

Judgment of Parson's Green III

28 February 2013

The Wines

2013 saw seventy-nine English sparkling wines gathered for the 3rd Judgement of Parsons Green tasting, a slightly lower number than in 2012 when there were ninety. Given the increased sales which followed the Royal Wedding, the Jubilee and the Olympics, plus the dismal 2012 harvest when many vineyards picked very little (and some vineyards nothing at all), a few producers decided that they weren't going to give precious stock for tastings, preferring to keep it for sales. A few vineyards, sadly some of the better known ones, decided they didn't want to be judged against their peers and refused to play ball. Perhaps they were frightened of the competition?

The wines were split into two equal sessions – morning and afternoon – and added to the English wines (no Welsh entries this year) were three Champagnes and one New World sparkler: NV Taittinger Brut, Waitrose's NV Blanc de Blancs, NV Champagne Devaux 'Oeil de Perdrix' rosé and Roederer Estate's NV Quartet from California. These ranged in (full retail) price between £18-35 so about the same range as the majority of the UK wines present. These actually ranged from £12.20 per bottle to £55.00 with a median cost of £24.95.

Of the English wines, there were 23 rosés, 22 blanc de blancs and 2 blanc de noirs, and 32 blends of all descriptions. Of the rosés, all but 6 were made 100% from Champagne varieties (either Pinot noir on its own or in two and three variety blends). Five of the six non-Champagne blends had Pinot noir as one of their main varieties and a sixth wine was put in with 'not stated – vinifera' as its grape variety. Of the blanc de blancs, 10 were pure Chardonnay, 9 were blends of white varieties with Seyval blanc present (and usually dominant) and 4 were either 100% Reichensteiner or had this variety dominant in a blend. One wine was made from Faberrebe. The 2 blanc de noirs were 100% Pinot Noir. Of the blends, all but 1 were Champagne variety blends, 17 with Chardonnay dominant and 14 with Pinot noir dominant. The non-Champagne variety wine was a Seyval blanc dominant blend with Pinot Noir.

Of the vintages of the wines, 2 were from 2006, 4 from 2007, 8 from 2008, 29 from 2009, 23 from 2010, 1 from 2011 (the mystery grape variety) and 12 wines labelled as 'non-vintage' although in reality many of them were from the 2009/10 harvests. 2009 and 2010 wines dominated the top 30 wines although whether this is a reflection of the quality of both those years (high) or just the reality of the stock situation of most of the major producers is open to question. When wines from the more challenging 2011 vintage and even-more challenging (or even non-existent) 2012 vintage start showing up it will be intriguing to see whether it is the vintage or the producer who fares better.

The Tasters

This year's seventeen tasters included some of the same from 2011 and 2012, plus a few new faces. They were: Essi Avellan MW (Finnish wine writer and Editor of FINE Champagne Magazine), Richard Bampfield MW, Susie 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), Susanna Forbes (from

DrinkBritain.com), Nancy Gilchrist MW, Richard Hemming (MW student and tasting for jancisrobinson.com), Rebecca Hull MW (English and Welsh wine buyer for Waitrose), Justin Howard-Sneyd MW (working with Direct Wines – Laithwaites), Charles Metcalfe (IWC and journalist), Victoria Moore (Daily Telegraph wine writer who tasted but didn't score), Julia Stafford (proprietor of the Wine Pantry, now in Borough Market and St. Pancras), Tom Stevenson (wine writer specialising in Champagne and sparkling wines), Julia Trustram Eve (English Wine Producers), plus myself. Eleven tasters tasted and scored all 84 wines, and four either came for the morning or afternoon sessions. Most wines were tasted and scored by at least fourteen tasters.

Tasters were free to tackle the wines in any order, although most tasted in the order they were laid out: rosés, blanc de blancs and blanc de noirs, and blends. Within their flights, the wines were arranged in ascending order of sweetness, with some allowance made for wines with higher acidity being placed before those with lower acidity for the same or a similar residual sugar level. Last year I questioned whether tasting order favoured the rosés as they did especially well (7 out of the top 11 wines) but this year the top rosé appeared at wine no. 8 in the ranking.

