

Ageing English fizz

The many top medals being awarded to English sparkling wines confirm that quality is high, yet their suitability for ageing in bottle is still a voyage of discovery – our expert's 18 picks are leading the way

STORY & SELECTION SUSIE BARRIE MW

A regular request I receive from friends and wine lovers is for advice on what bottle (or case) to lay down for a new godchild, a future anniversary or a 'big birthday'. They might mention that they're considering Port or Champagne, at which point I tend to throw English sparkling wine into the mix. The question that inevitably follows is: 'But will it age?'

A decade or so ago that was almost impossible to answer with any certainty. The modern English wine industry was just too young and older vintages simply didn't exist in sufficient quantity. Now, this is no longer the case. With several English wineries building libraries of their older vintages, we can say unequivocally that the best English sparkling wines can and do age. In some instances, quite spectacularly.

The question then becomes: what makes for an ageworthy English fizz? You might think England's naturally high acid levels and low yields are the key. But for any wine to age well, first and foremost it must be balanced, and the acidity in some English vintages can actually be too high for wines ever to become harmonious, no matter how long they're aged.

Equally, as Nyetimber Estate's head winemaker Cherie Spriggs says: 'Low yields aren't necessarily your friend in sparkling wine.' Low yield can often give a wine with more polyphenolic content. And those polyphenols can make the wine more susceptible to oxidation over time, which can lead to the wine developing too quickly.

COMPELLING ENERGY

Creating an English sparkling wine with ageability is clearly a fine art and a multi-faceted process. As for factors beyond a balanced base wine that has



a material impact on ageing, from my extensive tastings of older English sparkling wines and discussions with leading producers, I'd mention the likes of vintage, bottle format [size] and, on a purely practical level, winery (or home) storage facilities.

In terms of vintages, at present, the 2010 and 2013 vintages are looking terrific and drinking beautifully. But there are some lovely wines from 2014,

2015 and 2016 on the market, too, and if you're looking to lay a fine English sparkling wine down then 2018 is a must.

When it comes to formats, one of the most intriguing aspects of this whole subject is what's referred to as 'the magnum effect'. In my experience, there is often compelling energy to English sparkling wines bottled in magnum (especially when you compare them to exactly the same wine in a 75cl bottle). They also tend to age better and develop more complexity over time.

The subject of ageability is very much on the agenda for England's top sparkling producers, and rightly so. There is nothing quite like the flavour of an English fizz that has developed from tangy and orchard-fruited to complex, multi-layered and full of the truffle, honey and brioche characters of age.

Labels such as 'library collection' may come at a price, but I guarantee that any one of the wines that follow would make a very valuable addition to your cellar. And they will come in handy for any number of celebrations.

Nyetimber, Blanc de Blancs, West Sussex 2007

nyetimber.com

I was so impressed when I first tasted this wine that I bought several magnums. Tasting it again I'm feeling rather smug – it's astonishingly good and has aged impeccably. From its old gold hue to its aromas of freshly baked bread, cream-filled patisserie, honey and toasted hazelnuts, it is utterly compelling. Poised and sensual, rich yet savoury. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alcohol** 12%



Gusbourne, Blanc de Blancs, Kent 2007

£150 gusbourne.com/membership

This golden fizz is classic Gusbourne in every way and shows what wonderfully ageworthy wines the 2007 vintage has produced. Elegant, with flavours of truffle, warm bread and toasted hazelnut surrounding a steely core. Stylish and multi-layered with a fresh fine mousse and a salted caramel lick to the finish. A wine of contemplation. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 12%



Hattingley Valley, Kings Cuvée, Hampshire 2015

£85-£95 Caviste, Hattingley Valley, Hedonism, The Great Wine Co

The best wines from the cool 2015 vintage are glorious and this is no exception. Unashamedly oaky (fermented then aged for seven months in barrel), Hattingley's top wine shows spiced white peach, toasted nut and a hint of struck match. It's rounded with a lively mousse and flavours of brioche and lemon curd. **Drink** 2024-2035 **Alc** 11.7%



