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Heat Forces Southern France’s Wine Growers to Harvest Grapes in July

Producers in Occitanie say the unprecedented early start is disrupting labor plans and accelerating climate adaptation in vineyards.

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Wine growers in southern France began harvesting grapes at the end of July this year after months of unusual heat pushed vineyards ahead of schedule, an early start that producers in Occitanie say they have never seen before and that is forcing faster changes in how wine regions manage water, labor and grape varieties.

In La Palme, in the Aude department near the Mediterranean coast, grower Alain Gleyzes started picking muscat à petits grains on July 30 during the night, an exceptionally early harvest for fruit destined for a sparkling white wine. Gleyzes, who also heads the Fitou appellation, said that in 43 years working in vineyards he had never harvested in July.

The early harvest is not limited to one estate. Inland, on the hills near Narbonne, Camille and Audrey Lalaurie, twin sisters representing the 10th generation at their family domaine, said they had never started before August 12. This year they expected to begin at the end of last week, about 10 days earlier than usual. Camille Lalaurie said that 20 years ago harvest there typically began around August 25.

Farther south in the Pyrénées-Orientales, Domaine Lafage also began picking at the end of last week. Jean-Marc Lafage said the estate was running one week to 10 days ahead of its normal schedule. Some of the grapes now being brought in are intended for a lower-alcohol wine, which requires fruit to be harvested before it becomes too ripe.

The shift follows a run of very warm months across the region. Growers said vines started growing early in March and then developed well through spring under elevated temperatures. Lafage said nearly every month since February had set a heat record locally. Producers and regional officials say the pattern adds to evidence that climate change is reshaping vineyard calendars in one of France’s largest wine-producing areas.

The speed of this year’s harvest has also created practical problems on estates that usually plan staffing around an August start. Lafage said part of his team was on vacation when picking began, forcing the winery to pull in employees from marketing, accounting and information technology to help with the harvest.

For some growers, the pressure comes after several years of severe dryness. Gleyzes said he had already been battling drought for years and at the end of 2025 had to uproot about 20 hectares from an estate of more than 60 hectares after two years of acute aridity. He said 30% of his vine stock had died from drought, something he had never experienced before.

That kind of loss matters beyond one farm because it can affect grape supply, production costs and the style of wines reaching the market. Earlier ripening can alter sugar levels, acidity and alcohol balance, while repeated drought losses may reduce yields and push wineries to invest more heavily in irrigation research, soil management and new plant material. For the broader beverage sector, especially wine producers and distributors tied to Mediterranean regions, these shifts could influence volumes, pricing and product profiles over time.

Producers say moving harvest dates is only one part of a broader adaptation effort. At Domaine Lafage, a viticulture research and development unit was created in 2020 and an agronomy engineer was hired to work with Montpellier SupAgro University on ways to improve water use. The estate has focused on increasing soil water storage capacity through new compost approaches. Lafage said growers have become more like “water farmers” than vine farmers.

Regional wine bodies are also studying longer-term responses. Stéphanie Delorme, director of the Languedoc AOP, said growers are working with what she described as a full toolbox as hot, drying wind events become more frequent. One area of study is grape varieties better suited to warmer conditions. She pointed to so-called adaptation-interest varieties, including older grapes once grown in Languedoc as well as some Greek and Italian varieties.

Other appellations are considering geographic changes. In Banyuls and Collioure, some producers are looking at moving vineyards to slightly higher elevations where temperatures are lower. Such changes would take time and depend on regulatory decisions as well as land availability, but they show how deeply heat is affecting vineyard planning.

Even with those pressures, some growers say recent data gives them reason to believe adaptation is possible. After several years of collecting information on vine behavior, soils and water management, Lafage said producers are beginning to see possible paths forward where only a few years ago many feared they would be overwhelmed.

The developments in Occitanie come as wine regions across Europe face more frequent heat waves and shifting growing seasons. In southern France, where appellations are closely tied to place and tradition, this year’s July harvest stands out as a clear sign that climate pressure is no longer a distant forecast but a current operational reality in the vineyard.