Harvest 2026 – Champagne Louise Brison, Côte des Bar, Champagne

The 2026 growing season will be remembered as an exceptionally early, warm and technically demanding vintage in the Côte des Bar. From an unprecedentedly early harvest to significant frost damage, intense heat and severe summer water stress, the season required constant vigilance and adaptation in both the vineyard and the winery.

Despite these challenges, the quality of the fruit at harvest was highly promising, with healthy, concentrated grapes and encouraging potential for the resulting wines. Quantities, however, were significantly reduced, with yields approximately 50% below expectations as a result of the various climatic events experienced throughout the season.

Autumn and Winter: Replenishing Water Reserves

Autumn 2025 provided relatively favourable conditions, allowing vineyard soils to gradually replenish their water reserves following several years characterised by recurring water deficits.

The 2025/2026 winter remained relatively mild, without any prolonged periods of extreme cold. Nevertheless, there were sufficient cooler periods to ensure proper vine dormancy.

Spring arrived early, with temperatures above seasonal averages accelerating the start of the growing cycle. In the Côte des Bar, budbreak began in early April, slightly ahead of the historical average and continuing a trend towards earlier vine development that has become increasingly noticeable in recent years.

Spring Frost and Early-Season Challenges

The first significant challenge of the season came even before budbreak. Several frost alerts occurred between mid-March and the end of March, with the night of March 26 causing considerable damage. Approximately one-third of the vineyard parcels were severely affected.

Spring frost pressure has become an almost annual concern and represents one of the increasingly important challenges faced by growers in the region.

Rainfall during the spring, however, did not create significant concerns regarding disease pressure, allowing the remaining vegetation to progress under relatively healthy conditions.

Flowering Under Extreme Heat

Flowering took place between the final week of May and the first week of June, coinciding with a period of intense heat.

The warm and dry weather encouraged a relatively rapid flowering period. However, the exceptionally high temperatures affected Chardonnay in particular, resulting in some *coulure*—poor fruit set—and *millerandage*, with uneven berry development within the bunches.

This was an early indication that 2026 would require particularly close monitoring of individual varieties and vineyard parcels.

An Exceptionally Hot and Early Growing Season

As the season progressed, 2026 developed into an extraordinary vintage in climatic terms. Successive periods of high temperatures and several significant heatwaves placed considerable pressure on the vineyards.

Despite these conditions, the vines initially demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt. By early July, however, the situation had become considerably more challenging as the soils entered a period of severe water stress. The vines increasingly struggled to access sufficient water, particularly in parcels with shallower soils.

Higher-altitude vineyards and parcels situated at the top of the slopes normally provide some of the best-balanced growing conditions and are generally less vulnerable to spring frost. In 2026, however, these same sites proved particularly exposed to drought because of their shallower soils.

The severity of the water stress became visible in some young vineyards, with vines of only around ten years of age beginning to lose their leaves and some bunches drying directly on the vine.

Adapting Vineyard Practices to Climate Change

The 2026 season further highlighted the increasingly visible effects of climate change in the Côte des Bar. Earlier budbreak, accelerated ripening and increasingly extreme climatic events—including frost, intense rainfall and heatwaves—are becoming recurring features of the growing season.

The focus has therefore shifted from questioning whether the climate is changing to determining how viticultural practices can evolve to ensure the resilience and long-term sustainability of the vineyards.

Vineyard management has already been adapted accordingly. Interventions that excessively expose bunches to direct sunlight are now greatly limited, while more leaf area is retained to provide natural shade. In 2026, the vines were not trimmed during the growing season, helping to protect the grapes while maintaining sufficient leaf surface for photosynthesis.

Soil management has also become increasingly important. Practices inspired by regenerative viticulture are being developed to improve the soil’s ability to retain water, including the use of locally produced compost.

As irrigation is not practised in Champagne, managing the soil and vegetation effectively is fundamental to helping the vines withstand increasingly hot and dry growing seasons.

A New Consideration: Wildfire Risk

Wildfire risk remains considerably lower in the Côte des Bar than in many regions of southern France, but it can no longer be considered an entirely theoretical concern.