Wiston Estate, Library Collection Blanc de Blancs, South Downs 2010

£130-£140 Hedonism, Hennings, The Finest Bubble, Wiston Estate

A limited-edition release from the excellent 2010 vintage, this is a wonderful example of how beautifully English blanc de blancs can age. Savoury, mushroom and spice aromas with notes of digestive biscuit and truffle. Generous and long, with bracing acidity but plenty of rich, savoury flavour. Drinking beautifully now but with the ability to mature further. **Drink** 2023-2033 **Alc** 12%



Chapel Down, Kit's Coty Coeur de Cuvée, Kent 2016

£96-£120 Chapel Down, Grape Britannia, Harrods, Harvey Nichols, Master of Malt, The English Wine Collection, The Wine Society

The most impressive vintage to date, made with Chardonnay sourced from the estate's flagship Kit's Coty vineyard. The base wine is fermented with wild yeast and matured on lees in oak for seven months. Supremely elegant with a savoury aroma and clotted cream texture; fine but lively mousse, great ageing potential. **Drink** 2023-2031 **Alc** 12%



Digby Fine English, Vintage Brut 2013

£45 Digby Fine English

I've tasted this multi award-winning wine on several occasions and it has never failed to impress. Rounded and sumptuous, it shows all the classic secondary notes of truffle, spice and caramelised nuts you can expect from mature English fizz. A great example of 2013 at its very best, fruit grown mainly in Sussex and Hampshire, with some from Dorset and Kent. Digby's Vintage Rosé 2014 is also superb (£48.50 The Whisky Exchange). **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 12%



Sugrue South Downs, Cuvée Boz, Hampshire 2015

£65-£74 Grape Britannia, Hennings, Hedonism, Hic, Lea & Sandeman, Shelved Wine, The English Wine Collection, The Whisky Exchange, Vinvm

Dermot Sugrue is one of England's finest winemakers and he produces a small range of stunning wines under his own label. This is a brilliant example of a thoroughly English blanc de blancs. Notes of praline, toasted hazelnut and apple rind are matched by a lively mousse and gloriously tangy acidity. **Drink** 2025-2032 **Alc** 12%



Sugrue South Downs, Cuvée Dr Brendan O'Regan, South Downs MV

£125-£135 Brunswick, Grape Britannia, Hennings, Sugrue South Downs, Symposium, Vinvm

This multi-vintage blend is named after winemaker Dermot Sugrue's great-uncle, who established the concept of duty free in the mid-20th century in Ireland. Based on the 2016 vintage with reserve wines dating back to 2009. Ripe orchard fruits, savoury spice, with fresh, tangy acidity and a fine lively mousse. It will age and develop for several years. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 12%



Exton Park, Cuvée M Isaac, Hampshire 2011

£150-£188 Exton Park (by allocation), Hedonism

Unlike many English sparkling winemakers, Corinne Seely chooses to block malolactic fermentation in her vintage wines, saying: 'I don't want to lose that vibrancy, that perception of life in the wine.' Produced in Exton's first vintage from the oldest plot, this mature blanc de blancs shows the classic smoky, savoury, truffle-infused aromas of aged English fizz, but retains its intense acidity. **Drink** 2023-2025 **Alc** 11% ▶



Gusbourne, Cork Aged Blanc de Blancs, Kent 2013

£99 Gusbourne

This elegant 2013 blanc de blancs spent three years on lees and five ageing on the cork. Its truffle-infused aromas blend seamlessly with its steely core, spine-tingling acidity and fine mousse. The finish is long and satisfying. A late-disgorged version (available via Gusbourne's website at the same price) makes for a fascinating comparative tasting. **Drink 2023 Alc 12%**



