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Heat and drought pushed the Rhône Valley harvest to an unusually early start

Inter Rhône said Côte-Rôtie yields fell about 20% below normal, with growers still reporting promising wine quality

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The Rhône Valley’s 2026 wine harvest started unusually early and ended with lower yields in some key areas after a season shaped by heat and drought, according to Inter Rhône, the region’s wine trade body.

Inter Rhône said Wednesday that winter and spring rain had rebuilt soil water reserves before a string of summer heatwaves and dry conditions hit vineyards across the region. Even with that earlier moisture, growers still faced fast ripening and had to monitor plots closely to decide when to pick.

Harvesting began exceptionally early in many vineyards, with some producers starting in mid-August. Inter Rhône said the wide range of conditions from one area to another made timing critical, as growers tried to preserve the balance of the wines by adapting to each terroir and adjusting picking dates with precision.

Samuel Montgermont, president of Inter Rhône, described the vintage as difficult to predict but promising in its final results. He said the season had tested growers, but that the wines had shown encouraging quality, with whites marked by strong aromatic intensity and reds standing out for structure and maturity.

In the Northern Rhône, the first grapes were picked in Diois on August 11, making it the earliest harvest ever recorded there, according to Inter Rhône. A few days later, growers in Côte-Rôtie began harvesting on August 15, ahead of rainfall that arrived in the second half of August.

Inter Rhône said yields in Côte-Rôtie were about 20% below normal, though it described grape quality as dense and concentrated. In Condrieu, harvest started on August 22, with vines reported to be in excellent condition. Hermitage AOC and Cornas also saw early harvests that were viewed positively by growers.

Saint-Péray was one of the hardest-hit areas in the north. Inter Rhône said the appellation went through six successive heatwaves during the season. Even so, growers reported that older vines had held up well under the extreme conditions, a sign that vine age and rooting depth may have helped plants cope with prolonged stress.

Farther south, heat and drought also played a central role, though Inter Rhône said the overall picture was more balanced than many growers had feared earlier in the season. In Cairanne, a rainy spring gave way to a very dry summer. Harvest there began on August 20 and continued until the start of October.

Laurent Brusset, co-president of Cairanne AOC, said the vintage had been surprising, challenging and demanding, but that the final quality was high. Other southern appellations, including Rasteau, Lirac and Duché d’Uzès, also reported early harvests with strong grape quality.

In Costières de Nîmes, Inter Rhône said winter and spring rain restored water reserves and sea breezes helped soften the effect of the summer heat. Michel Gassier, co-president of Costières de Nîmes AOC, said the area’s white wines were showing excellent balance, freshness and aromatic expression, while the reds were showing maturity, balance and potential.

The Rhône’s experience adds to a wider pattern in European wine regions, where warmer growing seasons are pushing harvests earlier and making yields less predictable from one appellation to another. In the Rhône, the 2026 season appears to have produced wines that growers regard as high in quality, but the reduced output in places such as Côte-Rôtie could still matter for merchants, importers and retailers who depend on steady volumes from one of France’s major export regions.

That pressure is likely to be felt most in premium appellations where lower yields can tighten supply even when quality is strong. For the drinks trade, the season is also another sign that vineyard management, site selection and the ability to respond quickly to heat and drought are becoming more important to long-term production planning.

Inter Rhône’s account of the vintage suggests that the region avoided a broader collapse in volume despite the weather. But the contrast between replenished water reserves early in the year and intense summer stress later on underlines the fragile balance many growers now face. Where rain came at the right time and soils retained enough moisture, vines appear to have resisted the hottest periods. Where pressure was more severe, as in Côte-Rôtie and Saint-Péray, producers relied on careful timing and the resilience of established vineyards to protect fruit quality.

The result, according to the regional body and local appellation leaders, is a harvest that arrived earlier than usual, demanded constant attention in the vineyard and delivered wines that may still compare well in the market, even as lower yields in some

areas raise questions about future supply and the cost of adapting to increasingly volatile growing conditions.