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# Machine harvesting in Champagne by the back door?

Tom Stevenson



On July 29, 2021, the executive board of the Syndicat Général des Vignerons voted by a majority of 35 out of 50 to legalize the use of *vignes semi-larges* (VSL). Semi-wide spacing of vine rows is a necessary precursor to machine-harvesting, should Champagne decide to go that route—not that anyone pushing VSL will claim this as their intent. At the same meeting, the board also voted to authorize a pink-skinned Chardonnay mutation and the experimental use of a hybrid variety called Voltis.

For almost 100 years, the vine density in Champagne has been subject to the *somme de l'écartement*, or “sum of spread,” where the numerical total of the distance between vines in a row and the spacing between those rows must not exceed 2.5. Vines within the same row may be planted between 0.9m and 1.5m (3–5ft) apart, the choice of planting distance determining the maximum space allowed between rows (which cannot in any case exceed 1.5m [5ft]). For example, if the vines within each row are planted 1.5m apart, the maximum distance between those rows would be no more than 1m (3.3ft).

The lowest legal density of 6,400 vines per hectare is achieved by spacing both the vines and the rows 1.25m (4ft) apart, but as the current average is 8,000 vines per hectare, it is clear that the present-day inclination of the Champenois is to maintain a higher rather than lower vine density. In fact, a density as high as 12,000 vines per hectare is not uncommon in Champagne. However, the new rules, which have yet to be approved by INAO (expected in 2023 or thereabouts), will allow a distance between rows of up to 2.2m (7ft), which could end up with just 3,035 vines per hectare, less than 38 percent of the current average. If the maximum in-row spacing is reduced to 1.2m, in line with the vines this study has been based on, then minimum vine density will be 3,777 vines per hectare, or 47 percent of the current average, but that is still a huge drop in density.

## Waxing lyrical

Although the current VSL program began in 2006, its genesis can be traced back to the mid-1980s, when an even wider-spaced system called lyre was under study. Those vineyards were planted as far apart as 4m (13ft) and with as few as 2,750 vines per hectare (later increased to almost 4,000 vines), but while lyre had its advantages—such as less ambient humidity (thus less gray rot) and more acidity (thus crisper wines)—these came at a price. Despite less than half the number of vines per hectare, that system requires up to 14 foliage and fruiting, which makes it 30 percent more expensive than planting and training 8,000 vines/ha in traditional ways. Furthermore, cropping levels are low and, the deal-breaker if the truth be known, researchers were unable to adapt mainstream machinery to prune or harvest the lyre's horizontal trellis system. Although some advocates of lyre claim this problem is not insurmountable given enough time, it has yet to be resolved.

However much the politically minded talking heads in Champagne might try to allay fears about machine-harvesting, I doubt researchers and technicians are ever going to pursue any development that prevents Champagne benefiting from mechanization in the future. This is not to say that the lyre is a bad vine-training system. There is no such thing. All systems have their own pros and cons, many of which are site-dependent. Certainly Jean-Claude Rouzaud must have been sufficiently impressed by the pros of the lyre to introduce it to the Anderson Valley at Roederer Estate in 1988, and from a purely qualitative point of view, that has been a great success. Indeed, there are many other happy users of the lyre system around the world, but it is not for every situation, and I sincerely doubt a mechanized dead-end will ever be authorized in Champagne.

In the early 1990s, however, a decision was made to expand the lyre study to

include VSL, which does not split the canopy horizontally but raises it to allow mechanical access to the soil immediately beneath, and requires a significantly narrower space between the rows, albeit far wider than currently exists in Champagne. The initial results were so impressive that the INAO announced a 25-year program to study VSL to commence in 2006.

Just 15 years later and VSL has already been voted on. Why? Basically, because those in charge believed there was enough data to make the case for semi-wide planting. Moreover, with climate change snapping at their heels and, they believed, sufficient support to win the vote, they could not afford to delay any longer. After ten meetings of SGV members between May 4 and June 2 to reveal that evidence, including field trips, the vote was held and the motion passed.

## Fight the right battles

With more pros and cons than you can shake a stick at and enough variables to transpose many a pro into a con and vice-versa, depending on your overall viewpoint, it is not surprising that there remains a very significant and highly passionate opposition to VSL, especially those who fear it is a back door to machine-harvesting. Personally, I am curious to evaluate the quality of Champagne produced from wider-spaced rows, and with the extraordinary advances made in machine-harvesting, I think it is highly probable that it will be used in Champagne one day. I am more concerned about authorizing Voltis on an experimental basis (see *À la Volée*, *WFW* 62), but what I would say to those who oppose VSL is not to waste their lives campaigning against the unavoidable. Instead, they should start planning how to turn what they view as a negative into a positive. VSL is not mandatory; it is only an option. Promote the exclusivity of hand-harvested, high-density Champagnes, and charge a premium for it. ■