

In an English vineyard



Masters of Wine Susie Barrie and Peter Richards glory in the growing success of domestic growers, as England continues to nip at the heels of traditional wine-producing regions

In May 1972, so the story goes, the Queen was hosting a dinner for French president Georges Pompidou at the British Embassy in Paris. The bold decision was taken to serve English wine but, when the urgent shipment appeared in French customs shortly before the banquet, it was instantly impounded. ‘Because,’ the French agent spluttered, ‘I can only import what is sanctioned and, according to my documentation, English wine simply does not exist: there is no such thing!’

How times change. In a little over 50 years – a blink of an eye in wine terms – production has gone from 1,500 bottles of (probably rather modest) wine to an average annual production of 5.3 million bottles. Since 2000, the area under vine has almost tripled and a record 1 million new vines are being planted in 2017. The UK now has more than 130 wine producers and over 500 commercial vineyards; wine production is predicted to double over the next five years.

In short, it’s hard to ignore English wine today. The category has real momentum, fuelled by praise from eminent critics and awards from reputable competitions. It even has royal endorsement: the Duchess of Cornwall recently became president of the UK Vineyard Association, declaring herself ‘passionate’ in her support of English and Welsh wine. It is regularly served at royal occasions including state banquets and is increasingly part of the British political and diplomatic scene, too.

Foreign interest and investment is proving another pillar of support. One historic example is that of Chicago couple Stuart and Sandy Moss, who in the late 1980s were the first to break the mould and make a success of the three key Champagne grape varieties (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier) for high-quality fizz at Nyetimber in Sussex. Before this, English wine was largely the domain of hobbyists with an emphasis on still wines made using Germanic varieties. (In fact, the history of English and Welsh wine is one of ups and downs – with nature or economics thwarting the occasional outbreak of vinous ambition, from Romans and Normans to later landholders.) But the truly pivotal moment →



came recently when ‘grandes marques’ Champagne houses Taittinger and Vranken-Pommery announced plans to buy land and produce their own English sparkling wine. Given that Champagne represents the pinnacle of sparkling wine, this was a significant boost for the still fledgling English wine industry and a strong vote of confidence in its future potential.

At a ceremonial planting of the first vines in a blustery Kent field in May 2017, Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger said: ‘We’ve been impressed by the quality of English sparkling wine and believe the combination of chalk soils, topography and climate of our site in Kent are very similar to the terroir in Champagne, perfect for grape growing and ideal for producing quality sparkling wine.’

Traditional method (ie, Champagne style) sparkling wine is undoubtedly the UK’s strongest

suit. As Nyetimber winemaker Cherie Spriggs says, ‘We believe England is best suited to making sparkling wine, when you consider what we do to compete internationally on quality.’ The UK’s coolish climate, allied with the right soil, typically gives crisp, vibrant, tangy flavours in all kinds of fruits and vegetables – from apples to rhubarb, tomatoes and asparagus – and grapes are no exception. When the juice is made sparkling and aged over time in the bottle, it can be transformed into complex, intense fizz that stands comparison with some of the finest in the world.

THE SECRET’S IN THE RIPENING

One of the key aspects of this process is the long ripening cycle inherent to growing fruit in the UK. According to winemaker Dermot Sugrue of the highly rated Wiston Estate, among others: ‘We can

achieve fabulous flavour maturity without having great sugar ripeness. To make good, complex wines you need a long ripening season, which is what we have. That shows in the wines, which can also age very well.’

The point about English sparkling wines ageing well is important. Commercially, it means that producers can hold back stock rather than selling it at unfavourable rates, without its quality or inherent value deteriorating. It can also make for delicious wine. The 1992 Nyetimber Blanc de Blancs – the first wine made at the property, from vines planted in 1988 – was a revelation at a recent tasting. The bottle had been disgorged in 2015 (this is the process of removing the lees or sediment), so it had spent the previous 27 years ageing with the yeast lees still in the bottle. It was wonderfully mature, with complex notes of

‘The history of English wine is one of ups and downs, the triumph of brutal reality over hope – but now wine cognoscenti around the world are pricking up their ears’

wood-smoke, honeycomb, glazed peach and truffles, and a real delicacy and finesse on the finish. Some producers issue late-released vintages, which are well worth looking out for.

But wine in the UK isn’t just about fizz. One of the most exciting aspects is how good the still wines are. In the whites, Bacchus has the potential to be a major player, making wines similar to Sauvignon Blanc in style; good producers include Albourne, Camel Valley, Chapel Down, Denbies and Lyme Bay. Chardonnay is also performing well, making wines with a real nerve and tension, but ➔

ABOVE The Leckford Estate in Hampshire produces sparkling wine for Waitrose using three varieties of grape – Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier and Chardonnay

THE BEST OF BRITISH



Classically creamy

NYETIMBER CLASSIC CUVÉE NV £34.99/75cl
If you’re looking for a stylish English fizz to rival Champagne, look no further. From West Sussex, Nyetimber’s non-vintage blend is class in a glass. Bready, fresh and refined with beautiful length and finesse.



