vinetur

Champagne producers rework vineyards to protect the region’s signature style

Houses are testing Voltis, reviving late-ripening grapes, blocking malolactic fermentation to preserve acidity in hotter, drier seasons

Monday, November 23, 2026



Champagne producers are turning to new grape material, stricter plant health measures and technical changes in the cellar as climate change alters the conditions that long defined France’s best-known sparkling wine region, according to reporting by

Decanter.

The shift has become more urgent after a run of unusual seasons, including the 2025 harvest, which Perrier-Jouët cellar master Séverine Frerson told Decanter was unlike anything she had seen. Her assessment reflected a wider concern in Champagne, where producers are trying to preserve the freshness, moderate alcohol and high acidity that have historically made the region's wines suited to the traditional method of sparkling wine production.

That challenge goes to the heart of Champagne's identity. The region built its reputation in a cool, wet northern climate where still wines were often too sharp and light to stand out on their own, but proved highly suited to sparkling wine. As warmer seasons push grapes to ripen earlier and accumulate more sugar, growers and houses are weighing how far they can adapt without changing the style that defines Champagne.

One area of focus is grape genetics. In 2022, France's appellation authority, INAO, approved the disease-resistant variety Voltis for trial use in the Champagne appellation. Decanter reported that the authorization came with strict limits: a maximum of 5% of any estate's vineyard area and no more than 10% in any finished blend. The trial is due to be reviewed in 2032. The first plantings began in 2023, and by May 2026 about 10 hectares had been planted, roughly 0.03% of Champagne's total vineyard area.

Producers are also revisiting older regional grapes such as Petit Meslier and Arbane, which are known for high acidity and late ripening. In a warmer climate, those traits can help slow sugar accumulation and preserve freshness. Their footprint remains very small. Decanter said their combined plantings account for less than 0.1% of Champagne's vineyard area.

At the Comité Champagne, or CIVC, potential new varieties are being vinified in small test batches to see whether they can fit the sensory profile expected in Champagne. Pierre Naviaux, the CIVC's sustainable development manager, told Decanter that wines from these trials can vary widely, with some showing strongly aromatic notes that are far from the relatively restrained character associated with Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Meunier. He said new varieties are part of the region's toolbox, but not its main tool.

Many leading producers are instead investing in greater diversity within Champagne's established grapes. Louis Roederer has spent years collecting and replanting massal selections, meaning genetically diverse vine material taken from existing vineyards rather than standardized commercial clones. The house's cellar master, Jean-Baptiste Lécaillon, told Decanter that the goal is to recover plant material that may need a longer growing season and may cope better with heat.

Roederer's program began in 2002 with selections from some of its oldest pre-clonal vines, planted before 1960 in what is now Domaine Cristal. With support from vine specialists and the company's vineyard team, the house selected cuttings judged most promising for quality and resilience and replanted them in four propagation conservatories. Decanter reported that more than 100 variants are now being propagated, mostly Pinot Noir but also some of Champagne's other traditional grapes.

The same work is being done on rootstocks, which matter because low genetic diversity can leave vineyards more exposed to climate shocks and disease. Lécaillon told Decanter that mixing genetic material within the same plot can improve resilience because not all vines reach vulnerable stages, such as flowering, at the same moment.

A broader effort is also taking shape at the regional level. The CIVC is part of Qanopée, a €10 million project with Burgundy, Beaujolais and Jura aimed at securing the long-term viability of more than 20 grape varieties and protecting genetic diversity. In Champagne, the project includes a 4,500-square-meter insect-proof bioclimatic greenhouse in Oger, in the Marne department, where disease-free vine material can be prepared for grafts and rootstocks. That work was previously done in open fields, but Decanter reported that sanitary risks and climate pressure have made the process more vulnerable.

Moët & Chandon is pursuing a similar conservation strategy through its Essentia project, part of the wider Natura Nostra program launched in 2021. The company planted a four-hectare vineyard in 2022 that it describes as a living library of genetically diverse vines from different grape varieties, including material from old vines.

Disease pressure is helping drive these investments. One of the region's main concerns is flavescence dorée, a bacterial disease spread by leafhoppers. Decanter reported that warmer temperatures have helped the disease move north from southern France into areas including Champagne, while earlier springs are causing the insects' eggs to hatch sooner. Faster insect development and warmer conditions can also favor the disease itself.

That threat is changing how producers think about biodiversity measures. Tree planting and hedgerows, once promoted mainly to improve landscape diversity and local microclimates, are increasingly being seen as a way to attract birds and bats that may help control insect populations. Moët & Chandon has planted 20 kilometers of ecological corridors in the region and plans to expand that network significantly. The corridors are meant to connect existing biodiversity areas and support species that can help regulate pests.

The pressure is not limited to the vineyard. Producers are also trying to manage the chemistry of hotter vintages once grapes reach the winery. Frerson told Decanter that regenerative practices such as cover crops can reduce heat at soil level and, in some plots, lowered alcohol by 0.3 points. But those practices bring trade-offs in dry years because cover crops can also compete with vines for water. Decanter identified 2025 and 2026 as especially dry seasons that made that balance harder to manage.

Inside the cellar, some houses are changing long-standing practices to preserve acidity. Perrier-Jouët, which had previously completed malolactic fermentation as a matter of course, is now choosing to block that conversion in some wines. The process turns sharper malic acid into softer lactic acid. By preventing it, producers can retain a brighter acid profile in years when grapes arrive riper than in the past. Frerson told Decanter that, among the cellar tools available, stopping malolactic fermentation has one of the biggest effects.

Other adjustments include reducing dosage, the sugar solution added before release, using different yeast strains and modifying aging times. Decanter reported that producers increasingly see yeast and other microbes as an important frontier in climate adaptation. At Moët Hennessy's Robert-Jean de Vogüé Research Centre, Moët &

Chandon is working with its own yeast strain and developing others that could better handle high alcohol levels and lower nutrient availability in musts from warmer seasons. The company’s research director, Marc Brevot, told Decanter that microbiology may also have uses beyond fermentation, including soil and plant health, recycling and even packaging materials.

The stakes extend well beyond one French wine region. Champagne remains one of France’s most profitable wine areas and a benchmark for the global sparkling wine business. How it responds to warming temperatures, disease pressure and changing ripening patterns could influence where producers invest, how they manage vineyard health and what consumers come to expect from premium sparkling wine. Those choices may also shape decisions in other parts of the beverage industry as wine groups, growers and suppliers prepare for the same pressures.