

Made in England

English sparkling wine is a world-class product – and one which will keep on gaining plaudits thanks to continued investment, vine age and support from patriotic wine drinkers. Susie Barrie MW looks at the progress so far, and names her top wines



Photograph: courtesy of Nyetimber

IT'S HARD TO believe that, in just over 25 years, the English sparkling wine industry has come so far. Only in the late 1980s were Chardonnay vines planted alongside Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier in West Sussex by a pioneering couple from Chicago determined to be the first to make sparkling wine to rival that of Champagne. Nyetimber was born and a revolution began.

Until that point England was, at best, known for its still wines made from Germanic varieties, but more often as a wine-drinking rather than wine-producing nation. (Wales also produces acclaimed wines, but we'll focus on England here). Even as recently as 2008 Stephen Skelton MW, Regional Chair for the UK at the Decanter World Wine Awards, wrote in his *UK Vineyards Guide*: 'I hope we can make the change from what was once considered a joke into a sustainable industry.'

Unquestionably, that change has now happened and sparkling wine is the style that has led the way. Today, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the two most widely planted varieties in England and, together with Pinot Meunier, they account for approximately half of all plantings. About two thirds of everything England produces is sparkling and that is only set to grow as new vineyards come on stream. There is now widespread consensus that English sparkling wine is a world-class product. Its growing

'I hope we can make the change from what was once considered a joke into a sustainable industry' **Stephen Skelton MW in 2008**

prominence at everything from state banquets to prestigious international awards and high-profile restaurant lists the world over (including France) is further evidence of the same.

This recent rise is partly the result of considerable investment – in many cases several million pounds – from successful businessmen looking for a project as they approach retirement. Every industry needs its financial bedrock and such capital investment and long-term vision are helping to create the foundation for a profitable and sustainable business.

This is, of course, exactly the strategic approach that the English sparkling wine industry needed at a key stage in its development. It has led to money being ploughed into every aspect of the business – from detailed geological studies to map soil types, to the most advanced winery equipment and even French consultants from Champagne to make the wines. Many of the better wineries, however, now employ graduates from Sussex's Plumpton College who are well travelled and bring a fresh, modern outlook to this most traditional of arts.

Solid foundations

Most of the best wines are being produced in the south of England, though specific regional differences between Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, Dorset and Cornwall are indefinable. It's also true to say that several producers source grapes from more than one county, making those differences even less discernible. Equally, although chalk and greensand are the most sought-after soil types, in combination with a south-facing exposure, the understanding of individual terroirs is some way off. As Ben Murray of newcomer Hennes says of the concept, 'we're only just scratching the surface'. ➤

Above: Nyetimber was a pioneer of English sparkling wine and, for Susie Barrie MW, it is the ageability of its best wines that singles the estate out

‘English sparkling wine is an increasingly exciting proposition with a growing number of bottles to sell to the world’

House style, grape blend and vintage are therefore a more reliable yardstick. Most wines are currently vintage wines and, apart from 2012, which was a shocker for almost everyone, recent years have been good with 2009 producing deliciously full and sumptuous wines, 2010 offering more ageing potential, and the small but ripe harvest of 2011 giving concentration and texture.

One issue that exists is a lack of reserve wines. This is due either to pressure to bring wines to market, lack of storage facilities, or simply a dearth of back vintages. Not only can up to 15% of reserve wine legally be added to vintage-dated wines to lend complexity to the final blend, reserve wines also allow consistent non-vintage wines to be made, which is especially important in difficult vintages. As Hattingley Valley’s winemaker Emma Rice says: ‘2012 spurred us on to do it’ and although more and more producers are starting to build up stocks it would be good to see everyone doing so.

One of the most exciting things about well-known producers such as Nyetimber, Ridgeview, Chapel Down, Camel Valley and Denbies is the sense that none of them is standing still. From investment in land and new plantings, to improved winemaking and visitor facilities, and particularly the development of new prestige wines, there is something noteworthy happening at each one.

Nyetimber was the pioneer in the early days and it remains a leading light. Although the wines have gone through ups and downs in the past, since Cherie Spriggs and Brad Greatrix took over as winemaker and vineyard manager in 2007 the estate has produced some of its best vintages to date. For me, it is the overall quality of the range and the ageability of Nyetimber’s best wines that singles the estate out, as the current Blanc de Blancs 2007 demonstrates. Nyetimber has kept reserve wines since 2007 and from the 2011 release the Classic Cuvée will become a non-vintage wine for the first time. There is also a new wine to look out for (yet to be released) from the superb 2009 vintage, with 3% barrel fermentation in new oak.

Expansion and tourism

Ridgeview has ploughed a different furrow. The late Mike Roberts’ mantra, as his daughter-in-law Mardi explains, was ‘quality, consistency, value’. Although it owns vines, the estate’s contract winemaking business also sources grapes from across the south of England with which to make a broad range of sparkling wines that are consistently good and often excellent. The company has plans for expansion that will double production under the Ridgeview label and increase exports, which already stand at 20%, making it one of the labels you are most likely to find outside the UK.



