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French Wine Regions Battered: Frost, Hail, and Mildew Ravage 2024 Harvest

Can Growers Overcome Devastating Losses?

Monday, May 27, 2024



In the ever-unpredictable world of winemaking, dealing with Mother Nature's whims is a year-round challenge for viticulturists. Unfortunately, the start of the 2024 season in France has been particularly tough, with major frost events and hailstorms wreaking havoc across several key wine regions. The consequences are dire, with significant losses reported in Cahors, the Jura, Bergerac, Chablis, and beyond.

Cahors has been hit hardest, with an estimated 80% of its 2024 harvest lost to frost at the end of April. The local deputy, Aurélien Pradié, has voiced grave concerns about the survival of vineyards in the Cahors appellation. The Jura region is echoing this sentiment, with Château Chalon's Domaine Berthet-Bondet losing 70% of its harvest and Domaine Noir Frères in Poligny reporting similar devastation.

"We've experienced four frost attacks in eight years – it's starting to take its toll," said regional prefect Serge Castel, capturing the weary outlook shared by many.

Despite an early start to the growing season in Beaujolais and Burgundy, heavy rainfall has stymied vine growth, heightening the threat of mildew. Organic organization AgriBio Rhône et Loire's Brieg Clodoré highlighted the challenges, noting the heavy rain followed by hot weather creates perfect conditions for mildew. Tractors struggle to navigate the sodden vineyards, forcing growers to use backpack sprayers to combat mildew.

In Burgundy, particularly in the Maconnais and Côte d'Or, wet weather has also been problematic. Thunderstorms recently threatened the region, although most hail damage was contained to Dijon town. Nonetheless, mildew has made its presence known, adding another layer of concern for growers.

Chablis has been grappling with destructive hail and early disease pressure. A late April hailstorm caused significant damage, especially in the villages of Fontenay-près-Chablis, Villy, and Chapelle-Vaupelteigne, where almost all vines were hit. Audrey Cellier of the Yonne Chamber of Agriculture noted that mildew spots have been appearing since early April, complicating efforts to protect the vines.

Champagne hasn't been spared either. A mid-May hailstorm ravaged around 200 hectares of vineyards in the Aisne department, with estimates suggesting a 70% reduction in yield for the affected area. The Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne (CIVC) also reported a 9% loss of primary buds across the entire appellation due to frosts in April. While not as severe as the losses in 2021, it still represents a significant setback.

In the Muscadet region, unusually cold weather has led to a phenomenon called "filage," where vines abort flowering, significantly impacting potential yields. Florent Banctel, a viticultural advisor, noted this issue is unprecedented and poses a serious concern for the region's flagship variety, Melon de Bourgogne. With vines choosing to sacrifice bunches to continue growing, growers like Eric Vincent of Domaine de la Foliette are left scrambling to assess the potential yield losses while managing mildew threats.

Bordeaux is once again contending with mildew, although the current outbreaks are less severe than last year's devastating events. The early arrival of mildew in Saint-Emilion, described as "completely crazy" by local growers, has everyone glued to weather apps, desperately searching for windows to apply spray treatments.

The Limoux region faced a major hailstorm that obliterated leaves, bunches, and shoots in its vineyards. However, the destruction was not as widespread across the appellation. Corsica, on the other hand, has mostly been spared from severe weather and mildew pressure, with vines reportedly ahead of the 2023 vintage by eight to ten days, offering a glimmer of hope amid a challenging season.

As French winemakers navigate these turbulent conditions, their resilience and adaptability remain crucial. The 2024 season may have started on a rocky note, but the determination of these viticulturists to protect and nurture their vines is a testament to their enduring passion for their craft.