

English and Welsh wines come of age

Commercial vineyards have only really been a feature of the British countryside for the last sixty years and for most of those sixty years, English wines (and to a lesser extent Welsh wines) have been something of a joke. The wine trade knew about them (just) and those that did know about them knew they weren't top sellers. Most wines were made from unusual (or at least less-familiar) grape varieties – Müller-Thurgau, Seyval blanc, Reichensteiner, Bacchus and Schönburger were the top five varieties in 1990 – and the best tasted like a watered down version of Blue Nun or Golden Oktober. No wonder they didn't please everyone!

So what's changed? Firstly, the climate. With more days over 30°C and warmer nights, UK vines are now able to produce riper grapes – sugar levels are almost twice as high as they were 30 years ago – which has meant that the old German varieties are being rapidly replaced by better, and much more importantly, better known, varieties. In 1990, Chardonnay and the Pinots – noir, blanc, gris and Meunier – accounted for 60 ha of the 929 ha planted (6.5%). Today (2011) my estimate is that these same varieties account for around 750 ha out of the total of 1,550 ha (48%). In addition, many of the newer vineyards planted with Champagne varieties are better sited, better trellised and pruned and better managed than many of the old vineyards. They are also, most importantly, bigger and better financed. UK sparkling wines with their relatively high acidity, generally take a few years of lees ageing to come to market and therefore growers need to be prepared to invest in 4-5 years of bottled stock if they are to sell their wines in top condition and at Champagne prices.

Although the longest established dedicated sparkling wine producer, Nyetimber, is still probably the best known (and at 151 ha is still by far the biggest), other large-scale producers such as RidgeView (in my view the most consistent and best-value UK sparkling wine producer), Chapel Down and Camel Valley (who still use, and champion wines made from Seyval blanc) are creeping up on them. Behind the majors are a number of smaller and/or newer producers who are proving that with care taken over the selection of site and varieties and expertise in the winery, size is not everything. Producers such as Bluebell Estates, Breaky Bottom (another Seyval blanc expert), Coates & Seely, Gusbourne, Furleigh, Henners, Hush Heath, Jenkyn Place and Plumpton College are all now producing award winning sparkling wines which are rivalling (and sometimes beating) wines from the better known estates.

Although it's English sparkling wines that have been hogging the limelight, UK still wines have also been improving. In 2011, a strange vintage with both high sugars and high acids, the variety Bacchus (on a good day a Sancerre or Marlborough Sauvignon blanc look-alike) triumphed with producers such as Camel Valley, Chapel Down, Davenport, Furleigh and Sharpham all turning out award winning wines. We are also starting to see a trickle, and I suspect that in years to come this might turn into perhaps not a flood, but quite possibly a stream, of interesting still wines made from Chardonnay, Pinot blanc, Pinot gris, Pinot noir (especially rosés). West Sussex producer Stopham Estates' Pinot gris and Pinot blanc wines have been creating quite a buzz with very encouraging press comments from Jane McQuitty and Jancis Robinson helping sales so much that the 'Sold out' signs for these two wines have been put up.

After my 35 years involvement with growing and making wines in England, the current situation has come as something of a reward after many years spent ignoring the cat-calls from wine merchants and wine drinkers. That the UK can now produce world-class sparkling wines that sell alongside, and at the same prices as, Champagnes and other quality sparkling wines is amazing and with our still wines improving vintage by vintage, they too will find their market niche.