The Results

Rank	Vineyard	Name of Wine	Vintage	%Grape variety 1	%Grape variety 2	%Grape variety 3	Retail price
1	Wyfold	Wyfold	2009	Chardonnay 67%	Pnot noir 21%	Meunier 13%	£ 24.99
2	Theale	Blanc de Blancs	2007	Chardonnay			£ 24.95
3	Breaky Bottom	Cuvée Princess Colonna	2008	Chardonnay 85%	Pnot Noir 7%	Meunier 8%	£ 24.50
4	Ridgeview	Cavendish	2010	Pnot noir 39%	Chardonnay 35%	Meunier 26%	£ 24.95
5	Wiston	South Downs Cellars Bin 3	2009	Chardonnay 34%	Pnot noir 33%	Meunier 33%	£ 23.95
6	Ridgeview	Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs	2010	Chardonnay			£ 29.95
7	Roederer Estate	Quartet (California)	NV	Chardonnay 60%	Pnot noir 40%		£ 21.99
8	Bluebell Estates	Hindleap Rosé	2010	Pnot Noir 61%	Meunier 39%		£ 25.00
9	Camel Valley	Pnot Noir Rosé Brut	2009	Pnot Noir			£ 24.95
10	Champagne	Waitrose Blanc de Blancs	NV	Chardonnay			£ 23.99
11	Henners	Vintage Reserve	2009	Chardonnay 70%	Pnot noir 30%		£ 29.00
12	Henners	Vintage	2009	Chardonnay 34%	Pnot noir 33%	Meunier 33%	£ 27.00
13	Plumpton	The Dean Blush Brut	NV	Pnot noir 54%	Chardonnay 33%	Meunier 13%	£ 22.00
14	Champagne Taittinger	Taittinger Brut	NV	Chardonnay 40%	Pnot noir 35%	Meunier 25%	£ 35.00
15	Chapel Down	English Rose	NV	Pnot Noir 48%	Chardonnay 33%	Pnot Blanc 10%	£ 18.99
16	Gusbourne	Blanc de Blancs	2008	Chardonnay			£ 28.99
17	Jenkyn Place	Rosé	2009	Pnot Noir 79%	Chardonnay 21%		£ 27.00
18	Meopham	Sparkling Brut	2008	Reichensteiner			£ 23.50
19	Chapel Down	Rosé Brut	NV	Pnot Noir 97%	Pnot Meunier 3%		£ 24.99
20	Ridgeview	M&S Marksman	2009	Chardonnay			£ 22.00
21	Champagne Devaux	Oeil de Perdrix Rosé	NV	Pnot noir	Pnot noir 80%	Chardonnay 20%	£ 18.00
22	Ridgeview	South Ridge Brut	2010	Chardonnay 63%	Pnot noir 25%	Meunier 12%	£ 19.99
23	Three Choirs	Blanc de Noir	2009	Pnot Noir			£ 18.15
24	Ridgeview	Victoria Rosé	2009	Meunier 63%	Pnot noir 37%		£ 29.95
25	Ridgeview	South Ridge Blanc de Blancs	2010	Chardonnay			£ 24.99
26	Camel Valley	Cuvée R	2011	Not stated (Vinifera)			£ 24.95
27	Camel Valley	Pnot Noir Rosé Brut	2010	Pnot Noir			£ 24.95
28	Ridgeview	Knightsbridge Blanc de Noirs	2010	Pnot noir 50%	Meunier 50%		£ 32.95
29	Marden Organic	Brut Rosé	2010	Pnot Noir 40%	Chardonnay 30%	Meunier 30%	£ 25.00
30	Plumpton	The Dean Brut	NV	Pnot noir 50%	Chardonnay 35%	Meunier 15%	£ 22.00

The top wines

As in JOPG I and JOPG II, the wines made from the classic Champagne varieties triumphed, occupying all of the top 17 slots, with the first non-Champagne variety (a Reichensteiner) appearing at no. 18. Apart from this wine and the mystery vinifera, which came in at no. 26, the next non-Champagne variety wine didn't appear until no. 43. However, just using Champagne varieties doesn't guarantee you success. Of the bottom 20 wines, 14 were also made wholly from one or more of the Champagne varieties.

If using the right grape varieties is one element to get you to the top, the other has to be experience. The name which ran through four of the top six wines was Ridgeview. The top two wines, the Wyfold and the Theale, plus the two wines from Ridgeview itself, were made in the Roberts' family winery, proving (once again) that they are a hard team to beat. The other thread running through the top two wines was the name 'Laithwaite' as Wyfold is part owned by Barbara Laithwaite and Theale is the tiny (704 vines) vineyard planted on builder's rubble outside Direct Wine's head office. Given that Laithwaites/Direct Wines now have the vineyard in Windsor Great Park, plus son Henry Laithwaite's vineyard at Pump Lane, Marlow, I feel sure the name Laithwaite will be attached to more winners in years to come.

The Breaky Bottom 2008 Cuvée Princess Colonna, the wine at no. 3, came from one of the UK's oldest vineyards (planted in 1974) and unusually still owned and operated by the same vigneron Peter Hall. Given that he's my oldest friend in the UK winegrowing business it really pleases me to see his wine do so well. At wine no. 5 was a new name to English wine, Wiston, but with an experienced winemaker, Dermot Sugrue, in charge it shows what is possible. Sugrue was also responsible for the wines from Jenkyn Place and Meopham (nos. 17 and 18) and is the consultant at Henners who did well with their two wines at nos. 11 and 12. Other wines in the top English wines included Bluebell Estate and Camel Valley. The newcomers – Wyfold, Henners and Wiston – all did well with wines from the easy 2009 vintage and it will be interesting to see how they fare with the more difficult 2011 and 2012 vintages.

