

NEW frontiers

The burgeoning English and Welsh wine scene is awash with innovation, finds **PETER RICHARDS MW**

Robb and Nicola Merchant are proud of many things at their White Castle Vineyard in Abergavenny, Wales. One of them is their fortified red wine '1581', made from the Regent grape variety and aged for several years in barrel. Another is the Cabernet Franc they planted to celebrate their 10th anniversary in 2019.

'It's a really exciting time in Wales at the moment,' grins Robb. 'Our focus is on Welsh identity and quality. No compromise.'

While the notion of Welsh fortified or Cabernet Franc may raise eyebrows, the Merchants are far from atypical in the context of modern English and Welsh wine. Experimentation, innovation and diversification are words ringing round UK vineyards as winemakers feed off the momentum of a fast-growing and increasingly popular UK wine scene.

A SPARKLING SUCCESS

Of course, that momentum has largely been generated by one specific wine category: traditional method sparkling wine. Although the history of English and Welsh viticulture is largely a story of still wine, the move to quality-driven traditional method fizz that began from the late 1980s onwards transformed this fledgling industry, attracting investment from champagne houses such as Pommery and Taittinger along the way.

Such has been the success of traditional method fizz that two in every three bottles of English and Welsh wine are sparkling, and these are almost exclusively made by the traditional method (99%, according to trade organisation WineGB). A glance at UK vine plantings also confirms this focus, with the sparkling varieties (Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier) accounting for 70% of the entire planted area.

International recognition, major awards and critical acclaim have focused on these sparkling wines, especially as their prestige and numbers have grown in the two decades following the millennium. They are, quite simply, what has put England

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CHARLES AND RUTH SIMPSON



and Wales on the international wine map – and they remain the bedrock of UK wine production.

BEYOND FIZZ

And yet, talking to winemakers and tasting new releases from all around the country, there is a notable appetite for adventures beyond the confines of the traditional sparklers. The Merchants are one example. At the other end of the scale is Chapel Down, the UK's largest wine producer. Some 60% of Chapel Down's output is

traditional method sparkling wine but the remaining 40% is largely still wine, from the easy-going Flint Dry to the outstanding Kit's Coty still wines and more experimental bottlings like a Chardonnay/Albariño blend and orange Bacchus.

'English wine is a particularly exciting industry to be in precisely because we're not bound up in red tape and regulation stipulating what we can and cannot do,' comments Mark Harvey, Chapel Down's managing director of wines and spirits. 'The centre of gravity for Chapel Down will always be traditional-method sparkling wines but the diversity of our product range beyond this adds interest and excitement to the brand.'

Not far from Chapel Down in Kent, Charles and Ruth Simpson initially 'vowed never to make still wine in England', having been underwhelmed by the quality and given the comparative ease of making such wines at their Languedoc operation, Domaine Sainte Rosé. But the couple were won over after studying the Kent terroir and in 2018 a third of production at their eponymous estate was still, including a Chardonnay, rosé, Pinot Noir and a pioneering white Pinot Meunier. 'We believe UK still wines have the potential to challenge Burgundy – they grow on similar limestone terroirs and display the same minerality, elegance and ageing potential,' asserts Ruth. 'People have commented that traditional-method sparkling has done for England what Sauvignon Blanc did for New Zealand in the early years. As England's reputation becomes established, we absolutely should diversify in order to bolster that position and appeal to a broader market.'

Broadening the offering is a key motivation for many producers. 'The English sparkling wine market is already starting to become crowded,' comments Gusbourne's Charlie Holland, whose still Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are among the finest in the country. 'Being able to offer something new, different and exciting is important to give breadth and depth to the category.'

