

Judgment of Parson's Green I - 2011

English Sparkling Wine v Champagne – who will win?

The Tasters

A stellar line up of tasters (in alphabetical order): Suzie Barrie MW (Winchester Wine School proprietor who wrote her MW dissertation on Champagne), Dee Blackstock MW (Champagne and sparkling wine buyer for Waitrose), Sue Daniels (MW student and wine technologist for Marks and Spencer) Michael Edwards (journalist and author of several books on Champagne), Victoria Moore (journalist, wine columnist for the Daily Telegraph), Jancis Robinson MW, OBE (journalist and wine-polymath), Julia Trustram Eve (English Wine Producers), plus myself.

The Wines

52 English Sparkling Wines – all from award winning producers – against six non-UK sparkling wines (four Champagnes and two others). The wines were arranged in three flights: 11 Blanc de Blancs inc. Sainsbury's excellent BdB Champagne (£18.49), 15 Rosés inc. Sainsbury's Etienne Dumont NV £18.99) and 32 blends inc. 2 Champagnes – Moët & Chandon NV (£30.99), Sainsbury's Defontaine Premier Cru Champagne (£19.99), Pelorus 2006, Cloudy Bay's New Zealand vintage sparkler (£17.99) and Codorniu's top Cava (£12.99).

All wines were served blind, the RidgeView magnum was decanted into a standard bottle and tasters were free to (and did) taste the wines in any order they wished. The Champagnes were carefully chosen; the Moët because it is the world's largest Champagne brand, the UK's favourite and considered by most to be the benchmark for NV Champagnes, and the Sainsbury's Champagnes because the Blanc de Blancs is a truly excellent wine and unbeatable at the price, and the two others because they are recognised as offering superb quality and value for money. The fact that there was a 25% discount for 6 bottles or more also helped! The Pelorus vintage is one of New Zealand's best and as it is owned by LVMH they ought to know something about making the stuff. Likewise the Cava – Codorniu – Spain's top producer with over 150 years of experience in sparkling wine. The wines were also chosen because they were in the same price range as UK-sparklers are selling - £12.90 to £36.99.

The Results

Ranking	Average scores	Vineyard	Wine	Vintage	Varietal blend	Retail price
1	17.17	Ridgeview	Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs	2007	Chardonnay 100%	£ 21.95
2	16.82	Ridgeview	Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs in Magnum	2000	Chardonnay 100%	£ 63.00
3	16.65	Sainsburys	Etienne Dumont Rosé (Maison Burtin)	NV	???	£ 18.99
4	16.64	Gusbourne Estate	Brut Reserve	2006	Chardonnay 46% Pinot noir 41% Meunier 13%	£ 21.99
5	16.50	Nyetimber	Nyetimber Rosé	2007	Chardonnay, Pinot noir	£ 34.95
6	16.46	Ridgeview	Bloomsbury	2008	Chardonnay 54% Pinot Noir 26% Pinot Meunier 20%	£ 19.95
7	16.43	Plumpton Estate	The Dean	NV	Pinot noir 90% Chardonnay 10%	£ 20.00
8	16.42	Sainsburys	JS Blanc de Blanc (Duval Leroy)	NV	Chardonnay 100%	£ 18.49
9	16.36	Moet & Chandon	Brut Imperial	NV	Pinot noir 50% Chardonnay 10% Meunier 40%	£ 30.99
10	16.32	Sainsburys	Defontaine Premier Cru (Maison Burtin)	NV	Chardonnay, Pinot noir, Meunier	£ 19.99
11	16.25	Plumpton Estate	The Dean Blush	NV	Pinot noir 94% Chardonnay 6%	£ 20.00
12	16.20	Chapel Down	Pinot Reserve	2005	Pinot Noir 70% Pinot Blanc 30%	£ 24.99
13	16.05	Nyetimber	Classic Cuvée	2006	Chardonnay, Pinot noir, Pinot Meunier	£ 25.99
14	15.92	Laithwaites	South Ridge Cuvée Merret (RidgeView)	2008	Chardonnay 60% Pinot noir 28% Meunier 12%	£ 19.99
15	15.86	Jenkyn Place	Jenkyn Place Brut	2006	Chardonnay 61% Pinot noir 23% Pinot Meunier 16%	£ 25.00
16	15.81	Hush Heath Estate	Balfour Brut Rosé	2006	Pinot noir 55% Chardonnay 40% Pinot Meunier 5%	£ 36.99
17	15.80	Davenport	Limney Estate Blanc de blancs	2005	Reichensteiner 100%	£ 16.50
18	15.78	Camel Valley	Pinot Noir Brut	2009	Pinot noir 100%	£ 24.95
19	15.73	Nyetimber	Blanc de Blancs	2001	Chardonnay 100%	£ 28.99
20	15.70	Breaky Bottom	Cuvée John Inglis Hall	2006	Seyval blanc 100%	£ 20.05
21	15.69	RidgeView	Cavendish	2008	Pinot noir 39% Meunier 29% Chardonnay 22%	£ 19.95
22	15.62	Chapel Down	Blanc de Blancs	2007	Chardonnay 100%	£ 24.99
23	15.58	Bookers	Barts Bubbly Rosé	2007	Pinot noir 100%	£ 19.95
24	15.54	Laithwaites	South Ridge Cuvée Merret (RidgeView)	2007	Chardonnay 52% Pinot noir 30% Meunier 18%	£ 19.99
25	15.50	Theale	Founder's Reserve	2005	Chardonnay 100%	£ 22.99
26	15.44	Biddenden	Gribble Bridge Sparkling Rosé	2007	Gamay 100%	£ 17.70
27	15.43	Bluebell Estates	Hindleap Blanc de Blancs	2008	Chardonnay 100%	£ 23.00
28	15.40	Nutbourne	Nutty Brut	2006	Reichensteiner, Pinot noir	£ 16.50
29	15.39	Denbies	Greenfields	2006	Pinot noir 50% Chardonnay 35% Pinot Meunier 15%	£ 21.99
30	15.35	Ridgeview	Fitzrovia Rosé	2008	Chardonnay 69% Pinot Noir 19% Pinot Meunier 12%	£ 21.95

