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Frost and Rain Ravage Champagne Vineyards

Champagne Faces Crisis as Harvest Yields Plummet

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The 2024 harvest in the Champagne region has been notably marked by erratic weather patterns, resulting in a small and uneven crop. After a year of plentiful production in 2023, this season has been dramatically different, shaped by significant challenges such as relentless rain, spring frost, and disease. The combination of these elements has cast a shadow over what is typically one of the most eagerly anticipated harvests in the world of wine.

Since October of last year, rainfall has been a constant feature across the Champagne appellation, but its distribution has been far from uniform. The most affected areas have been the Aube department to the south, and Aisne to the west. In Aube, the situation has been particularly dire, with rainfall hitting annual averages well before flowering. The heavy rain returned after flowering, saturating the vineyards once again. In some places, almost 100 milliliters of rain have drenched harvesters in the last ten days alone, adding significant weight to the grape clusters. Yet, according to producers like Etienne Sandrin, the increase in weight hasn't translated into a larger quantity of grapes. The bunches themselves are far fewer in number.

One of the most dramatic events of the growing season came on the night of April 22, when a brutal frost swept through parts of Champagne. The Aube region was hit hardest by what local producers have dubbed a "Moscow-Paris Siberian Glacial Air Express." This sudden and extreme frost devastated the vineyards, particularly in the subregions of Bar-sur-Aube and Bar-Sur-Seine, freezing the vines and destroying a significant portion of the year's crop.

Michel Drappier, the head of Champagne Drappier, described the aftermath of this event with a deep sense of loss, as vineyards that should have been thriving were instead left barren. This frost has become one of the defining moments of the 2024 vintage, setting the stage for what would become a difficult season ahead.

The excessive rain, which persisted throughout the growing season, left the vines highly susceptible to disease, particularly downy mildew, which spread quickly in the damp conditions. In addition to mildew, localized hailstorms struck parts of the region, further reducing the number of viable grapes left on the vines.

Jean-Sébastien Fleury of Champagne Fleury noted that his vineyards were particularly hard-hit, with losses of up to 95%. In light of the damage, Fleury decided to share a pressing facility with Champagne Robert Barbichon, underscoring the gravity of the situation. Overall, some areas have reported crop losses as high as 50%, while isolated outbreaks of botrytis (gray rot) also threatened the already diminished harvest.

The brief heatwave at the end of August, which scorched some grapes, added another layer of complexity. This intense, late-summer heat affected ripening, with Chardonnay struggling the most to reach the desired levels of maturity. In the Sézannais region, excessive rainfall accelerated the development of botrytis, further impeding Chardonnay's maturation.

Despite the tumultuous conditions, the Comité Champagne (CIVC) set goals for ripeness, aiming for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir to reach 10.5% potential alcohol and Meunier to hit 10%. However, slow ripening due to the cool, wet weather led the CIVC's director of quality and sustainable development, Sébastien Dubuisson, to revise these targets downward to between 9.5% and 10%. Even with these lowered expectations, it remains challenging for many vineyards to achieve these levels of ripeness, and producers are facing difficult decisions about whether to harvest underdeveloped grapes or risk waiting longer in hope of improvement.

The slow maturation process, exacerbated by a lack of consistent warm weather, has put the entire region in a precarious position. While some areas are clinging to hopes of a respectable, if not outstanding, vintage, others are more pragmatic about the limitations imposed by the weather. The final product, while potentially acceptable in quality, is unlikely to rise to the greatness that Champagne enthusiasts typically expect.

Adding to the concerns for 2024 is the state of the region's individual reserve (RI) system, which allows producers to compensate for low-yielding years by drawing on stockpiled wine. Last year's reserve, boosted to 10,000 kg/ha, was affected by rot, leading some producers to offload lower-quality wine. This, in turn, risks putting subpar champagne into the market and may damage the region's reputation at a time when sales are already in decline. The reliance on the RI system to make up for this year's shortfall presents a difficult trade-off between maintaining market presence and ensuring quality.

Producers are also keeping a close eye on Champagne's overall sales figures, which have shown signs of slowing. A compromised harvest in a year of lower demand could further exacerbate challenges for the region's producers, who are already grappling

with rising costs and international competition.

Though it is still early to draw definitive conclusions, the 2024 Champagne harvest is shaping up to be one of the most difficult in recent memory. Terms like "small" and "uneven" are already being used to describe this challenging season, with yields varying widely—ranging from as low as 200 kg/ha to 20,000 kg/ha in some vineyards. Even in the more abundant areas, there is significant doubt over whether the grapes will reach the necessary alcohol levels for high-quality Champagne production.

The combination of cold temperatures, persistent rain, and disease has put an undeniable strain on this year's harvest. While some producers may find solace in the prospect of crafting acceptable wines, few are anticipating greatness from the 2024 vintage. For Champagne, a region that prides itself on consistency and excellence, this year's harvest will likely be remembered as one of trials, a stark reminder of nature's unpredictability and its impact on even the most storied wine regions.