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French Growers Press to Lift Ban on Hybrid Grapes

Supporters say the old varieties could help vineyards withstand heat, drought and disease with fewer treatments

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In the Loire, a retired grower is still making the case for old hybrid grape varieties that many French wine officials have spent decades trying to push out of the vineyard.

Daniel Mondon, who began farming in Boisset-Saint-Priest after turning to winegrowing at 50, said he never treated his old hybrid vines with pesticides and never saw disease on them. He built his vineyard in the Forez area around a mix of gamay and hybrids such as baco, seibel, couderc and ravat 6, and he said the vines fit his goal of farming with little intervention. “I never did any treatments at all on the old hybrids,” he said in an interview published Monday by Reussir Vigne. “I never had any diseases.”

His comments come as growers and advocates for so-called heritage hybrids are trying again to win recognition for grapes that remain banned for commercial wine production in France, including clinton, herbemont, isabelle d’Amérique, jacquez, noah and othello. Those six varieties have been restricted since 1934 under French law, later carried into European wine rules. Supporters argue that the ban no longer makes sense at a time when vineyards are under pressure from heat, drought and disease.

Mondon said the appeal of the hybrids was simple: they needed little or no treatment. He said he vinified without sulfur or filtration and aged his wines for three or four years in barrels. He also said he was not worried about the fox-like flavor often used to dismiss hybrid wines. At first, he said, consumers were skeptical. But over time, younger drinkers became more open to them.

The debate has gained urgency as climate change reshapes viticulture across Europe. Some hybrids ripen late, which can be an advantage in warmer seasons, while others show strong resistance to spring frost because their secondary buds can still bear fruit. Jérôme Villaret, who works on heritage grape projects for an IGP group in the Cévennes, said those traits helped some hybrids survive in remote areas even after official uprooting campaigns.

Villaret said growers are now pressing Brussels and Paris to lift the remaining restrictions. He said the French Agriculture Ministry again argued last summer that the banned grapes posed health risks because of methanol levels, a claim he rejected. According to him, studies show methanol levels remain below legal limits and can be lower than those found in some Vitis vinifera wines.

The issue reached the European Parliament after supporters were invited by Éric Sargiacomo, a Socialist member from France. An amendment aimed at easing the ban was initially accepted but later removed. Villaret said the European commissioner responsible for agriculture wants to revisit the matter during upcoming discussions on the common market organization for wine in 2026.

For Mondon, now retired but still active in promoting the grapes he once planted, the fight has become cultural as much as agricultural. He created a salon des vins rebelles in 2022 to keep these varieties from fading from memory and to give consumers a chance to taste them. This year’s event is scheduled for May 1 and 2 at Château de Bouthéon in the Forez plain, with about 20 winemakers expected, including four from Italy.

The movement has also drawn new growers. Didier Mounier, an engineer who now farms near Saint-Marcellin-en-Forez at Domaine Terre Vin Ciel, said he plans eventually to plant 5 hectares, with half devoted to hybrids, especially older ones such as chancellor and plantet because of their historical value and disease resistance. He also has taken an interest in saphira, a newer hybrid descended from noah.

Supporters say demand is growing among growers who want vines that can handle drought and disease with fewer inputs. They also point out that hybrid plantings once covered vast areas of France; Villaret said that in 1958 there were 400,000 hectares planted with hybrids nationwide.

For now, advocates say they have found one narrow legal path: French customs and European officials have confirmed that these grapes can be declared as “boisson à base de jus de raisin fermenté,” or fermented grape juice beverage, rather than wine. That workaround allows some producers to sell them while the broader ban remains in place.