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Downy Mildew Ravages French Vineyards

French Winemakers Battle Devastating Mildew

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The French wine industry is grappling with a recurring issue in 2024: downy mildew, exacerbated by unusually heavy rainfall during the winter, spring, and even into the summer months of July. This fungal disease, thriving in such conditions, has spread across various wine-producing regions, from Bordeaux in the southwest to Jura in the

east, as reported by multiple media outlets.

Persistent rains have created an ideal environment for downy mildew. Météo France, the national meteorological organization, noted that the spring of 2024 has been the wettest since 2008 and the fourth wettest on record. This rainfall has been abundant across nearly all wine-growing regions, sparing only a few areas near the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees.

The exact impact on this year's wine harvest remains uncertain. France's Ministry of Agriculture is set to release its initial production estimates for the 2024 vintage on August 9. However, preliminary reports from Bordeaux highlight significant challenges. The region, already reeling from intense mildew outbreaks last year, faced prolonged rainfall starting in November, coupled with a mild winter, which allowed the fungus to remain active in the vineyards.

Producers in Bordeaux have emphasized the importance of early protective measures, particularly organic treatments, to mitigate the effects of downy mildew. Some grape varieties, such as Merlot, have been more susceptible than others. Biodynamic practices, including the use of cow manure for soil health, quartz applications for vine leaves, and sprays made from horsetail and buckthorn, have been part of the strategy to combat this disease. Nevertheless, these efforts have incurred significant financial costs, necessitating more manual labor and additional treatments.

Within Bordeaux, the situation varies. While some areas have managed the mildew relatively well, others have suffered more substantial losses. Regions like Fronsac and Entre-Deux-Mers have faced a triple threat of mildew, hail, and frost, leading to considerable damage.

Producers now hope for stable summer weather. A dry summer with moderate temperatures would benefit the vines significantly. The véraison, or the onset of ripening, has begun, and the first white grape harvests are expected by late August.

Elsewhere in France, the pressure from downy mildew is also significant. Le Bien Public reported on the challenges in Châtillonais, known for its Crémant de Bourgogne sparkling wines, located northwest of Dijon. Similarly, France 3 highlighted the severe

impact on Jura's vineyards following late April frosts.

In the Champagne region, growers have also battled considerable mildew pressure. However, according to Maxime Toubart, president of the Champagne growers' union (SGV), diligent efforts by producers have managed to keep the problem under control.

As the French wine industry contends with these climatic adversities, the resilience and adaptability of vintners are tested yet again. The hope for a favorable summer underscores the delicate balance between nature and viticulture, a balance that growers continuously strive to maintain in the face of increasingly unpredictable weather patterns. The outcomes of the 2024 harvest will undoubtedly reflect these challenges and the relentless effort of those committed to preserving the legacy of French wine.