

Freak blast or taste of the future? French wine-makers count heatwave cost

30 June 2019, by Ysis Percq



Noting that grapevines are native to the Mediterranean, and therefore more heat-resistant than many other plants, she noted: "If we cannot grow them in the south of France, we must accept that we cannot grow anything else here either and that humans are no longer in their rightful place here."

'Never seen its like'

Bernard, who watched a part of her grenache (a red wine grape variety) crop in Restinclières wither on the vine, saw it as a "warning" of a warmer future caused by [climate change](#).

On June 28, the hottest day of the heatwave that engulfed parts of France, Spain, Italy and Germany, vines in the Hérault and neighbouring Gard regions—home to the Pic Saint Loup and Coteaux de Languedoc appellations—were badly burnt.

"It's a warning," Catherine Bernard said gravely as she surveyed rows of withered vines at her wine estate in southern France, where a blazing Sun scorched part of the harvest.

Bernard's vineyard near the city of Montpellier lies in a region that meteorologists this week likened to California's ["death valley"](#) as temperatures rose to 45.9 degrees Celsius, a record for France.

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Winemakers believe the heatwave damage is a warning of worse to come as the planet warms.

"We've never seen the like of it," said Emilien Fournel, a winemaker in Sussargues, near Restinclières, who estimates he lost half of his 35-hectare harvest.

The vines on the edges of his vineyard, as well as those on higher ground, were the worst affected by the hot air from the Sahara desert which left the trunks looking as if they had been hit by lightning,

the leaves singed and shrivelled.

Fournel, whose family has been in the wine business for six generations and who rigorously respects the lessons of his forefathers, wondered if some traditional practises are, in fact, making the vines more vulnerable to rising temperatures.

He gave as an example the spraying of the vines with sulfur to treat mildew at the start of summer.

"Did that increase the heat of the Sun?" he queried. © 2019 AFP

He also questioned the system of training the vines along trellises to space them out and ensure that the leaves get sufficient sunlight, noting that it left them more exposed to the elements.

The dismay in the south contrasted with the enthusiastic response to the heat in the southwest Bordeaux region, where producers had welcomed the hot Sun as a remedy for mildew left over after a wet spring.

"Two of three days of heatwave in Bordeaux at this time, it's magic!" Philippe Bardet, head of the Bordeaux Wine Council, told AFP at the onset of the so-called Saharan bubble.



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Jerome Despey, he head of the chamber of commerce for the Herault region near Montpellier, urged wine producers to seek compensation from the state.

But for Bernard, "the phenomenon is far bigger than the wine and even agriculture sectors.

"It's a red card telling us to reassess the way we have been living these past 50 years."

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