

## **Judgement of Parson's Green IV**

**6 March 2014**

### **The Wines**

This year saw ninety-four English Sparkling Wines from forty-seven different producers gathered together at the White Horse at Parson's Green for JOPG IV. I believe this to be the largest number of UK-Grown sparkling wines ever gathered together for such a tasting. No Welsh wines this year and, as ever, a few of the larger producers said they didn't want to play ball.

Owing to the large number of wines I decided that the tasting system had to be changed so the wines were split into three roughly equal groups (30 or 32 wines in each) according to wine style and a team of at least four judges tasted one of the three flights. The scores were then added up and after a break for lunch, the top 45 wines – all those wines scoring 16.00 or over and representing 48% of the wines entered – were re-tasted by all twelve judges. I also decided this year not to include any non-UK wines as in the past I don't think they added much to the tasting (apart from showing that UK-grown wines are often better than the foreigners and costing me money) and given the number of wines already in the tasting, adding additional ones didn't seem sensible.

In the tasting were 24 rosés, 22 blanc de blancs, 8 blanc de noirs, and 40 blends of all descriptions. Of the rosés, all but 5 were made 100% from Champagne varieties (either Pinot noir on its own or in two and three variety blends). Two of the five non-Champagne blend rosés had Pinot noir as one of their main varieties and the three others were all Seyval blanc blends with Rondo in two of them and Pinot noir Précoce (or Blauer Frühburgunder if you prefer) as the other partner in the blend.

Of the blanc de blancs, 11 were pure Chardonnay, 7 pure Seyval blanc, and one each from Auxerrois, Kerner, Phoenix and Reichensteiner. Four of the blanc de noirs were made from Pinot noir and four Pinot noir and Meunier blends. Of the 40 blends, all but 8 were classic Champagne blends. Of the Champagne blends, 24 had Chardonnay dominant and 8 Pinot noir dominant. Of the non-Champagne blends, four were Seyval blanc dominant, one Auxerrois dominant, one Pinot blanc dominant and one Müller-Thurgau dominant. All the non-Champagne blends also had Pinot noir or Pinot blanc in the blend.

Of the vintages of the wines, 1 was from 2005, 1 from 2006, 3 from 2008, 18 from 2009, 40 from 2010, 17 from 2011, 2 from 2012 and 12 non-vintage wines. Most of the NV wines are actually vintage wines, but for ease of labelling are labelled as non-vintage. (Whilst I understand the reasons for non-vintage labelling, I can see a problem looming as if a non-vintage wine wins an award, how can one tell whether a subsequent non-vintage wine carrying the same label is actually the blend that won the award?).

The prices of the wine ranged from £109 per bottle (I am still not sure if this is the Lindo's idea of a wind-up) down to £14.63 a bottle. The average price of all wines was £25.97 with the average price of the top 30 wines £27.75 (both averages excluding the £109 bottle).

### **The Tasters**

In total, twelve different tasters took part in the tasting, some old faces and some new: they were Richard Bampfield MW, Susie Barrie MW (Winchester Wine School), Giles Fallowfield (wine writer specialising in Champagne), David Furer (wine writer from Texas), Mike Harrison (Head Sommelier at Hotel du Vin, Henley), Richard Hemming (MW student and tasting for jancisrobinson.com), Rebecca Hull MW (wine buyer for Waitrose), Justin Howard-Sneyd MW (working with Direct Wines – Laithwaites), Charles Metcalfe (IWC and wine writer), Joanna Simon (wine writer), Margaret Rand (wine writer), Julia Trustram Eve (English Wine Producers), plus myself. One of the tasters could only do the morning session and one only the afternoon. As in previous years, the wines, within their flights, 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. This

system of ranking relies on producers submitting their own figures for sugar and acid levels, and, judging by some of the wines I tasted, these were probably not always 100% accurate. As before, all wines were scored out of 20 and there was no conferring between judges.

## **The Results**

### **The top wines**

As ever, the wines from the classic Champagne varieties triumphed, occupying all of the top spots with the first non-Champagne variety (a Seyval blanc) appearing at No.13. The next non-Champagne variety wine didn't appear until No.32, a Seyval blanc, Rondo rosé. These two wines were the only non-Champagne variety wines to make the cut into the top 45 which were re-tasted. However, as I said last year, just using Champagne varieties doesn't guarantee you success. Of the bottom 20 wines, ten were Champagne blends and ten non-Champagne blends (although this was over 50% of all of the non-Champagne variety wines). The rosés as a class did especially well with 18 out of the 24 entered making the cut into the top 45 wines – a far higher proportion than any other category – showing what a valuable style this can be for UK winegrowers.