With summers becoming progressively hotter and drier, the situation is now monitored more closely. Although wildfire currently represents a relatively limited threat in the region, changing climatic conditions mean that it is becoming another factor to consider in the long-term management of the vineyards.

An Unprecedentedly Early Harvest

The 2026 harvest began in mid-August—an unprecedentedly early date for the estate.

The interval between flowering and harvest, which would normally be approximately 80 to 90 days, was reduced to just 75 days this year, illustrating the extraordinary speed of the growing season.

Chardonnay is generally the first variety to achieve the desired balance, particularly in the earliest-ripening parcels. This is followed by Pinot Noir from mid-slope vineyards, before moving to later-ripening sectors and higher-altitude parcels.

Nevertheless, harvest decisions are never based solely on a predetermined order. Each parcel is assessed individually through ripeness analyses, berry tasting, sanitary condition and weather forecasts, as well as according to the intended style of the final wines.

The official *ban des vendanges* provides the regulatory framework for the start of harvest, but the precise picking date ultimately remains a decision for the winegrower.

For Champagne production, the objective is not simply to achieve the highest possible potential alcohol level. The priority is to preserve the essential balance between physiological maturity and freshness.

Knowing When to Wait—and When to Pick

In some parcels, waiting a few additional days proved beneficial in 2026, allowing phenolic maturity to develop further without compromising the desired balance.

However, this decision was particularly delicate during such a hot vintage. Under these conditions, waiting even slightly too long can result in a rapid decline in acidity.

Each parcel was therefore monitored individually, and the most balanced vineyards were prioritised at the beginning of the harvest.

Managing Heat in the Winery

The challenges of increasingly warm vintages continue after the grapes leave the vineyard.

Whenever possible, harvesting now takes place early in the morning, allowing the fruit to arrive at the winery at a lower temperature. The estate has also invested in a refrigerated container to reduce grape temperatures before processing.

The natural thermal inertia of the winery buildings is complemented by temperature-control equipment during juice settling and fermentation.

As Champagne harvests increasingly take place during periods that can still experience extremely high summer temperatures, effective temperature management has become a critical component in preserving fruit quality, controlling fermentation and maintaining the freshness required for the wines.

Pinot Noir and Chardonnay: Different Responses to Heat

The season also highlighted differences in the way the principal grape varieties respond to extreme temperatures.

Pinot Noir has shown a particularly good capacity to adapt to the Côte des Bar's Kimmeridgian terroirs, especially where soils are sufficiently deep to provide better access to water. Nevertheless, the bunches need greater protection from direct solar radiation to reduce the risk of sunburn.

Chardonnay can be more sensitive to excessive heat, particularly in the earliest-ripening and most exposed sites, where acidity can decline more rapidly.

The experience of 2026 nevertheless reinforces the importance of looking beyond grape variety alone. Soil depth, vineyard position, exposure and viticultural practices can be just as important as the variety itself in determining how successfully a vineyard responds to extreme climatic conditions.

2026: Promising Quality, Significantly Reduced Yields

Despite the climatic challenges encountered throughout the growing season, the quality of the 2026 harvest is very promising. The grapes arrived in excellent sanitary condition and showed good concentration.

Analytical acidity levels are relatively low, but experience has shown that low measured acidity does not necessarily translate into wines that lack freshness. The balance and expression of the wines will become clearer as vinification progresses.

Quantity is a very different story. Frost, flowering conditions, extreme heat and water stress combined to significantly reduce the crop, resulting in an estimated **50% decrease in yield**.

The 2026 vintage can therefore be characterised as one of contrasts: **exceptionally early and intensely sunny, with promising fruit quality, but severely reduced quantities and unprecedented technical challenges in the vineyard.**

More broadly, the vintage illustrates the rapidly evolving conditions facing Champagne growers. Adapting vineyard management, protecting the fruit from extreme heat, improving soil resilience and maintaining precise control over harvest dates and winery temperatures are no longer occasional considerations. They are becoming fundamental elements in preserving the balance, freshness and identity of Champagne in an increasingly variable climate.