Above: in 2011, Her Majesty The Queen was served Ridgeview’s Fitzrovia Rosé 2004 at the state dinner to honour the visit of US President Barack Obama

Top: enjoy stunning views – and wine – at Camel Valley in Cornwall

If you’re looking to visit an English vineyard then Chapel Down, Camel Valley and Denbies ought to be at the top of your list as they all have excellent tourist facilities. Denbies offers everything from a vineyard train tour to a farm shop; Chapel Down has a superb restaurant, The Swan; and Camel Valley is a beautiful place to enjoy a guided tour and a glass of wine. At Chapel Down, which prides itself in offering ‘a wine for everyone’, you’ll also find dynamic winemaker Josh Donaghay-Spire doing

impressive things with Chardonnay, and pushing the boundaries with both sparkling and still wines.

As for the newer producers, there are so many exciting names cropping up all the time that it is almost impossible to know where to begin. Understandably, the longer-established members of this group make more consistent, better wines, while many of the very recent estates are on their first vintage or, like the hugely ambitious Rathfinny project in East Sussex, have yet to release a wine.

Gusbourne has long been a favourite of mine but when the estate became part of the AIM market of the London Stock Exchange in 2013 I admit to concerns that the characterful and very English style of the wines would suffer. Fortunately that doesn’t seem to be the case – no doubt helped by the fact that winemaker Charlie Holland moved to Gusbourne from Ridgeview (where he had been making the Gusbourne wines) and a new winery was built next to the vineyards giving greater connectivity between the two. There are now plans to further develop and extend the Appledore site in to accommodate increased production and tourism.

Awarded winemakers

Wiston and Hattingley Valley are two key names to look out for. Wiston’s talented (and DWWA 2014 Trophy-winning) winemaker Dermot Sugrue admits he has a preferred soil type: ‘I’m a chalkista’, he enthuses. His wines show incredible refinement allied to the delightful texture and complexity he



Photographs: courtesy of Camel Valley; Chapel Down; Wiston Estate



Above: Chapel Down offers great tourist facilities, including a wine and fine food store, restaurant and a range of tours and walks

Left: Dermot Sugrue makes wine for Wiston Estate on the South Downs as well as wines under his own label, Sugrue-Pierre

achieves through low dosage and skilful use of oak. The wines are consistently exceptional. Sugrue also makes a wine from leased vines under his own label, Sugrue Pierre, which is lifted and elegant, and again shows his talent with oak.

At Hattingley, 2014 UK Winemaker of the Year Emma Rice and her team run the UK’s largest contract winemaking business as well as making a range of wines under the Hattingley Valley label. The style is attractively generous and there was a huge shift upwards in quality between 2010 (the first vintage) and 2011. Rice also makes wines for Court Garden, whose 2010 Blanc de Blancs and Noirs wines are particularly impressive.

Over in Dorset both Furleigh and Langham are estates to watch. Ian Edwards at Furleigh (2012 UK Winemaker of the Year) turned a former dairy farm into a vineyard and winery, producing his first wine in 2009. Edwards’ cuvées are incredibly well made and show beautiful richness and intensity. He’s also making wine for his neighbours Steven and Bella Spurrier at Bride Valley (see feature in the April issue), this time with a pure, fresh and delicate character to match Spurrier’s desire for an ‘aperitif-style’ wine.

In addition to these privately owned estates, some major UK retailers are also getting in on ➤

the act, with Waitrose launching its own very credible sparkling wine last year from the Leckford estate, and Laithwaite's Family Vineyards making some excellent wines to sell through its business.

Of the rest; Hambledon, Hennes, Hindleap, Hush Heath, Jenkyn Place and Upperton are all names that didn't quite make it into my shortlist of recommended wines (*see below*), but they are certainly producers worthy of attention.

It may not square neatly with the stereotypical English reserve to start championing our own home-grown produce – especially when it's wine. But English sparkling wine is an increasingly exciting proposition with a growing number of bottles to sell to the world. Given the quality and promise out there, it couldn't be further from a joke: it's something all wine lovers should start shouting about in earnest. **D**

Susie Barrie MW is a writer and broadcaster

For more on English wine, visit Decanter.com. English Wine Week takes place 23–31 May: www.englishwineproducers.co.uk/news/eww

An English baker's dozen: Barrie's top fizz to try



Hattingley Valley, Kings Cuvée Brut, Hampshire 2011 19/20 (96/100)
£64-£65 **Corks Out, Dalling & Co, Hawkshead Wines, Slurp, The Vineyard (Dorking), Liberty Wines**
This Chardonnay-dominant blend is 100% barrel fermented and simply stunning. Full of rich, roasted nut and orchard fruit characters, it also shows

beautifully crisp acidity. Compelling in a unique, spicy way. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 12%

