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Adapting to Climate Change: the new reality for vineyards and winemakers

How winemakers are adapting to a new climate reality

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As the world grapples with the undeniable impacts of climate change, the wine industry faces its own unique challenges. Vineyards around the globe are witnessing significant shifts in their growing seasons, prompting winemakers to adapt both in the vineyard and the cellar.

The Accelerated Vineyard Calendar

Notable changes have been observed in key wine regions. In Bordeaux, Nicolas Glumineau of Pichon Comtesse reports a reduction in the average growing season, now approximately 90 days compared to the historical 100-110 days. This pattern echoes in Burgundy, the Rhône Valley, Italy's Trentino region, and the Rheingau in Germany, where the growing seasons are shortening due to earlier budbursts and accelerated ripening periods.

The Challenges of a Shortened Season

This shift towards shorter growing seasons presents a multitude of challenges. Winemakers like Alberto Tasca in Sicily and McPrice Myers in Paso Robles are adjusting to balance phenolic and sugar ripeness, a task made more complex by the accelerated maturation of grapes. The risk of frost damage due to early budburst and the need for more frequent monitoring of vineyards have also become more pronounced.

Silver Linings Amidst Change

Despite the difficulties, there are some benefits. Lower disease pressure is a notable advantage, as observed by David Moreau in Burgundy and Jacques Grange in the Rhône Valley. Shorter seasons also mean avoiding the risks associated with late-season rain and rot, leading to healthier, more consistent harvests.

Vineyard Strategies: Canopy Management and Beyond

In response to these changes, vineyard management techniques are evolving. Winemakers like Stefan Doktor in Germany and Maurizio Maurizi in Italy are implementing more nuanced canopy management to protect grapes from intense sun, while others, like Laura Bianchi in Tuscany, are minimizing leaf removal to avoid sunburn. Pruning strategies are also adapting, with later and more careful approaches being adopted to delay budburst and manage the growth cycle more effectively.

Cellar Adaptations

In the cellar, the focus has shifted towards managing higher alcohol levels and ensuring balanced extraction. Techniques like incorporating whole bunches during fermentation are gaining traction to retain freshness and tension in the wines. Winemakers are becoming more vigilant in their approach to vinification, closely monitoring and adjusting their methods in response to the changing characteristics of their grapes.

Looking to the Future: Adaptation and Preservation

As winemakers navigate these changes, many are exploring new sites with cooler climates or more favorable exposures. However, there remains a strong commitment to preserving traditional terroirs and grape varieties. Winemakers are experimenting within their existing vineyards, seeking ways to enhance the resilience of their vines while staying true to their heritage.

This evolving landscape poses both challenges and opportunities for the wine industry. As winemakers adapt to the changing climate, they are not only preserving their heritage but also paving the way for sustainable viticulture in an uncertain future.