Bold & buttery

HAMBLEDON PREMIÈRE CUVÉE NV* £42/75cl
The Hampshire village of Hambledon is renowned as the birthplace of cricket – and it’s also the home of England’s longest-running commercial vineyard. This is its top wine. Delightfully bold and buttery with a long, rich finish.



Rosy prospects

DIGBY LEANDER PINK NV BRUT* £30/75cl
The beautifully pale, salmon-pink colour of this wine is hard to resist, as is its spicy, summer-berry fragrance and subtle hints of wild strawberries. Engaging and seductive, this is a wine to sip and savour.

*Available from selected stores



Plum choice

GREYFRIARS ROSÉ RESERVE BRUT 2013* £25.99/75cl
What makes this rosé so compelling is that part of the blend was fermented in old oak, giving it a flavour of spiced plum and roasted nut. Made from 100% Pinot Noir, it’s plump, full-flavoured and a great match for food.



Innovative blend

LITMUS ELEMENT 20 2013* £16.99/75cl
A blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Bacchus, this wine shows just what England can do when it comes to still whites. Flavours of lemon zest, pear and apricot mingle with notes of cream and vanilla from oak.



Light & fruity

CHAPEL DOWN ENGLISH ROSE 2016 £11.99/75cl
This delightfully easy-going rosé is summer in a glass. Made from raspberry-scented Pinot Noir, it has a hint of sweetness and is refreshingly light-bodied at 12.5%. A great wine for summer parties with family and friends.

Home-grown talent



also harmony and finesse. Many producers are making credible examples though perhaps the most prominent is Chapel Down, particularly with its vines grown on south-facing chalk slopes in the North Downs.

'I'm a firm believer that England can make top, top Chardonnay,' says Chapel Down winemaker Josh Donaghay-Spire. 'I love Chardonnay and have worked with it in France; I've never seen aromatic delicacy like we get here. It's turned me into a champion of English Chardonnay!'

It doesn't stop at whites, either. Although it's hard to regularly ripen grapes sufficiently to make reliable red wine every year, that hasn't stopped some pioneers making progress. Pinot Noir is

particularly exciting. As Sam Linter at Bolney says: 'Pinot Noir is the future! It's challenging, but that's half the fun. Even Burgundy has its problems.' Sweet wine is on the up, too – Hattingley Valley in Hampshire is adding to its burgeoning reputation with a sweet Bacchus, while Denbies makes Noble Harvest from Ortega.

It seems the ambition for UK wine is limitless. Exports – hardly a realistic prospect a decade ago – are now firmly in the sights of British producers as production grows, with the likes of the US and Japan top priorities.

Hambledon MD Ian Kellett wants to reach a production total of 1 million bottles, of which just one-third will be destined for the UK. 'I don't just want to make the best English sparkling wine,' he says. 'I want to make one of the top British brands, alongside the likes of Aston Martin.'

Ridgeview's Simon Roberts thinks that English character is important not only inside the bottle but also on the outside. 'The English name – allied to a strong brand and premium quality – is key when exporting. When we started, "England" was quite small on the label. Now it's big!'

English wine is on the up. Britannia might not rule the wine waves just yet, but it's making sterling headway. WD

Susie Barrie and Peter Richards are married Masters of Wine and TV presenters. Their Wine Festival Winchester (24-25 Nov 2017) features a range of English wine. Visit susieandpeter.com or thewinefestival.co.uk

In my glass this summer...



Waitrose buyer Becky Hull MW picks her favourite English summer sparklers

Fruity & fresh

LECKFORD ESTATE

BRUT 2013* £24.99/75cl

This blend of classic Champagne varieties from the Waitrose Farm in Hampshire is matured in bottles for two years at Ridgeview. Creamy and nutty, with a fine mousse, red-apple and peach flavours.



No. 10 favourite

RIDGEVIEW

BLOOMSBURY BRUT

£26.99/75cl

Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier add depth to this award-winning fizz from Ridgeview, an official supplier to Downing Street, but it's the Chardonnay that gives the effortless elegance, zest and finesse.



THE BEST OF BRITISH



A hint of spice

BOLNEY ESTATE PINOT NOIR

2015* £15.99/75cl

Although it's not easy to make red wine in our chilly climate, the grape that does best is the pale-skinned Pinot Noir. This is a great example: light-bodied and savoury, with a lovely hint of crushed black pepper.



Sweet success

DENBIES NOBLE HARVEST

2015* £19.99/37.5cl

It's rare to find English pudding wine – and even rarer to find one this delicious. Made from 100% Ortega, it is honeyed and zesty and cries out for a plate of apple crumble and custard.

Try something new...

If this feature has inspired you to sample home-grown wines, you'll find more than 95 English and Welsh wines – red, white, rosé and sparkling – at waitrosecellar.com. It's also worth checking your nearest store, especially if you live near a vineyard, as they often stock locally-produced wines.