UK VINEYARD AREA

(WINEGB, 2019)

PINOT NOIR* – 1,063ha (29.7% of total hectareage)

CHARDONNAY – 1,034ha (28.9%)

PINOT MEUNIER – 394ha (11%)

BACCHUS – 247ha (6.9%)

SEYVAL BLANC – 150ha (4.2%)

PINOT GRIS – 70ha (2.4%)

REICHENSTEINER – 66ha (2.3%)

MADELEINE ANGEVINE – 61ha (2.1%)

OTHERS – 494ha (12.5%)

TOTAL UK VINEYARD – 3,579ha

PRICE POINTS

For Vagabond winemaker Gavin Monery, diversifying isn't just desirable but essential, he says: 'It's crucial for survival – unless you're financed by crazy money then most producers will need to make still wines (and 'fast-to-market' sparkling wines) just to keep the lights on. Sparkling wine only accounts for 12% of the overall



CHAPEL DOWN VINEYARD



SERGIO VERRILLO OF BLACKBOOK WINERY

UK wine market and sparkling over £30 is just 2%. Anyone not making some still whites and rosé styles is missing a trick – that’s what people are drinking most of the time.’

Maturing traditional-method sparkling wine over a period of years comes at a significant cost, so developing alternative products can not only broaden the market but also improve cash flow. This can prove a vital commercial lifeline, especially for newcomers. Ruth Simpson concedes that still wine production ‘has allowed us to get our product and our name out into the marketplace earlier’, while Vagabond’s Monery adds, ‘I like and respect the traditional-method process, but it’s so capital intensive and that can be prohibitive for a lot of producers.’ Meeting different price points is also a particularly motivating factor in this diversification process.

Sergio Verrillo is behind the Blackbook urban winery in Battersea, making still Bacchus, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. ‘By creating still wines at a more accessible price point, I believe we open up a larger set of consumers to English and Welsh wine,’ he says. ‘It’s immensely important for English wine to diversify.’

Bolney is a stalwart of the English wine scene, operational since 1972, which has evolved over time from still wine production to incorporate traditional-method sparkling. Nonetheless, MD and winemaker Sam Linter is adamant that still wine remains important, describing it as a gateway into English wine.

‘Traditional method fizz at £30 is a celebratory drink – a still wine at £14-£18 is still aspirational but also another level for people to get into English wine. It plays an important role in bringing people into the category.’

The changing climate is also playing its part. According to Dr Alistair Nesbitt of Vinescapes, the average growing season temperature in the UK has been trending upwards, from 13°C for 1954-1983 to 14°C by 2004-2013. This warming has seen still wine production become more viable – particularly in hot years like 2018. ‘The 2018 harvest was a great catalyst for diversity,’ observes

Gusbourne’s Holland. ‘Having a surplus of healthy, ripe grapes encouraged winemakers to experiment with different styles.’

NON-TRADITIONAL SPARKLERS

Stylistic diversification isn’t just limited to still wines, either. The last few years have seen the emergence of non-traditional-method sparkling, from charmat (ie tank method) to pet-nat and even carbonated styles. This has ruffled feathers among those who perceive a threat to the reputation of English and Welsh wine, many of whom argue that such products risk causing confusion among consumers and driving prices lower.

‘English [traditional-method] sparkling wine enjoys the most enviable quality position and price point, so purposefully de-valuing this position makes no sense,’ commented one producer.

At the same time, however, many concede these are inevitable developments. Both Flint and Fitz have charmat method sparkling on the market. ‘When we looked at the fantastic English sparklings on the market, we started to feel the choice was a little narrow,’ reads the text on Fitz’s website. ‘So we decided to experiment with different grape varieties and produce our wines differently using the charmat method. We saw a gap and moved to fill it.’ Monery of Vagabond dreams of ‘setting up a plant in the UK to make a million bottles a year’, of low-intervention charmat, saying it could be ‘huge as a product category’. Blackbook’s Verrillo also backs charmat. ‘As long as it tastes good and is made well, then I’m all for it. What we need to bear in mind as an industry is that with methods such as charmat, we extend our reach to the consumer, which benefits all. However, quality needs to be paramount.’ Long-time organic wine producer Will Davenport makes a similar point about pet-nat (the lightly sparkling, often cloudy style). ‘Our pet-nat started as a challenge in 2015, but the quality has exceeded my expectations and we’ve made it every year since.’ However, while he describes it as ‘a fun wine to make’ and notes it has proved very popular with customers and adds that production is necessarily small as ‘the grapes need