Although it is inevitable that a ranking based upon scores appears to show some wines doing better than others, the reality is that less than one mark separated many of the top wines. Whilst the top two wines were clearly out in front with the Wyfold getting over 0.6 of a point higher than any other wine and being the top wine for four tasters and the Theale almost half a point higher than the next wine and again, being the top wine of three tasters, the next 45 wines (positions 3-47) were only separated by 1 point. The overall quality I thought was exceptionally good and only one bottle aroused suspicions about its quality and I was asked to open a second bottle. At the bottom end of the scores, the major problem I felt was the lack of balance in the wines (of which more later).

UK wines from non-Champagne varieties

18 out of the 79 UK wines were made from non-Champagne varieties, 12 with Seyval blanc as the dominant or only variety, 4 with Reichensteiner as the dominant or only variety, one Faberrebe and one 'not stated', but 'vinifera' (quite why the Lindos are keeping stumm about this is something of a Cornish mystery). Apart from the 2008 Meopham Reichensteiner at no. 18 and the 'not stated' at no. 26, no non-Champagne wine made it beyond no. 37 and the bottom 25 wines contained 9 non-Champagne variety wines. Taking Breaky Bottom and Camel Valley as examples, both of whom produce serious wines using both Champagne and non-Champagne varieties, their non-Champagne varieties scored significantly worse than their Champagne varieties. I suspect it is not it's not necessarily that these wines are bad, it's just that in a class of pedigree dogs, the mongrels don't fare that well. Although I am a great Seyval fan and have championed it endlessly, it just doesn't have the breeding to beat a well-grown and well-ripened Chardonnay. Having said that, 2012 showed that there IS a place in UK winegrowing for varieties other than the Champagne varieties and Seyval

and Reichensteiner are not to be completely dismissed, at least not if you are trying to run make ends meet!

One aspect of UK sparkling wine production which has not really been touched upon is the question of whether the clones used make a difference. I have steadfastly planted what are commonly called 'Burgundy' clones of the Champagne varieties, guided by both CIVC recommendations and the clones French pépiniéristes recommend, but also taking note of the experiences of the best UK producers. So far, I am pleased with the results. It worries me however that some producers are using German and Swiss clones, particularly of Pinot noir and expecting the same results. Although I have no firm evidence, I don't think these clones are as good for bottle-fermented sparkling wines. It would be good to get some more UK based research done on this.

Acidity levels and dosage

Once again, my personal view is that in a tasting like this – which I fully accept is not the same as tasting the wines in isolation or tasting them with friends, with food, and in convivial surroundings – those wines which are out of balance, usually because they are too acidic, do less well. However, with around fourteen tasters tasting each wine and with over eighty wines in the 'sample', I believe that it is worth looking at trends. Of the top 30 UK-grown wines, the average total acidity (TA) level was 8.9 g/l and the residual sugar (RS) level 10.5 g/l. Of the bottom scoring 20 UK wines (excluding the two demi-sec style wines), the average TA was 8.0 g/l and the RS 7.0. Of the top 30 wines only 6 (20%) had a higher TA than RS; of the bottom 20 wines, ten had a higher TA than RS (50%) and of the bottom 13 wines, 6 had a RS of 4.5 g/l or less. There were 31 UK wines with TA higher than their RS and apart from five of these, none of them scored higher than position no. 31. Make of this what you will, but for me it shows that the key to producing great sparkling wines is balance.

Non-UK wines

As in previous years, the non-UK wines (listed in second paragraph) did well, but significantly failed to beat the best UK wines. In 2011, the non-UK wines had done well (four in the top ten), in 2012 less-well, appearing some way down the charts. This year, I thought I ought to beef up the competition (keeping within the correct price bracket) and chose what I thought were good examples of their type and it rather surprised me (and rather pleased me) that they failed to do better: the best was at no. 7, the next at no. 10 and the third, NV Taittinger Brut which is after all one of the UK's premier Champagne brands, at no. 14. The fourth, the rosé, came in at no. 21

Summary

It seems somewhat boring to say that 'once again' the best UK sparkling wines are more than a match for non-UK sparkling wines, but that is the truth. The best are superb with really great acidity matched by both good fruit characters and sensible levels of residual sugar giving great balance, length and class. I still think that the rosés are an undervalued class and when producers really get the hang of them, they will prove to be a UK speciality.

Stephen Skelton MW
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