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Climate Change Pushes France’s Grape Harvests Weeks Earlier

Growers say extreme heat now compresses decision-making, disrupts ripening and raises risks for wine quality, volumes and costs

Monday, August 3, 2026



Harvests across France are moving earlier into the calendar, and wine growers say the shift is making one of the most important moments of the year harder to manage.

Researchers and producers interviewed in France say the trend has become clear since the 1980s, as warmer average temperatures push grapes to ripen sooner. Jean-Marc Touzard, research director at Inrae, the French agricultural research institute, said harvest timing has advanced by at least four days per decade, even if year-to-year variation remains.

Government data cited in France show that in vineyards including Champagne, Alsace, Saint-Emilion, Tavel and Châteauneuf-du-Pape, harvests now take place on average 24 days earlier than they did in the 1970s. In the southern Rhône, the start of picking in Tavel and Châteauneuf-du-Pape has shifted from the second half of September in the 1950s to the second half of August. In Saint-Emilion, where harvest often began around Sept. 26 for much of the 20th century, it now tends to start near the beginning of the month. In 2022, it began as early as Aug. 29.

In Champagne, where harvest dates are set through consultation among industry groups, picking now begins about two weeks earlier than it did 20 years ago. The years 2003, 2011, 2022 and 2025 were especially notable for early starts.

This year may bring new records in some regions after three heat waves, with some white wine producers in Languedoc saying they planned to begin at the end of July. Before the 1980s, harvest there typically started around Sept. 15.

But growers and researchers say earlier does not always mean simpler. In some areas, recent extreme heat has slowed grape development rather than speeding it up. Jérôme Bauer, president of the national confederation representing producers of appellation wines, said some vineyards may not end up harvesting especially early because “the grape is no longer moving,” meaning ripening has stalled under heat stress.

Touzard said excessive heat can slow maturity because vines switch into a defensive mode. They reduce photosynthesis and close leaf pores to conserve water. That can make harvest dates harder to predict even in a warming climate that generally pushes them forward.

The result is a narrower and less stable decision window for growers. Sugar levels in grapes can rise suddenly once conditions change, forcing producers to monitor vineyards more closely and react faster. If they wait too long, they risk losing the balance they want between sugar and acidity.

That balance matters directly for wine style. Producers need enough sugar to produce alcohol, but they also want enough acidity to preserve freshness, a quality many consumers still seek. For sparkling wines and crémants, grapes are often picked slightly before full maturity, which adds another layer of timing pressure when ripening patterns become less predictable.

Bauer warned that some grapes this season may fail to ripen properly and may not be usable for quality wine production. He said he expected a small crop in some places.

Heat during harvest also raises practical risks after grapes are picked. Warmer fruit is more vulnerable to oxidation and unwanted fermentation during transport and processing. To limit damage, more growers are cooling harvested grapes, sometimes using carbon dioxide blocks or other refrigeration methods.

The changes are also affecting labor and investment decisions at wineries. Touzard said the acceleration of vine development creates added mental strain for growers who must track vineyard conditions more intensely while also adapting to market demand. Some producers are considering diversification through different grape varieties or more sparkling wines, but those choices can further complicate harvest logistics.

For the beverage sector, the shift matters beyond vineyard gates. Earlier and less predictable harvests can affect wine volumes, style consistency, alcohol-acid balance and production costs, with possible effects on supply planning and pricing for wineries, distributors and retailers. The need for more cooling equipment and faster cellar handling may also raise operating expenses during already compressed harvest periods.

French producers have shown a capacity to adapt through new techniques and vineyard strategies. But researchers say the pace of climate change is testing how far those adjustments can go, especially when extreme heat no longer just advances ripening but disrupts it altogether.