo. In 2022, that was not the case in a single store.

This is not merely a short-term response to economic conditions. The move away from darker, heavier categories towards white, sparkling and rosé wine, beer and alcohol-free products has been measurable for **about 25 years**. It first became visible in Oslo around 2000 and has gradually spread across the country, although some regions remain 15 to 20 years ahead of others. In my view, it is a **structural change** driven by lifestyle, greater health awareness and, increasingly, climate and temperature patterns.

Italy is by far Norway’s leading red-wine country. As the market moves towards lighter styles, could that strength become a vulnerability?

Some decline in Italian red-wine sales might be expected, but so far they have proved relatively resilient. Year to date, they are down only **1.4%, compared with a 3.6% decline for red wine as a whole**. Piedmont is undoubtedly Italy’s most important red-wine region in Norway, in both volume and quality terms. Barbera-based wines, particularly in three-litre bag-in-box, drive volume, while Nebbiolo dominates the premium segment.

We should also ask which reds can fit the preference for lighter styles. Nebbiolo is often pale and transparent, with moderate oak influence. Although it can have considerable structure and elevated alcohol, it may give a lighter overall impression than heavily extracted, oak-driven wines. Many of the high-volume Barbera wines sold here are fresh, fruity and unoaked. I also see room for **juicy, carefully extracted reds that can be served slightly chilled** and place freshness ahead of power.

Italy is well positioned in sparkling wine too, although sales are declining. Prosecco played an important role in taking sparkling wine beyond celebrations and into more everyday occasions. **France overtook Italy in 2025**, however, as some consumers traded up and found in Crémant an accessible bridge between Prosecco and Champagne. This suggests untapped potential for Italian traditional-method wines such as **Franciacorta, Trento DOC and Alta Langa**. The difficulty is price: they are often significantly more expensive than French Crémant and therefore compete with a very well-established Champagne category.

How much genuine commercial opportunity is there for lesser-known Italian regions and indigenous grape varieties?

The potential is enormous, but we need to distinguish between **experienced and less experienced consumers**. The former increasingly appreciate Italy’s diversity and regional identity; the latter tend to rely on names they already recognise.

Italy’s approximately 600 registered grape varieties are a unique strength, but they also make the category difficult to navigate. Even committed wine enthusiasts can struggle to maintain a broad overview. At the same time, interest is growing in **wines perceived as distinctive and authentic**, and this is where Italy has opportunities few competitors can match. Volumes are still driven mainly by varieties such as Barbera and Sangiovese, but over the years we have seen wines made from lesser-known or nearly extinct grapes, including **Pelaverga and Schioppettino**, establish a lasting position in Norway.

Can a small Italian winery genuinely compete with a large company in the Vinmonopolet system?

The first step is to **find a Norwegian importer**, since Vinmonopolet does not buy directly from producers. Its English-language website also provides a list of importers whom producers can approach.

Products submitted through the tender process are **tasted blind by Vinmonopolet’s own panel**, and purchasing decisions are based on quality, price and availability. In this respect, the system formally offers the same opportunity to small and large producers. Vinmonopolet can purchase lots of only a few hundred bottles, which is particularly important for smaller wineries. Producers able to supply sufficient volumes, meanwhile, may secure nationwide distribution through approximately 350 stores.

Looking three to five years ahead, where do you see the greatest opportunities for Italian wine in Norway?

In categories that match the continuing preference for **fresher, lighter wines**, both red and white. Italian whites have interesting potential thanks to the country's wealth of indigenous grape varieties and their affinity with food. Soave has traditionally been Italy's most important white wine in Norway, but consumers are discovering less familiar varieties such as **Timorasso, Grillo and Pigato**.

Many Italian white grapes combine **naturally high acidity, moderate alcohol and a mineral profile**, qualities that fit contemporary Norwegian preferences. Consumers need to encounter these wines, however, before they can appreciate them. This remains a relatively unexplored category, and it takes curiosity and a degree of experience to value wines built around minerality, texture and freshness rather than immediate aromatic intensity. White-wine sales are still dominated by Chardonnay, Sancerre and dry German Riesling, but there is room for greater diversity.

Sustainability will also become increasingly important. Vinmonopolet is strongly committed to reducing CO_2 emissions throughout the value chain, and bottle weight is currently one of its main priorities. Producers that combine quality with socially and environmentally sustainable solutions in the vineyard, winery, packaging and transport will be more competitive. With its broad producer base, Italy is well placed to meet these expectations, especially if it can **act collectively**.

Punti chiave

1. **Market shift:** White wine, beer and alcohol-free products are gaining share as red wine declines.
2. **Italian reds:** Sales fell 1.4%, outperforming the overall red-wine category’s 3.6% decline.
3. **Growth areas:** Indigenous whites, fresher reds and traditional-method sparkling wines offer the strongest potential.
4. **Market access:** Small wineries need a Norwegian importer but can compete through blind Vinmonopolet tenders.
5. **Sustainability:** Bottle weight, packaging, transport and production standards will increasingly influence competitiveness.