Right at the top, the wines were incredibly close and consistent in their quality and the top eight all had the same median score (17.50) and were separated by only 0.50 of a mark in their averages. The next nine wines were likewise extremely close with only 0.50 of a mark between them. The producers of these top 17 wines can definitely hold their heads up high.

This year saw a mixture of both older and newer names in the top slots: Langham did exceptionally well with both the top wine and one at No.8 (the same wine that last year came in at No.66 proving – perhaps – that a bit more bottle age works wonders). Other relatively new producers who did well were Henners, Wiston, Wyfold and Hattingley. The more established producers were less evident, although Ridgeview had two in the top ten and Bluebell and Camel Valley one each. In the next ten were some newcomers, Court Garden, East Meon and Waitrose's Leckford Estate (with their very first wine) plus 'old-timers' Gusbourne, Meopham, Meonhill, Pebblebed and Sharpham. Ridgeview – as ever – were involved with several winning wines (five in the top twenty by my reckoning) and Dermot Sugrue, winemaker at Wiston, can also be pleased with the results: a total of seven of his wines (Wiston wines or wines made under contract) came in the top 30.

It is (mildly) interesting to note that in 2011 and 2012, the average score of the top 50% of all wines entered was 15.89 and 15.86 respectively; in 2013 it was 16.09; and this year it was 16.62 – over half a point higher. The average score of the top ten wines in 2013 was 16.43; in 2014 it was 17.25. If nothing else does, these facts alone demonstrate the increase in quality of the best wines.

One quite noticeable fact was that of the top twenty wines, 12 were from the 2010 vintage, 4 from 2011, 1 each from 2009 and 2005 and two non-vintage wines (although probably 2010 wines). Given that I have always maintained that 2009 was a better vintage than 2010, I am surprised that of the 19 wines from 2009 entered, only one got into the top twenty, especially considering that they have all had an additional year's lees time. 2010 was both a (slightly) larger and much leaner year than 2009, whose wines have always been full and round with great fruit characters. 2010 wines on the other hand had lower sugars and higher acids. I guess it just goes to show that it's this type of leaner wine that makes better bottle-fermented and bottle-aged sparkling wines. Whether this is a pointer towards the wines from 2013, which are if anything even leaner and more acidic than anything picked for several decades in UK vineyards, is an interesting question. Time will tell.

### **Acidity levels and dosage**

The question of the sugar/acid balance in sparkling wines is, for me, the single most important factor, all other things being equal and the correct dosage level, for how the wine is showing at the time of disgorgement, can make the difference between a great wine and a good wine. Last year I said that it was my opinion that the wines that showed worst were the ones where the residual sugar (RS) levels were low compared to the wine's total acid (TA) levels. This year, although many of the lower scoring

wines still showed what I would consider to be sugar/acid levels out of balance – 20 of the bottom 45 wines had TA levels higher than their RS levels – on the whole the wines seemed to me to be much better balanced. The average TA levels of the top twenty wines this year was 9.59 g/l (as tartaric) compared to 8.6 g/l in 2013's tasting, but the RS was 10.10 g/l this year, compared to 10.4 g/l last year. The higher acid is of course vintage related, the higher acid 2010s and 2011s replacing the softer 2009s, but I also think it shows that the major producers are becoming more attuned to the RS levels that the generality of UK sparkling wine drinkers expect and want. The UK is most definitely not a place to make many *Brut Nature* wines (or at least not in recent vintages).

### Summary

I seem to say the same thing every year about how our wines are getting better and better, but it really is the truth. Of course, we are still in some good vintages and 2012 and 2013 were very different to 2010 and 2009, so it will be interesting to see how the wines show next year. The best wines – I would say almost all of the 45 that made the cut and were re-tasted – would make any wine drinker pleased and are a great advertisement for what UK winegrowers are doing today.

### Thanks

Once again, many thanks to all those producers who submitted wines and to all those tasters who took part. Without both this tasting could not have taken place. Thanks also to the White Horse at Parson's Green for their help in putting on the tasting, plus special thanks to Julia TE and Wendy W (especially given that it was her birthday) for helping with the tagging, bagging and setting up the wines.

