Italy Leads China's Sparkling Wine Boom as Imports Return to Growth

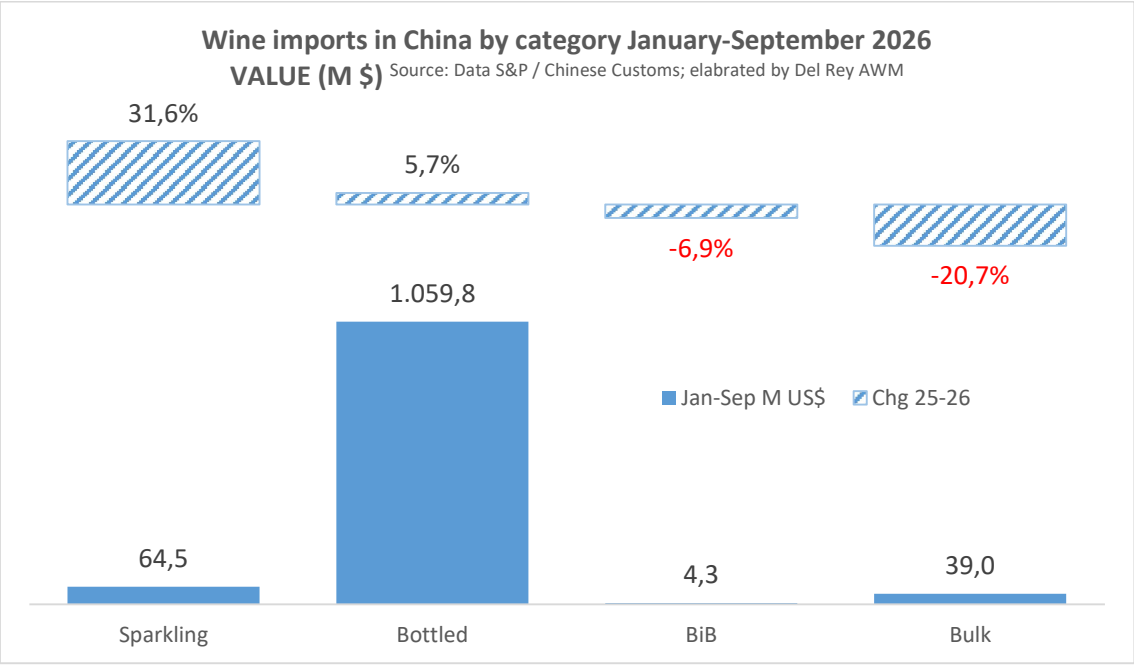
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China's wine imports returned to growth in value terms during the first nine months of 2026, with sparkling wines leading the recovery. According to Chinese customs data analysed by Del Rey AWM, wine imports increased by 5.6% in US dollar terms between January and September compared with the same period in 2025. However, the recovery was driven by higher average prices rather than increased volumes, as imports continued to decline.

Total wine imports reached $1,167 million, an increase of $61.9 million on the same period of the previous year. Import volumes, by contrast, fell by 5.5% to 156.9 million litres, representing a decline of 9 million litres. The average import price rose by $0.78 per litre to $7.44, up 11.7% from the previous year, reflecting a shift towards higher-value wines.

Sparkling wines lead the recovery

Sparkling wines emerged as the strongest-performing category, with import values surging by 31.6% to $64.5 million during the first three quarters of the year. Non-sparkling bottled wines, which account for most of China's wine imports, recorded more modest growth of 5.7%, reaching $1,059.8 million. Meanwhile, imports of bag-in-box (BiB) and bulk wines declined.



The contrast between categories was also evident in volume terms. Sparkling wine imports rose by 27.4% to 7.1 million litres, while non-sparkling bottled wine imports fell by 10.8% to 94.6 million litres.

The figures suggest that sparkling wines are playing a growing role in China's import market, combining rising demand with higher revenues. Nevertheless, the overall market remains under pressure, as the increase in import values has yet to translate into a recovery in total volumes.

A tentative turnaround after years of decline

The latest figures offer some relief after years of contraction in China's wine market. Wine import values fell from a peak of almost $2.9 billion in 2018 to less than $1.2 billion in 2023. A recovery in 2024 proved short-lived, with imports declining again in 2025.

The positive results recorded in 2026 therefore provide grounds for cautious optimism. However, the recovery remains uneven, driven primarily by higher average prices and stronger performance in the sparkling wine segment rather than by a broad-based increase in consumption.

Italy gains ground in China's sparkling wine market

Italy has emerged as one of the main beneficiaries of the recovery in sparkling wine imports, outperforming France in volume growth. The two countries occupy different price segments, with Italian sparkling wines entering China at an average price of $4.66 per litre, compared with approximately $30 per litre for French sparkling wines.

