

Goodbye October, Hello August!

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There were no August harvests in Champagne prior to August 21, 2003, yet that became just the first of six August harvests in the past 16 years. This phenomenon represents the most tangible manifestation of Champagne's warming climate, but what is being done to mitigate its effect?

Most of the best Champagne vintages have come from September harvests, whereas most of the worst vintages have been October harvests. If the Champenois have to harvest in October, it is usually because of bad weather and they have to wait for the grapes to ripen, after which rot is a high probability. There have been a few exceptions, of course, and none more famous than the truly great 1955 vintage, but October is almost exclusively responsible for the very worst years, such as 1965, 1968, 1972, 1977, and 1984.

September is not a magic wand because it often rains, and rainfall in that month has climbed from 56mm (2.2") in the 1980s, to 76mm (3") currently; but when it is dry and sunny, a September harvest virtually guarantees high quality. Sunny Septembers can either rescue crops from the jaws of disaster (2012 and 2004) or provide the icing on the cake after a perfect growing season (2009 and 2002).

An August harvest, on the other hand, will always pose an insidious threat to Champagne's reputation, however hard the Champenois try to dress up its results and exaggerate their expectations. Forget the clever marketing that created its fame, Champagne's intrinsic success has been built on its unique ability to grow acid-ripe grapes with an average potential alcohol of just 9.5% (the current 30-year average is for 9.7% ABV grapes bearing 53.2% tartaric acidity). The more the Champenois push the riper, fatter, more characterful line, the more they erode the difference between Champagne and other sparkling wines, and the closer Champagne comes to comparisons with the New World.

Champagne's famous "lean structure" is best achieved in a sunny September or

October, when the vine's metabolism is temporarily halted each night by the sudden drop in temperature, which preserves acidity, but on clammy nights in August no such diurnal difference exists and acids plummet.

Better risk the devil we know

What long-term strategy does Champagne have for mitigating the effects of climate change? In 2010, Champagne joined the INRA ResDur program to develop fungal-resistant hybrids based on Champagne varieties that will retain "typicity" before a panel of "Champagne professionals" submit any new varieties to INAO for inclusion in the appellation.

As fascinating as this project is, I have to ask: Is Champagne serious?

Even if, for argument's sake, these new varieties do turn out to be superior to classic Champagne grapes, with the bonus of fungal disease resistance and the impossibility of ripening to the same classic lean structure in both August and September harvests, does Champagne really think that sales can be maintained when its wines are made from Artaban Noir, Floréal Blanc, Vidocq Noir, Voltis Blanc, or other as yet unnamed varieties?

Or will Champagne simply hand over its future market on a plate to any other sparkling wine made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Meunier? It would put Champagne back to where English sparkling wine was before Nyetimber, where New York state was before Konstantin Frank.

So, what should they do? Although the August harvest phenomenon is primarily due to a warmer climate, it has also been exacerbated by the proliferation of early-ripening clones. Those clones should be banned and uprooted, while research is focused on developing late-ripening clones, to push back the harvest to September/October, rather than August/September. If this means coping with rain and fungal diseases as before, then so be it.

Harvest starting dates 1975-2018

Harvest year	Start date
2018	August 20
2017	August 30
2016	September 10
2015	August 29
2014	September 08
2013	September 24
2012	September 10
2011	August 19
2010	September 13
2009	September 08
2008	September 15
2007	August 23
2006	September 07
2005	September 09
2004	September 25
2003	August 21
2002	September 12
2001	September 22
2000	September 11
1999	September 15
1998	September 10
1997	September 12
1996	September 16
1995	September 18
1994	September 15
1993	September 08
1992	September 17
1991	September 26
1990	September 11
1989	September 04
1988	September 19
1987	September 28
1986	September 28
1985	September 30
1984	October 06
1983	September 26
1982	September 17
1981	September 28
1980	October 09
1979	October 03
1978	October 09
1977	October 06
1976	September 01
1975	September 29