

Liz Sagues finds England is sparkling

Champagne in all but name

Is there any decent English wine? Still I'm asked that, and by people whose wine experience I thought was pretty broad. So as English Wine Week loomed at the end of May, I argued in the *Ham&High* that the answer is firmly yes.

The core of the article was that what England does best is fizz, and it was centred around a visit to RidgeView – my first, although I've been a fan of Mike Roberts' wine for many years. The 20 acres of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes surely have one of the best views of vineyards anywhere, to the ridge of the South Downs where East and West Sussex meet.

Mike and his wife Christine bought the land 17 years ago, with the proceeds of the sale of their computer business. Wine hadn't been a particular ambition, but "we thought gosh, this would make a wonderful vineyard". Once they'd decided that wine grapes would be the crop, Champagne-challenging fizz was the aim, from the Champagne varietals. "I don't understand why people didn't do it before Nyetimber [the other pioneer, with a two-year start over RidgeView] and us," said Roberts.

The decision makes a lot of sense given the similarities to the Champagne region, less than 200 miles away. "We have the same geology, the same soils, the same climate. To me it was so logical." Everything points to Champagne-style wine in Sussex, he continues – there's even roughly the same geographical closeness to, literally, a capital market – Paris for Champagne, London for English sparklers.

Mike Roberts in his vineyard with a view. Vineyard photos by Liz Sagues.



In fact, Sussex has even more potential: Roberts argues that its longer growing season – almost a month more than Champagne's – allows better ripeness in the grapes, and thus more flavour in the wine. But the day I was there, the frost candles had been burning the previous night, one of an unusually high number of spring scares this year.

Roberts acknowledges that costs of what RidgeView is doing are high, "but at least we can use that expense by adding a lot of value". He and his son Simon follow the wine-making directives of the CIVC and use the expertise of Champagne's oenologists. Equipment and practice faithfully shadow those of the Champagne houses, if still on a fairly small scale – the Coquard press, mechanical riddling, enough barrels to ferment and age 4,000 litres of wine (a maximum of 5pc in any blend), a cool and quiet

cellar with space for 250,000 bottles – though sadly lacking the charm of the chalk-carved best of Champagne. There's even a dusty library of historic bottles.

RidgeView's first wine was made in 1996, but that was mostly from grapes sourced elsewhere. 1997 was the true maiden vintage, and now some 200,000 bottles are filled each year, with 300,000 anticipated soon.

The 20 home acres apart, there are partnerships with other growers, totalling 157 acres. And Roberts recently let go a 25pc stake in the company to enable the inclusion of 60 newly-planted acres a little to the west, at Boxgrove, with the potential to add at least double that vineyard area again.

The wines are now all vintage, deliberately, though the Bloomsbury (Chardonnay-dominated) and Cavendish (three-grape blend again, but with much more of the pinots)

cuvées are made to be as consistent as possible, year on year. The success of RidgeView, and the best of other English fizz, in blind wine-tasting competitions world-wide is no longer a surprise, but Roberts still takes particular pleasure in beating the French on their home ground. Tastings nearer home have the same result. He recounts that many times he has mixed Champagne and new world fizz with his own wines for consumer events. Blind, the RidgeViews are the frequent favourites, though such is the power of the ‘c’ word that once the concealing wraps are removed Champagne’s profile suddenly rises.

The London names are not simply to prove the Englishness of the wine. It all goes back to the multi-talented doctor, naturalist and scientist Christopher Merret, who in a paper to the Royal Society in 1662 explained what was to become the Champagne method of making sparkling wine – at a time when England could produce bottles strong enough to withstand the pressure of the bubbles. Dom Pérignon? His ‘invention’ came more than three decades later. Bloomsbury was the first title Roberts chose, Fizrovia – just across the road and where his office used to be – was a logical progression, and so on through some of the capital’s best addresses.

RidgeView is open to everyone, six days a week, so I could suggest that *Ham&High* readers formed their own opinions of the wines. But unlike a lot of English estates where tourism seems almost more important than wine-making, this is very much a working winery with a tasting room-with-a-view added on.

And what was particularly valuable in the context of an article in a local newspaper rather than a specialist wine publication is that, again unusually for England, RidgeView is easy to buy: Waitrose and Laithwaites (with its own blend, South Ridge) are the biggest outlets, but there are many more, The Wine Society, Fortnum’s, Berry Bros and Jeroboams among them.

Horizons are expanding – export markets include Norway (Bloomsbury is in every state liquor store), Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Germany, Japan – and there are even individual buyers in France. Last year sales were

up 22% in value, 17% in value, and when stocks run low it is the visitors who are restricted in what they can take home, to ensure there is no disruption to supplies to the main stockists. That’s essential, Roberts believes, if the increasing volume of RidgeView wine soon to be available is sure of a market.

He acknowledges that English wine acreage will continue to grow and that, for the moment, there is a market for all the good sparkling wine that is made, but he has concerns: “People are planting, but don’t know what to do with their grapes.” More contract winemaking by the bigger, established companies is one way to solve a problem of grape excess.

But while RidgeView does, and will continue to, make

wine for other growers (the new, much-praised fizz from the large Gusbourne Estate in Kent owned by an ambitious South African, Andrew Weeber, is currently made by the Roberts), that is not the estate’s *raison d’être*, he emphasises.

He argues that the newcomers often don’t understand the investment involved and advises a couple of years’ reflection between idea and implementation. If not, could English sparkling wine indigestion loom?

Afterwards, eating lunch at the pub in nearby Ditchling (The Bull – recommended: good, inventive food and a decent wine list from Enotria, including, of course, RidgeView) one of the group at the next table was talking of starting up a vineyard. I almost chipped in with Roberts’ advice, until the would-be grower said where. Banyuls...



Tasting room with a view, and a range of styles to match a Champagne line-up.

