

Judgment of Parson's Green II

1 March 2012

The Wines

After the interest and awareness in UK sparkling wines that last year's tasting engendered, I thought it would be good to repeat the exercise. Knowing the way the industry is growing, I expected a few more wines (there were 52 in 2011), but hardly a 73% increase! In the end, 90 UK-grown sparkling wines (89 English and 1 Welsh) were lined up for the panel in two flights. The first flight of 63 wines comprised wines from what I termed "award winning and established producers" plus 3 Champagnes and 1 New World sparkler: Sainsbury's (very good) Blanc de Blancs from Duval-Leroy, Lanson Black Label NV and Nicolas Feuillatte Rosé NV, and Domaine Chandon's Green Point 2008. This flight was split into blanc de blancs and blanc de noirs, rosés and blends. The second flight from "less established producers and newcomers" consisted of 31 wines, again split into blanc de blancs, rosés and blends. Of the 90 UK wines, 48 were from the excellent 2009 vintage, 13 from 2008, 11 from 2007, 6 from 2006, 2 from 2005 and 1 from 2000. There were also 9 non-vintage wines.

The Tasters

This year's tasters included some of the same from 2011, plus a few new faces. They were: Essi Avellan MW (Finnish wine writer and Editor of FINE Champagne Magazine), Suzie Barrie MW (Winchester Wine School), Sue Daniels (MW student and wine technologist for Marks & Spencer), Michael Edwards (journalist and author of several books on Champagne), Giles Fallowfield (wine writer specialising in Champagne), Andy Howard MW (wine buyer for M&S), Jancis Robinson MW, Matt Smith (Waitrose English Wine buyer and involved with Waitrose's vineyard at Leckford Estate), Steven Spurrier (Decanter Magazine), Julia Stafford (proprietor of the Wine Pantry, a shop in London's Borough Market stocking only UK wines), Julia Trustram Eve (English Wine Producers), plus myself. Sadly Jane McQuitty, Victoria Moore and Tom Stevenson intended to taste, but in the end were unable to owing to various problems.

Tasters could tackle the wines in any order they wanted (and did) and there was some debate about whether to taste rosés first followed by blends, vice versa, or perhaps it didn't make any difference! Not all tasters tasted all the wines, four out of the twelve tasters only had time to taste the larger flight. However, every wine was tasted and scored by at least eight tasters.

The Results

Position	Scores	Vineyard	Name of Wine	Vintage	Grape variety 1	Grape variety 2	Grape variety 3	Retail price
1	17.33	Camel Valley	Pinot Noir Rosé Brut	2010	Pinot Noir			£ 24.95
2	17.08	RidgeView	Grosvenor	2009	Chardonnay			£ 24.95
3	16.94	Bolney Wine Estate	Cuvée Rosé	2009	Pinot Noir			£ 23.99
4	16.71	Plumpton College	The Dean Blush Brut	NV	Pinot Noir 50%	Chardonnay 35%	Meunier 15%	£ 20.00
5	16.56	Chapel Down	Rosé Brut	NV	Pinot Noir			£ 21.99
6	16.45	RidgeView	M&S Marksman	2009	Chardonnay			£ 21.99
=7	16.22	Hush Heath Estate	Balfour Brut Rosé	2008	Pinot Noir 53%	Chardonnay 38%	Meunier 9%	£ 35.99
=7	16.22	RidgeView	Victoria Rosé	2009	Pinot Noir 63%	Meunier 37%		£ 24.95
9	16.20	Gusbourne	Blanc de Blancs	2007	Chardonnay			£ 29.99
10	16.19	Breaky Bottom	Cuvée Princess Colonna	2008	Chardonnay 85%	Pinot Noir 7%	Meunier 8%	£ 24.00
11	16.06	Coates & Seely	Britagne Rosé	NV	Pinot Noir 65%	Meunier 35%		£ 27.95
=12	16.05	Bolney Wine Estate	Blanc de Blancs	2007	Chardonnay			£ 23.99
=12	16.05	Chapel Down	Blanc de Blancs	2007	Chardonnay			£ 24.99
=12	16.05	Meopham	Sparkling Cuveé	2008	Chardonnay 60%	Pinot Noir 30%	Pinot Gris 10%	£ 18.50
=15	16.00	Camel Valley	White Pinot	2008	Pinot Noir			£ 29.95
=15	16.00	RidgeView	Blanc de Blancs Magnum	2000	Chardonnay			£ 63.00
=15	16.00	RidgeView	Bloomsbury	2009	Chardonnay 58%	Pinot Noir 30%	Meunier 12%	£ 21.95
=15	16.00	RidgeView	Fitzrovia Rosé	2009	Chardonnay 50%	Pinot Noir 28%	Meunier 22%	£ 22.95
19	15.95	Sainsbury's Champagne (Duval-Leroy)	Blanc de Blancs	NV	Chardonnay			£ 20.99
20	15.90	Chapel Down	Pinot Reserve	2005	Pinot Noir 68%	Auxerrois 15%	Pinot Blanc 14%	£ 21.99
21	15.89	Breaky Bottom	Cuvée John Inglis Hall	2006	Seyval Blanc			£ 21.50
22	15.85	RidgeView	South Ridge Blanc de Noir	2009	Pinot Noir 77%	Meunier 23%		£ 21.99
23	15.80	Breaky Bottom	Cuvée Brian Jordan	2005	Seyval Blanc			£ 21.50
=24	15.75	English Oak	Chinkapin Rosé	2009	Chardonnay 54%	Meunier 35%	Pinot Noir 11%	£ 22.99
=24	15.75	RidgeView	Cavendish	2009	Chardonnay 44%	Pinot Noir 27%	Meunier 29%	£ 21.95
=24	15.75	Sharpham	Sparkling Blanc	2009	Pinot Blanc 50%	Seyval Blanc 50%		£ 19.50
=27	15.69	Coates & Seely	Blanc de Blancs	NV	Chardonnay			£ 25.85
=27	15.69	Plumpton College	The Dean Brut	NV	Pinot Noir 54%	Chardonnay 33%	Meunier 13%	£ 20.00
29	15.67	Jenkyn Place	Rosé	2008	Chardonnay 44%	Pinot Noir 42%	Meunier 14%	£ 25.00
30	15.65	Camel Valley	Brut	2010	Seyval Blanc 60%	Reichensteiner 20%	Chardonnay 20%	£ 19.95

