

Climate change pushes Bordeaux winemakers to harvest at night

September 8 2023, by Jean DECOTTE



Harvesting grapes at night is becoming more common in Bordeaux due to climate change.

In France's southern Bordeaux region, the grape harvest is often now done at night to ensure the peak freshness required to obtain the best

wine but this is also a response to climate change.

With the country sweltering in a late heat wave, it is 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit) at five in the morning as a harvester crawls along a row of vines, powerful headlights helping guide its way through the darkness.

"Harvesting at night is done for the quality of the grapes, their freshness and taste," said the driver, Loic Malherbe, who has been at it for three hours already.

"It isn't bad, it's just life at a different rhythm... It's better for the equipment and for people."

It is already a common practice in several winemaking countries with hot summers but one that is likely to become even more common as climate change accelerates.

Harvesting at night can also help financially strapped growers save money, according to Kees Van Leeuwen, a professor of viniculture at Bordeaux Sciences Agro university.

It means they can skip refrigerating grapes while they are being hauled to be pressed, he explained.

"If [harvesting](#) is done at night the temperature of the grapes is lower, especially compared to the very hot days we've had this week," he said.

"There is a huge saving in energy use."



Harvesting when it is cooler also ensures a better quality wine and saves on refrigeration costs.

Dry ice

The harvester dumps the merlot grapes into bins which the vineyard's owner Stephane Heraud hitches to his tractor to haul to the cooperative.

"It's been 15 years that we've harvested the whites and the roses at night, and maybe one day we'll do that for the reds as well," said Heraud, who also heads the cooperative Vignerons de Tutiac.

"If we harvested at night, we'd have wine that is more oxidized, which in terms of taste is not nearly as nice."

Heraud climbs up onto his tractor and spreads dry ice (-80C, -112F) onto the grapes.

This not only helps keep the grapes cool but reduces the oxygen level in the bins as he drives to the cooperative, which is the largest in one of France's protected designation regions with 500 growers.

Tutiac has specialized in roses and accounts for nearly a third of the total produced in the Bordeaux region.

Its pesticide-free rose caused a stir at a blind tasting conducted by the French wine magazine La Revue des vins de France, being placed fourth among roses from the Provence region which traditionally take top marks in the category.



Night harvesting is expected to become more widespread.

Earlier harvests

That night, growers were expected to dump some 500 metric tons of grapes into the various stainless-steel tanks at the wine press, enough to make half a million bottles of wine.

Tutiac's chief oenologist Paul Oui said consumers like roses that are light colored and clear.

To achieve that "you have to limit the transfer of the color from the skin to the juice and the earlier and cooler we harvest the more we can limit the transfer", he said.

Night harvesting is already common in Australia and California due to the heat, and the practice is spreading in the Bordeaux region according to Van Leeuwen.

"For whites and roses, one can imagine that it will become common practice," said the specialist.

Nor did he exclude that it might one day concern grapes for red [wine](#), which account for 85 percent of Bordeaux's production.

Rising temperatures make grapes mature faster and push the [harvest](#) sooner and into warmer periods, and Heraud confirmed that harvests were indeed happening sooner and sooner.

"I remember when I was small watching my parents harvesting in

November," he said.

"Last year, we were finished on September 30...", he added.

"Anyone who says [climate change](#) isn't real isn't a Bordeaux winemaker."

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