Nyetimber, Blanc de Blancs, West Sussex 2007 18.5 (95)
£30-£49 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Carruthers & Kent, Exel, Farr, Fortnum & Mason, Hangingditch, Harvey Nichols, Hawkshead, New St, Oxford Wine Co, Salut, Sheldon's, SH Jones, Slurp, South Downs, The Secret Cellar, The Wine Society, Twenty One Wines, Vin Neuf, Woodwinters**
Incredible energy and focus. Having spent five years on its lees and several in bottle, it has a smoky, savoury and bready character while retaining elegant minerality and lifted citric acidity. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 12%



Gusbourne, Blanc de Blancs, Late Disgorged, Kent 2007 18.5 (95)
£37-£60 **Clark Foyster, Field & Fawcett, Fortnum & Mason, Lea & Sandeman, Selfridges, St Andrews Wine Co, Woodwinters**
Very developed and yeasty, this is delightfully rich and truffle-scented; shows its age but carries it beautifully. Complex palate of honey and cream and mushrooms on toasted brioche, all underpinned by refreshing acidity. A joy to drink; hedonistic. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 12%

Chapel Down, Blanc de Blancs, Kent 2009 18.25 (94)
£26.99 **Harvey Nichols**
A hint of oak was added to the dosage, giving an attractive, creamy flavour. The acidity is fresh and the finish long and savoury. Impressive and well-crafted, from a lovely vintage. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 12.5%



Wiston Estate, Rosé, West Sussex 2011 18.25 (94)
£36 **Corney & Barrow, Noel Young, Theatre of Wine, Wine Pantry**
As ever with Dermot Sugrue's wines, this rosé offers the perfect blend of elegance and character. It is creamy and spicy with delicate wild strawberry, nuts and a streak of minerality. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 12%

Gusbourne, Rosé, Kent 2011 18.25 (94)
£32-£35 **Fortnum & Mason, Hawkshead, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Highbury, Lea & Sandeman, Selfridges, SH Jones, Slurp, St Andrews Wine, Tanners, Uncorked, Wine Pantry, Woodwinters**
There's a touch of barrel influence in this flavoursome and exotic rosé. Sour cherry fruit and rich toasted brioche fill the mouth while the finish is dry but sumptuous and spicy. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 12%

Wiston Estate, Cuvée Brut, West Sussex 2010 18 (93)
£32.95 **Corney & Barrow, Noel Young, Theatre of Wine, Wine Pantry**
Fine, vibrant mousse, creamy aromas and an intense savoury palate. A self-assured fizz of poise and elegance. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 12%



Court Garden, Ditchling Reserve, East Sussex 2010 17.75 (92)
£29 **South Downs Cellars**
Recently released, this sumptuous blanc de noirs is a blend of the two Pinots, and 50% was aged in used oak for nine months. It shows rich and honeyed, spicy red fruit, along with a bold, smoky finish. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 12%

Ridgeview, Victoria Rosé, Sussex 2010 17.75 (92)
£27-£33 **Berry Bros & Rudd, Butlers Wine, Exel, Hawkshead Wines, Slurp, Ten Green Bottles**
A wonderfully toasty, characterful saignée rosé made from a blend of Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier. In the mouth it is bold and bready with classic English hedgerow and orchard fruit. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Alc** 12%



Davenport, Limney, East Sussex 2010 17.75 (92)
£24-£48 **Able & Cole, Butlers Wine Cellar, English Wine Centre, Exel, Les Caves de Pyrène, Wine Pantry, Vinceremos, Vintage Roots**
More than a decade ago Will Davenport's fizz was still a work in progress but I admired his commitment to the organic cause. Today it's delicious, with a lively mousse, rich yeasty aromas and a lovely savoury palate. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 12%

Langham, Classic Cuvée Brut, Dorset 2011 17.75 (92)
£22 www.langhamwine.co.uk
Made by Irish ex-jockey and Plumpton graduate Liam Idzikowski from Langham's Crawthorne vineyard just outside Dorchester. Round, bready, apple-scented fizz from the three Champagne varieties. For Langham's second vintage, it shows terrific promise. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Alc** 12%



Wyfold, Brut, Oxfordshire 2010 17.5 (91)
£29.99 **Laithwaite's**
Part-owned by Barbara Laithwaite (of the UK wine company), Wyfold's vineyards are in the Chiltern Hills and the wines made by Ridgeview. A consistently excellent performer, this elegant sparkling is a good value, reliable choice showing attractive, yeasty development. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Alc** 12.5%

Furleigh Estate, Classic Cuvée, Dorset 2011 17.25 (90+)
£28.50 **Corks Out, Harrogate Fine Wine, Highbury Vintners, Hedley Wright, Noel Young, Oxford Wine Co, Selfridges, Shaftesbury Wines, Stainton Wines, The Good Wine Shop, The Salisbury, The Vineyard, Vino Vero, Waples Wine**
Stylish aromas of freshly baked bread and a broad and generously textured palate with focused acidity and a long, satisfying finish. **Drink** 2015-2016 **Alc** 12%

For full details of UK stockists, see p103