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to be completely right for this style, and it's very time-consuming to make during harvest as the wine is bottled mid-ferment.' The latter point is echoed by Monery at Vagabond, who also makes a pet-nat. 'The nature of the process is unpredictable and hard to control, so it's impossible to scale.' He adds, 'pet-nats will continue to evolve in the UK – the beauty is they can be done in small batches that don't require huge investment. They are a great way for young winemakers with no capital or land to get noticed, and the fact they're natural and unadulterated resonates with a lot of consumers'.

HIGH VARIETY

Carbonated wines have also emerged lately. One example of this is The Uncommon, a brand launched in 2018 and sold in eye-catching 250ml cans. Another is Chapel Down's sparkling Bacchus, launched in 2019. 'It's a young, fun wine that's been really well received as a home-grown alternative to prosecco,' explains Harvey. Still wine production (over 4m bottles in 2018) is also seeing diversification. Take Bacchus. A recent tasting showed 36 different Bacchus wines, covering an impressive range of styles and formats. This German-bred cross has Riesling in its parentage but is fast becoming a USP for Britain, from expressively aromatic, tangy styles to oaked versions and even orange (Chapel Down, Litmus) and sweet iterations (Hattingley Valley's Entice).

The so-called sparkling varieties are also adding to the diversity. Chardonnay is not only making outstanding sparkling but also some of England's finest still whites. Pinot Noir is making credible red wines in a lighter style, particularly from the warmer vintages, and is also being made into white wines by the likes of Litmus. Meunier, meanwhile, can now be found not only as a still white (Simpsons) but also red (Hush Heath). With Albariño, Chasselas, Sauvignon Blanc and even Pinotage already planted in the UK, others are contemplating varieties like Grüner Veltliner, Aligoté, Poulsard and Trousseau. Low-intervention wine styles are also increasingly popular, giving a different spin on existing varieties. As Tillingham's Ben Walgate comments, 'The natural approach

PETER RICHARDS MW: MY TAKE



"Frontier winemaking" is how one winemaker described English wine to me recently. I couldn't agree more. Most producers are essentially exploring uncharted territory. That's precisely what makes it exciting. Anything seems possible.

It's also why we shouldn't be sniffy about diversification. Sure, some products will be gimmicky or cynical. But the market's not stupid. Only the best sites, producers and wines will survive over time. Without experimentation and innovation, we may never know what truly works best.

I believe there's a place for well-made non-traditional-method sparkling wine, but it will be hard to compete with the likes of prosecco and remain profitable. Brands will need to be strong and well differentiated in the market. Meanwhile, traditional-method sparkling will remain the mainstay of production, sales and exports. Still wines hold huge promise, especially as the climate warms. In a market increasingly demanding refreshing, food-friendly, nuanced, lower-alcohol styles, England and Wales can deliver in spades. Chardonnay will lead the charge but Pinot Noir, Bacchus, Ortega and Pinot Gris have potential. The best still wines aren't cheap but they are distinctive, frequently delicious and getting better all the time. Our cellar is already filling up with them...'

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gives compelling results – another level of texture and flavour. It's about not conforming to a commercial notion like house style or consistency, and the wines have been successful as a result.' He adds that exports have gone better than expected because 'importers have come to us – they want English wine as well as low-intervention and we're one of the few people doing that in the UK'. It is precisely this desire not to be limited by conforming to expectations that is driving the diversification trend in UK wine. It's still early days, so hard to predict where it will all end. But that's part of the point – and, as such, these are welcome developments. No credible wine industry can stand still. English and Welsh wine is still in the early stages of its fine wine evolution, so experimentation is inevitable and positive. The still wines in particular are exciting, especially those which focus on the very best sites, with the right clones and a quality-driven mindset. And if the likes of Welsh Cabernet Franc and fortified wine end up being one part of our nation's rich fine wine tapestry, so much the better. 🍷