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High Costs, Low Prices Push Bordeaux Winemakers to the Brink

Climate Change, Overproduction Force Bordeaux Vineyard Reductions

Tuesday, September 3, 2024



The 2024 harvest season in Bordeaux has officially commenced with the picking of grapes destined for the production of Crémants, marking the first steps in what is expected to be a challenging year for the region. Representing just 1% of Bordeaux's vineyards, the Crémants have become a symbol of both tradition and resilience as winemakers face the reality of a projected "low" overall production. The Bordeaux Wine Council (CIVB) has highlighted several factors contributing to this expected shortfall,

from climatic challenges to deliberate vineyard reductions.

The first grape cuts for the Crémants were made at the tail end of last week, with the main harvest for red wines anticipated to begin around September 23rd. This timing, considered more "traditional," reflects the "normal" temperatures Bordeaux has experienced this year. After years of erratic weather patterns that often pushed harvest dates earlier, this return to a more typical timeline is seen as a positive sign by many in the region.

However, despite the favorable summer conditions, the overall outlook for the harvest remains cautious. One significant factor is the intentional reduction of vineyard acreage. Last year, Bordeaux's vineyard area was recorded at 103,000 hectares, a number that is expected to shrink further by the year's end. This reduction is partly a response to an ongoing overproduction crisis that has plagued the region, forcing difficult decisions on vineyard management and cultivation practices.

Beyond the strategic reduction of vineyards, nature itself has posed significant challenges this year. Spring rains brought with them a "very strong pressure" of mildew, a fungal disease that thrives in wet conditions and can devastate crops. The Bordeaux Wine Council has acknowledged the "exhausting" effort required by vintners to combat the spread of mildew, with many spending every day in their vineyards to protect their grapes. Despite these efforts, the disease has taken a toll, contributing to the anticipated lower yields.

Adding to the difficulties, the phenomenon of coulure has also been reported, particularly affecting Merlot, Bordeaux's most widely planted grape variety. Coulure occurs when flowers fail to develop into fruit, often due to unfavorable weather during the flowering period. This year, the problem was exacerbated by the June rains, further limiting the potential harvest. Despite these setbacks, there is hope that the quality of the remaining grapes will be high, especially given the "very good acidity" noted in the freshly harvested Crémants grapes, which bodes well for the production of this sparkling wine.

Economic Struggles and Vineyard Reduction

The challenges in Bordeaux are not limited to the vineyard; they extend to the broader economic context of the region. Bordeaux has been grappling with a severe overproduction crisis, leading to a saturated market and plummeting prices. In response, many producers have taken the difficult step of reducing the number of vines they cultivate. This process has been supported by financial compensations aimed at encouraging the removal of surplus vineyards, thereby helping to rebalance the market.

One of the more drastic measures in place involves penalties for landowners who allow their vineyards to fall into disrepair. The state has introduced fines of up to €5,000 per hectare for those who abandon their vineyards, a move designed to prevent the spread of disease from neglected plots. Currently, four legal proceedings are underway against properties in such conditions, with additional inspections planned following the harvest.

The Bordeaux Wine Council has projected that by the end of the year, between 10,000 and 15,000 hectares of vineyards will be removed, including 9,000 hectares as part of a subsidized program. This reduction represents roughly 10% of Bordeaux's total vineyard area, a significant downsizing that underscores the gravity of the current economic and environmental challenges facing the region.

As the harvest season progresses, Bordeaux's wine industry faces a mix of hope and uncertainty. While the reduction in vineyard acreage and the ongoing battle against diseases like mildew and coulure present significant hurdles, there is cautious optimism regarding the quality of the 2024 vintage. A sunny summer has helped to ripen the grapes that have survived, and the first signs from the Crémants suggest that this year could still produce wines of notable quality, even if the quantity is lower than usual.

The coming weeks will be critical as winemakers across Bordeaux bring in the rest of their harvest. The focus will not only be on the immediate results of the 2024 vintage but also on the long-term strategies that Bordeaux will need to adopt to navigate both the economic and environmental challenges that continue to shape the region's future.