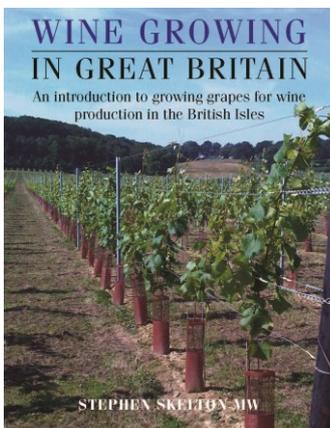
2015's tasting is pencilled in for Thursday 5 March.

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**WINE GROWING IN GREAT BRITAIN – to be published in May 2014**

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## JOPG IV – the Top Thirty wines

Final order	Vineyard	Name of Wine	Vintage	% Grape variety 1	% Grape variety 2	% Grape variety 3	Retail price
1	Langham	Classic Cuvée	2010	Pinot noir 70%	Chardonnay 15%	Meunier 15%	£ 26.00
2	Henners	Brut	2010	Pinot noir 56%	Meunier 44%		£ 27.00
3	Bluebell	Hindleap Rosé	2010	Pinot noir 61%	Meunier 39%		£ 24.99
= 4	Ridgeview Estate	Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs	2010	Chardonnay			£ 29.95
= 4	Wiston	Rosé	NV	Chardonnay 55%	Pinot noir 35%	Meunier 10%	£ 24.95
= 4	Wyfold	Wyfold Brut	2010	Pinot noir 55%	Meunier 35%	Chardonnay 10%	£ 24.95
7	Ridgeview Estate	Knightsbridge Blanc de Noirs	2010	Pinot noir 50%	Meunier 50%		£ 32.95
8	Langham	Blanc de Noirs Reserve	2010	Pinot noir			£ 24.00
9	Hattingley Valley	Classic Cuvée	2011	Chardonnay 71%	Pinot noir 20%	Meunier 9%	£ 29.95
10	Camel Valley	White Pinot	2005	Pinot noir			£ 109.00
11	Hattingley Valley	Rosé	2011	Meunier 40%	Pinot noir 30%	Pinot noir Précoce 30%	£ 34.95
12	East Meon	Berrygarden	2010	Pinot noir 80%	Chardonnay 20%		£ 29.50
13	Pebblebed	Sparkling White Brut	2010	Seyval blanc			£ 25.00
14	Leckford Estate	Leckford Estate Brut	2011	Chardonnay 55%	Pinot Noir 25%	Meunier 20%	£ 34.99
15	Gusbourne	Rosé	2010	Chardonnay 39%	Pinot noir 40%	Meunier 21%	£ 32.99
16	Sharpham	Sparkling Pink	2010	Pinot blanc 50%	Pinot noir 50%		£ 24.50
17	Meopham Valley	Rosé	2011	Chardonnay 65%	Pinot noir 35%		£ 26.50
18	Meonhill	Chardonnay	NV	Chardonnay			£ 22.95
19	Court Garden	Rosé	2010	Pinot noir 45%	Meunier 30%	Chardonnay 25%	£ 23.95
20	Gusbourne	Brut Reserve	2009	Chardonnay 77%	Pinot noir 14%	Meunier 9%	£ 27.99
21	Wiston	South Downs Brut	NV	Chatrdonnay 34%	Pinot noir 33%	Meunier 33%	£ 24.95
22	Digby	Vintage Rosé	2009	Pinot noir 80%	Chardonnay 20%		£ 39.99
23	Upperton	Aurora	2010	Chardonnay 65%	Pinot noir 20%	Meunier 15%	£ 24.50
24	Ridgeview Estate	Cavendish	2011	Pinot noir 38%	Chardonnay 31%	Meunier 31%	£ 24.95
25	Wiston	Blanc de Blancs	NV	Chardonnay			£ 24.95
26	Ridgeview Estate	South Ridge Cuvée Merret	2011	Chardonnay 69%	Pinot noir 17%	Meunier 14%	£ 22.00
27	Exton Park	Rosé	2011	Meunier 60%	Pinot noir 40%		£ 29.50
28	Breaky Bottom	Cuvée Princess Colonna	2008	Chardonnay 85%	Pinot noir 7%	Meunier 8%	£ 25.50
29	Hush Heath	Balfour Brut Rosé	2010	Pinot noir 46%	Chardonnay 45%	Meunier 9%	£ 35.95
30	Coldharbour	Southdowns Rosé	2011	Pinot noir 50%	Chardonnay 40%	Meunier 10%	£ 29.00