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Alsace wine region records earliest grape harvest as climate change accelerates ripening

Winemakers and experts express concern over long-term impacts on tradition and quality amid shifting weather patterns in France

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The Alsace wine region in eastern France is seeing its earliest grape harvest on record, a development that local experts attribute to ongoing climate change. Gilles Ehrhart, president of the Association of Alsace Winegrowers (AVA), confirmed that the official start date for harvesting grapes for AOC wines is set for August 25 this year. This marks a significant shift, with the harvest beginning ten days earlier than in 2024 and breaking the previous record set in 2018, when picking began on August 22.

Traditionally, the harvest for sparkling wines signals the start of the season in Alsace, but this year’s early schedule has drawn attention from both winemakers and climate observers. Ehrhart, who has worked in the region for decades, noted that there is now a difference of nearly three weeks compared to thirty years ago. “We have gained almost a day per year over the last thirty years. This is directly linked to climate change,” he said.

The vineyards benefited from favorable weather conditions throughout the growing season. Early spring growth was encouraged by mild temperatures, and the vines avoided damaging frosts that can sometimes threaten yields. June brought intense heat, accelerating grape development, followed by heavy rainfall at the end of July. Another heatwave arrived in early August, further speeding up ripening.

These weather patterns led to rapid changes in grape composition. According to Ehrhart, grapes absorbed significant amounts of water during the rains and then quickly began producing sugar as temperatures rose again. The sugar content increased at a rate of two degrees of alcohol per week—much faster than the usual 1.2 degrees.

The official start date for the harvest is determined in consultation with France’s National Institute of Origin and Quality (Inao), which oversees controlled designation of origin (AOC) standards. Some winegrowers have already begun picking grapes before the official date, but they must obtain special permission from Inao to do so.

The early harvest is being closely watched by both producers and consumers. While favorable weather has helped ensure good yields and healthy grapes this year, many in Alsace are concerned about what these changes mean for the future of their vineyards and wines. The region’s winemakers are adapting their practices as they face new challenges brought on by shifting climate patterns, hoping to preserve both quality and tradition in one of France’s most celebrated wine regions.