One thing is certain: the best UK sparkling wines can more than hold their own with Champagne. Although Champagne occupied four of the top ten places, that still meant that six were English and with only one point separating the top twelve wines, it was all very close. RidgeView undoubtedly were the stars of the tasting and with their wines (I include wines they made for both themselves and their clients) occupying ten out of the top thirty wines, there is no doubt that the team is on a roll. Their win at the Decanter World Wine Awards last year (Best World Wide Sparkling Wine over £10)

with the Grosvenor 2006 was no fluke. I rated their 2001 Grosvenor in magnum as my personal favourite when I tasted it at the EWP St. George's Day tasting last year (and promptly ordered six bottles to be kept for me for a future occasion) but now having tasted the 2000 Grosvenor in magnum, I am not so sure! I need to do a comparative tasting.

The other Top Twenty winners were the other serious players – Breaky Bottom (with the only Seyval blanc-based wine in the top 20), Camel Valley, Davenport (with a great 100% Reichensteiner), Gusbourne, Hush Heath, Nyetimber, Plumpton, Chapel Down, Jenkyn Place – all regular medal and award winners and capable of making good sparkling wines in a range of styles and over different vintages.

Of course no tasting is without its losers and this one was no exception. Whilst not wanting to single out any vineyard in particular, there is no doubt that on the basis of this tasting, wines made from non-Champagne varieties fared poorly. Apart from the Reichensteiner and Seyval blanc already mentioned, ALL the non-Champagne variety wines were placed at position 26 or below and whilst there were plenty of Champagne-variety blends in the bottom half of the tasting, these tended to be the younger wines suggesting that wines made from Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Meunier often (although certainly not always) require longer in bottle to come around. Older bottle-aged wines also tend to have a better nose – scoring points even before they have been tasted – whereas a short-aged bottle-fermented wine often lacks this attribute. All of the non-Champagne multi-variety blends scored badly (all in the bottom ten) and were probably best forgotten

The Conclusions

The best producers, those using the right varieties and clones, making their wine with care, ageing them for an appropriate length of time, and putting them on the market with a dosage that both respects the wine and the sector of the market they are aiming at, can produce wines that are truly world-class and at prices that are in no way out of line with the competition. With the UK sparkling wine industry barely out of nappies, what can we achieve over the next 25 years? When you consider that Dom Pérignon was perfecting the blending and assemblage of Champagne over three hundred years ago (he died in 1715) I think we can be pleased at the progress so far. As my teachers often wrote in school reports: “good work this term, but could do better” (usually with “--- if he paid attention/stopped larking about/applied himself” added on!). So it is with English Sparkling wine. In my opinion this is only the start. As both vineyards and growers mature, as winemakers learn from their past results, the quality of English Sparkling Wines can only improve. Many, many thanks to all those growers and winemakers who supplied wines and to the tasters who crowded into my flat. I hope to make this an annual event, so watch this space.

Stephen Skelton MW
12 March 2011