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Italy's premium Prosecco hills preserved their 2026 harvest despite record heat

Growers used emergency irrigation, denser leaf cover, soil measures to keep output less than 1% below 2025

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The steep vineyards of Conegliano Valdobbiadene in northeastern Italy, home to some of the most expensive Prosecco, are becoming a closely watched example of how wine producers may adapt to a hotter climate without losing a harvest.

Growers and the Prosecco Conegliano Valdobbiadene DOCG consortium said the 2026 season was one of the hottest on record in the region, with drought, unusually warm nights and daytime temperatures several degrees Celsius above historical norms. Even so, producers expect the harvest to be broadly in line with 2025, a result that stands out at a time when other European wine regions have suffered sharper climate-related losses.

The area, in the UNESCO-listed hills north of Venice, is known for so-called heroic vineyards because of their altitude and steep slopes. The denomination is separate from the wider and more common Prosecco DOC, though both are made from the Glera grape. According to the consortium, the region’s experience is showing that yields can still be preserved under more extreme weather, but only with growing technical and financial pressure.

That makes the region’s response important beyond one corner of Italian wine. Across the beverage sector, producers that depend on agricultural raw materials are facing similar questions about water supply, quality consistency and whether higher adaptation costs can be absorbed in a competitive market. In wine especially, the balance between sugar and acidity is central to style, freshness and commercial value.

Research commissioned by the consortium and carried out this year by the University of Cantabria in Spain modeled how factors including daytime and nighttime temperatures, humidity and rainfall could change in the coming decades. Consortium director Diego Tomasi and producers told Reuters that the conditions seen in the summer of 2026 broadly matched what the models had projected for around 2045.

The growing cycle has already changed. Over the past two decades, the vine cycle in the premium hills has shortened by as much as 16 days, according to the consortium. The 2026 harvest began about 10 days earlier than the historical average. By September 15, about 90% of the harvest had been completed, with quantities reported as similar to 2025.

Tomasi said the region recorded 60 nights in 2026 when temperatures stayed above 20 degrees Celsius, or 68 degrees Fahrenheit. Four of those were “super-tropical” nights, with temperatures above 23 degrees Celsius, leaving vines little chance to recover from

the daytime heat. Warm nights are especially difficult for vineyards because they reduce the plant’s ability to slow its metabolism and regain balance after hot days.

Despite that stress, consortium documents reviewed by Reuters showed production topped 70 million bottles in the first nine months of 2026. That was less than 1% below the same period in 2025 and about 7% above the average of the past decade. The consortium sold about 98 million bottles in 2025, up 8% from 2024.

The outcome contrasts with conditions elsewhere in Europe. France’s farm ministry has forecast that Champagne production from the 2026 harvest will fall 38% from 2025 after frost, hail, drought and heatwaves. Tomasi said comparisons are difficult because climate, grape varieties and vine age differ from region to region. In Conegliano Valdobbiadene, steep vineyards are seldom replanted, which means some vines are 80 to 90 years old. He said their age may have helped them endure extremes after decades of adaptation to local conditions.

Growers also say they have had to abandon practices that were once considered standard. Primo Franco, of the Nino Franco winery, told Reuters that the turning point came after the extreme summer of 2003. Since then, he said, growers have cut back far less than they used to, leaving more foliage around grape clusters, especially on south-facing slopes, to shield fruit from the strongest afternoon sun.

That is a clear reversal from older vineyard management, which often aimed to expose bunches to more sunlight to raise sugar levels and, in turn, alcohol. Under hotter conditions, too much exposure can now push grapes out of balance.

Water management has become another central issue as rainfall arrives in shorter and more intense bursts. Producers are trying to increase organic matter in the soil to help retain moisture, while also studying reservoirs that could store water for dry periods. Franco said he had long opposed irrigation but changed his view. He told Reuters that, beginning in 2025, he accepted the advice of his winemaker and had a well installed.

Rules for the DOCG denomination do not allow irrigation intended to raise production, but they do permit emergency irrigation, a tool that had traditionally been used mainly for young vines. In 2026, producers said mature vineyards also needed help. Franco

Adami, another grower in the area, said workers spent weeks hauling pipes across steep hillsides to reach stressed vines. “It saved the harvest,” he said.

The adaptations are expensive in a region where costs were already high. Because of the steep terrain, mechanization is limited and much of the work must still be done by hand. Growers said that climate adaptation is likely to push those costs higher still, while competition in the sparkling wine market leaves little room to pass the increase on to consumers.

There are also signs that preserving volume may not fully protect wine style. Researchers involved in the consortium’s study said warmer temperatures speed up sugar accumulation and reduce acidity, especially malic acid, which contributes fresh, crisp flavors. Franco and Adami said growers saw higher pH levels and lower malic acid in 2026, though both said the quality remained high.

The issue matters for sparkling wine in particular because freshness and acidity are key to the profile many consumers expect. More broadly, it offers a warning for producers of wines and other drinks that depend on specific flavor chemistry in fruit or grains: climate resilience may keep output stable while still changing the character of what is produced.

The pressure comes at a difficult moment for the wider wine business. The industry has been hit by health-related pressure on consumption and by inflation tied to energy costs and war, which has reduced consumer spending. Even so, Italian sparkling wines have generally held up better than other categories. Industry figures show exports of still Italian wine fell 9.1% by value in the first half of 2026 from a year earlier, while sparkling wine exports were broadly stable, slipping 1.6%.

According to the Unione Italiana Vini observatory, Prosecco accounts for 78% of Italian sparkling wine exports by value, helped by strong demand linked to aperitifs and cocktails. That relative strength has not eased concerns among growers in Conegliano Valdobbiadene, who say they face continued spending on water systems, vineyard practices and infrastructure as warming becomes a constant operating condition rather than a future risk.

“We must no longer speak of climate change,” Tomasi said. “We must simply speak of the current climate.”