The top wines

A quick glance at the results show quite clearly that in this tasting, the classic Champagne variety-based wines triumphed (top 19 positions) with rosés doing especially well (7 out of top 11) and 100% Chardonnay blanc de blancs not far behind (6 out of top 16). It was also clear that non-Champagne varieties fared far less well (as they did in 2011) with the first non-Champagne variety wines appearing at positions 21, 23 and 30 (and these all being Seyval blanc wines in the hands of seasoned producers Breaky Bottom and Camel Valley). As last year, the top 20 was dominated by established producers: Camel Valley, Bolney Wine Estate, Breaky Bottom, Chapel Down, Gusbourne, Hush Heath, Meopham, Plumpton College and RidgeView were well represented in the top twenty (19 out of 20). It was also good to see a fresh name in the top 20: Coates & Seely. (Despite being a “newcomer”, Coates & Seely were included in the first flight as having tasted their wines previously, I was confident of their wine quality). The absence of wines from the UK’s largest producer might well be questioned. They were invited to submit wines, but decided that they preferred

“opportunities where our wines can be tasted against great international references in as transparent and professional circumstances as possible”.

Acidity levels and dosage

The most common fault I found in the wines I did not like was either excess acidity or poor balance of acidity and sweetness – often both. I appreciate that taste is a very individual matter and it is very hard to produce and market a style of wine that one personally finds too sweet – but – unless you propose to drink the bulk of your output at home, the wider consumer’s preferences have to be taken into account. I have always said that it is easier to offend with a wine that is too dry and acidic, than with one that is marginally too sweet and I believe therefore that getting the dosage level right is critical, especially in a tasting like this where, with such a large number of wines, palates gets progressively more tired. With sparkling wines, which are generally disgorged and dosaged in relatively small batches and at times to suit the market, one does have the opportunity to alter the dosage according to the development of the wine and the longer the wine is on the lees, the softer the wine usually appears. Eighteen of the top twenty wines had a residual sugar level higher than or within 1 g/l of their acidity and only two had acid levels slightly higher than their sugar levels (9 g/l RS to 10.8 g/l TA and 9 g/l RS to 11.9 g/l TA). If one ignores wines with over 12 g/l of RS, then of the bottom 26 scoring wines, 16 of them had acid levels higher than their residual sugar levels. This may not be statistically significant, but I think it worth pondering on.

Non-UK wines

In 2011, the non-UK wines occupied 4 out of the top ten places. This year, the non-UK wines fared far less well with the Champagnes being at nos. 19, =35 and 88, and the Green Point at 43. The Lanson Black Label, chosen because I had previously tasted it and been impressed, fared dismally and this was not just down to a rogue bottle – two bottles were opened. I appreciate that 4 wines against 90 is hardly a fair fight, but the non-UK wines were selected for quality (within the typical price range of most UK sparkling wines) and there was no intention to make them appear as second-class citizens. The fact is that the best UK sparkling wines have better fruit, better acidity and greater length than wines grown in warmer climates.

UK wines from non-Champagne varieties

For the English and Welsh wines made in whole or in part from non-Champagne varieties, with the honourable exception of some excellent Seyval blanc based wines in the hands of top producers such as Breaky Bottom, Bluebell Estates and Camel Valley, EVERY one of the lowest scoring twelve wines (excluding the Lanson Black Label at no. 88) were made from a significant percentage on non-Champagne varieties and 23 out of the lowest scoring 35 wines (66%) also contained a significant percentage of non-Champagne varieties. Apart from the Seyval blanc wines already mentioned, the highest scoring non-Champagne variety based wines were two 100% Reichensteiners (both from Davenport) and a Pinot Gris from Meopham. It is not until position 66 that the first Müller-Thurgau based wine appears. The message from this tasting is that unless you are making sparkling wines using the three classic Champagne varieties (Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Meunier) or you know how to grow, ripen and turn Seyval blanc into good sparkling wine, think twice before you use other – in my opinion less suitable – varieties. In particular, rosé wines made using a proportion of red varieties such as Regent, Rondo and Triomphe are very

unlikely to score well against the excellent rosé wines being made from classic varieties. I am not saying it cannot be done, and perhaps there is a style of red and/or rosé sparkling wine (perhaps something like sparkling Australian Shiraz?) that could be made from these varieties. It also (I hope) goes without saying that unripe grapes with excess acidity and significant green characters can never successfully be turned into award-winning wines of any style.

Summary

There is absolutely no doubt that the best UK sparkling wines, almost all made from the classic Champagne varieties, can hold their own on a world stage. We are producing wines with good fruit, length on the palate and the best have a superb balance of sweetness and acidity. The “old school” style of English wines – long-aged, biscuity and yeasty (which were the hallmark of one or two of the early producers) – has gone, mainly because the top producers have sold their older wines and are well into their 2009s and even 2010s. Rosés are definitely on the up (something I predicted would happen with both still and sparkling wines) and one can expect Chardonnay wines from the ripe 2009 vintage (and hopefully also from 2010 and 2011) to continue to do well. Next year’s Judgement of Parsons Green III will be on Thurs 7 March.

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