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Hautes-Côtes vineyards gain prominence as Burgundy adapts to climate change and attracts top winemakers

Rising temperatures and new investments transform high-altitude Burgundy, highlighting terroir potential and innovative viticulture approaches

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In recent years, the Hautes-Côtes de Beaune and Hautes-Côtes de Nuits have emerged as new focal points in Burgundy's wine landscape. Once referred to as "Arrières-Côtes," these high-altitude vineyards were long considered less favorable due to their cooler temperatures and slower grape ripening. However, climate change has shifted the balance, making these areas increasingly attractive for both established and up-and-coming winemakers.

The Hautes-Côtes appellations were officially recognized in 1961. Today, they cover nearly 1,800 hectares and account for almost one in ten bottles of Burgundy's regional wines. The region's growing reputation is evident in the number of renowned producers investing here. Names such as Pierre-Yves Colin-Morey, Méo-Camuzet, David Duband, Arlaud, and the Gros and Leflaive families have all acquired land or launched projects in the area. This influx of talent signals a new era for the Hautes-Côtes.

The defining feature of these vineyards is their elevation. Vines are planted between 290 and 450 meters above sea level, which historically meant lower temperatures and challenges with grape maturity. As global temperatures rise, these once-chilly slopes now offer ideal conditions for balanced ripening. The geology of the Hautes-Côtes is similar to that of the prestigious Côte de Nuits and Côte de Beaune below, further supporting the potential for high-quality wines.

Laurent Delaunay, head of Maison Édouard Delaunay based in Étang-Vergy in the Hautes-Côtes de Nuits, believes that unique vineyard sites—known as “climats”—are beginning to show distinct identities and quality levels. His winery has introduced three single-vineyard cuvées, including one from Les Dames Huguette, a site just above Nuits-Saint-Georges.

Other producers are also focusing on precise vineyard parcels. Boris Champy has highlighted plots such as Clou, Bignon, and Montagne in his range. The Nuiton-Beaunoy cooperative, which manages 185 hectares across both Hautes-Côtes appellations, is also moving toward more site-specific bottlings.

To better understand the region’s potential, the local growers’ organization commissioned geologist Françoise Vannier to conduct a detailed soil study. This research aims to map out the terroirs by considering not only geology but also altitude, climate factors, and biodiversity preservation—the area is part of the Natura 2000 network for protected habitats. The results could help position the Hautes-Côtes as a model for adapting viticulture to climate change.

The Bourgogne Hautes-Côtes de Nuits AOC covers all vineyards in this subregion. Unlike other parts of Burgundy, there are no village-specific or Premier Cru designations here. The AOC allows for red and rosé wines made primarily from Pinot Noir and white wines from Chardonnay. Pinot Blanc is permitted but rarely used. Regulations set maximum yields at 50 hectoliters per hectare for reds and 55 for whites; minimum potential alcohol levels are 10 percent for reds and 10.5 percent for whites.

Production figures from 2008 show that nearly 657 hectares were under vine in the Hautes-Côtes de Nuits alone, yielding over 3 million bottles of red wine (including rosé) and more than 800,000 bottles of white wine annually.

The border between Hautes-Côtes de Nuits and Hautes-Côtes de Beaune runs through Magny-lès-Villers. Sixteen communes sit above the escarpment in Côte-d'Or, with four more partially included at higher elevations.

As Burgundy faces warmer growing seasons and shifting weather patterns, many see the Hautes-Côtes as a testing ground for new approaches to vineyard management and wine production. With its combination of altitude, evolving climate conditions, and renewed investment from top producers, this once-overlooked region is quickly becoming a key player in Burgundy's future.