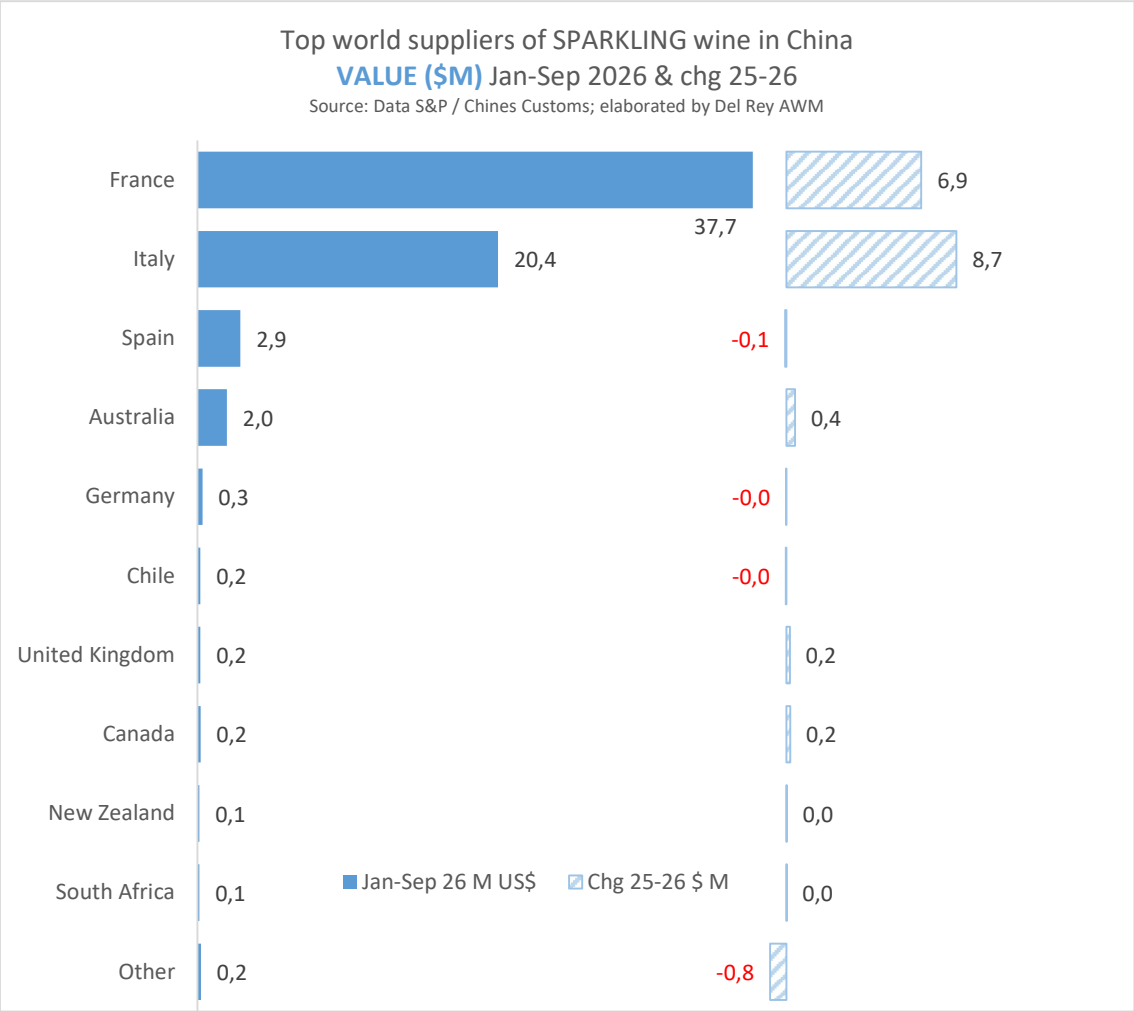
The difference highlights Italy's position in the more affordable segment of the market, where demand appears to be strengthening. France continues to command substantially higher prices, reflecting the premium positioning of its sparkling wine exports.

Other leading suppliers recorded comparatively limited changes in absolute terms, while Italy's gains were particularly pronounced in volume.

Between January and September 2026, Italian sparkling wine exports to China surged by 53.8% to 4.4 million litres, equivalent to approximately 489,000 nine-litre cases. French shipments increased by a more modest 21.3% to 1.3 million litres, or around 144,000 cases.

Spanish exports remained broadly stable at approximately 860,000 litres, while Australian shipments rose by 16.6% to 426,486 litres, roughly half Spain's volume.

Italy's performance reinforces its position as a key supplier in the expanding sparkling wine segment, benefiting from strong volume growth and a more accessible price point than France.



Two positive signals for a challenging market

The latest customs figures point to two encouraging developments in an otherwise difficult market for wine exporters.

First, China's wine imports have returned to growth in value terms after several years of sharp declines. Although volumes remain under pressure, rising average prices suggest that higher-value wines are helping to support import revenues.

Second, sparkling wines are showing considerably stronger momentum than other categories. Italy, in particular, is benefiting from this trend, with export volumes rising sharply at prices well below those of French sparkling wines.

Whether these developments mark the beginning of a sustained recovery remains uncertain. For now, however, the figures suggest that opportunities are emerging in China's wine market, particularly for sparkling wine producers able to combine competitive pricing with growing consumer demand.

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