French winemakers cheer vintage year

August 24 2018, by Fiachra Gibbons

Muscat grapes picked during the season's first harvest at a vineyard in Fitou earlier this month

2018 is shaping up to be a vintage year for French wine—the best for almost a decade.

The near perfect combination of a wet spring followed by a long hot summer has left wine makers rubbing their hands with glee.

The earliest harvest in 15 years is already in full swing in the Champagne region with the first grapes picked in equally northerly Alsace on Tuesday, two weeks ahead of schedule.

With global sales of champagne alone likely to pass five billion euros ($5.8 billion) this year, government expert predicted Friday that the overall French harvest could be up by as much a quarter.

And with the quality of the grapes said to be high, a truly vintage year to match 2009 could be in the offing.

All the wine producing areas of the country except Corsica, Languedoc-Roussillon and the Riviera coast have reported more and better grapes compared to the last five years.

Winemakers, however, were quick to insist that they will not be celebrating until they have the grapes in the barrel.

"A lot can happen," said Charles Bonnafont of the Peyres Roses winery at Cahuzac sur Vere near Gaillac in southwest France.

"Yes, it is looking very good. If we had a little rain now and than some more sunshine before the harvest it might be even more perfect," he told AFP.

Bumper harvest

Like many winemakers, his organic vines were hit by mildew after a very soggy spring but "the long dry hot summer has helped us to halt it and allow the grapes to ripen really well".

Other organic winemakers, however, have struggled to stay on top of the parasite even with the help of the heatwave. Laurent Herlin, from

Bourgueil in the Loire valley, said even drought "did not totally stop the march of mildew", which can eat away and wither bunches of grapes on the vine.

The French government agency FranceAgriMer said that mildew and violent spring storms had also hit the harvest along "the Atlantic coast and particularly along the Mediterranean".

Yet that would not stop 2018 being a bumper year—if the weather holds up for a few more weeks, it said.

While the harvest is very early in many of the country's most famous grape-growing regions—with pickers out in the renowned vineyards around the Burgundy village of Meursault on Tuesday—it is not the case everywhere.

Some domaines around Bordeaux have begun harvesting grapes for their white wines, but Bonnafort said that further to the east in Gaillac picking was likely to start between September 5 and 10—"which is not that far ahead of the norm".

Never-ending summer

The harvest in Fitou, traditionally the first in France, actually began a little late.

Even so Laurent Maynadier was still the first French winemaker to put his secateurs to work on August 7 as he harvested by hand on the hillsides overlooking the Mediterranean near Narbonne.

Fitou may be known for its strong smooth reds but it was the first ripe muscat grapes for its lesser known white wines that Maynadier was picking.

Sales of white wines from the area have "doubled in four years", according to Jerome Villaret, of the Languedoc AOC (Appellation d'Origine Controlee), which certifies wines in the huge southern wine region.

"Winemakers here have been working extremely hard on the quality and their efforts are being recognised with their white wines now being widely exported to the US and Japan," he said.

"Vines love the sun," said Bernard Farges, head of the union of winemakers in the prestigious Bordeaux region, as he rejoiced at the seemingly never-ending French summer.

Despite the mildew which took a toll particularly on the merlot grapes used in its famous claret reds, production is still likely to be hugely ahead of the disastrously small crop of 2017.

Like some other big-name regions, Bordeaux was devastated last year by frosts and hailstone storms.

Still experts are waiting to see how the final ripening of the grapes goes before they uncork something special to celebrate.

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Citation: French winemakers cheer vintage year (2018, August 24) retrieved 1 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2018-08-french-winemakers-vintage-year.html

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