Nyetimber, Classic Cuvée, West Sussex 2010

£85-£90/magnum Berry Bros & Rudd, Grape Britannia, Hedonism, Nyetimber

As winemaker Cherie Spriggs says, 'the real prize at the end of a magnum is that you get a lot more complexity when it reaches its peak' – and this wine lives up to that billing. Wonderful ripe peach and digestive biscuit flavours with a fine mousse and toasty finish. A joy to drink now, this will continue to develop. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**



Ridgeview, Limited Release Blanc de Blancs, Sussex 2009

£148-£195/magnum Ridgeview, The Finest Bubble

Ridgeview's blanc de blancs have always been the standouts of the range. Made in tiny quantities and having spent 10 years on the lees, this 2009 is saline, savoury and self-assured. It's subtle, bready and 'Champagne-like' rather than vibrant, appley and tangy. A very stylish choice. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 12%**



Wiston Estate, Blanc de Noirs, West Sussex 2014

£54-£61.50 Brunswick, DBM Wines, Hawkins Bros, Hennings, The Finest Bubble, Wiston Estate

Blanc de noirs is not an easy style to get right. Although the aromas can be enticing, there's often a disappointing hole in the mid-palate. Not where Wiston or this wine is concerned. Made from a blend of 65% Pinot Noir and 35% Meunier fermented in old Burgundy oak, it has a gorgeous golden colour and broad, yeasty, cream and spiced plum flavours. **Drink 2023-2026 Alc 12%**



Breaky Bottom, Cuvée Gerard Hoffnung, Sussex 2009

£80 Breaky Bottom, Corney & Barrow

Peter and Christina Hall have been making wine in their beautiful little corner of Sussex for almost 50 years, and moved from still to sparkling wine production in the mid-1990s. Named after an artist and family friend, this cuvée is a blend of 60% Chardonnay with the two Pinots, and shows developed brioche and smoke on the nose with a vinous texture and honeyed complexity in the mouth. **Drink 2023-2026 Alc 12%**



Grange Estates, The Grange Classic, Hampshire 2016

£110/magnum The Grange

The 2016 was the first vintage in magnum by The Grange and is a characterful blend of 65% Chardonnay, 20% Meunier and 15% Pinot Noir. This first release spent five years on lees, 18 months on cork and is full of English red apple and orchard fruit aromas and flavours, with keen acidity and subtle but attractive bready, autolytic notes. Further releases with longer lees and cork ageing to follow. **Drink 2023-2028 Alc 12%**



Greyfriars Vineyard, Cuvée Royale Brut, Surrey 2016

£38 Greyfriars Vineyard

This second release of the Greyfriars Vineyard Cuvée Royale is a 50/50 blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir that was fermented in old oak barrels and aged for four years on lees. It is packed with bruised red apple fruit, and is intensely yeasty and bold with rich, lemon acidity. Beautifully hedonistic and artisanal in style, it's terrific value for a wine with so much character. **Drink 2023-2031 Alc 12%**



Coates & Seely, La Perfide Rosé, Hampshire 2014

£140/magnum Coates & Seely

The La Perfide wines are a masterclass in ageworthy English fizz. From the ethereal salmon colour to its flavours of spiced red plum, dried rose petal and roasted nuts, it oozes sophistication. The mousse is very fine and, at 5g/L dosage, it's dry but perfectly balanced. Released last year only in magnum, it is ageing gracefully and will continue to do so for many years. **Drink 2023-2030 Alc 11.5%**



Rathfinny, Rosé Brut, Sussex 2017

£80-£85/magnum Carruthers & Kent, Rathfinny Estate, The Oxford Wine Co

A rosé with a deepish, onion skin hue, this is vibrant and attractive with notes of spiced plum and rosehip. A touch of oak from the still red Pinot element lends an attractive roundness, though at 4g/L dosage I do find it a little dry in the mouth to be perfectly balanced. That's only a small niggle though, as this still youthful wine has both the style and complexity to continue to develop over several years. **Drink 2025-2030 Alc 12.5%**



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