

SPARKLING WINERIES

It was not all that long ago that you could count the number of UK wineries equipped for the production of sparkling wine on the fingers of one hand. That number has now more than trebled, as the acreage in vineyards intended for sparkling wine production has also grown significantly.

Only a handful of these wineries are dedicated solely to the production of sparkling wine; the majority accommodate still and sparkling facilities, with a number offering contract winemaking (just over quarter of the vineyards officially registered have a winery on site). With vineyard acreage increasing by 45% over the last 5 years it is vital that more wineries are established to accommodate this increased production.

Over the next few years, new English and Welsh sparkling labels will be released alongside the established 'marques', which themselves are increasing in production; the volume of UK sparkling wines ready for market is predicted to rise to around 3 million bottles in 2012 (a 50% increase alone on the 'average' total UK bottle production) and will continue to increase thereafter. This will represent approximately 10% of Champagne imports, based on current figures. By 2012 the sales of English sparkling wine are predicted to be more than the 2009 forecast of total imports of sparkling wine from USA, NZ, Chile, South Africa and Argentina added together.

Here is a quick overview on recent developments amongst some of the UK's leading – and in some cases newest – sparkling wineries:

Nyetimber are arguably the biggest story in English sparkling wines – not just because of their pioneering work with traditional varieties in the early 1990's, but for the sheer size of the operation now and what it will represent to the volume of English sparkling wine in the future. Now comprising just over 175 ha spread over 9 estate vineyards in West Sussex and Hampshire, the total output, when at full capacity, will exceed 1m bottles. The original winery operation, in situ until last harvest at Nyetimber Estate is moving in stages to a new super winery to be built locally and more centrally placed to provide ready access to vineyard traffic from the estate.

2010 is shaping up to be another great year for Nyetimber, with good yields and maturity levels in their fruit. The projected tonnage from the 105 hectares of cropping vineyards in Sussex will produce in excess of 750,000 bottles from this year alone.

Ridgeview Wine Estate, established in 1994, and a firm favourite on the competition circuit (Ridgeview recently took the International Sparkling Wine Trophy for wines over £10 in the Decanter World Wine Awards – the first time a non-Champagne has received this award). From the original 6.5ha planted, Ridgeview now brings in grapes from some 68ha either grown under contract or on a contra-deal (whereby a proportion of bottles are returned to the vineyards to sell under their own label). This year a new extension to their winery has just been completed, doubling the capacity of winemaking output. Additionally new, advanced automated equipment is being installed to increase efficiency and to handle the increasing volumes produced. This year Ridgeview anticipates a production of 250,000 bottles, representing a steady increase since their first production in 1998 of 24,000 – and are eventually looking to achieve an output of 350,000 bottles by 2012.

Hush Heath Wine Estate in Kent has shown that in the short time its wine, Balfour Brut, has been on the market, effective marketing and distribution ensures good exposure and ultimately sales, be it through the Champagne bars at St Pancras and Westfield shopping centre in London to Marks & Spencer. The first three vintages were produced at the Chapel Down Winery, under the direction of Owen Elias, holder over several years of Winemaker of the Year*. Owen has now left Chapel Down to pursue his own winemaking consultancy business, English Terroir, and will oversee the winemaking at Hush Heath's new winery, ready for the 2010 harvest. The winery occupies a barn located near to the original vineyard, with a capacity to process 70 tonnes of grapes. This is not Owen's only project; he is also heading up operations at newly-completed **Nutbourne Redfold Winery** in West Sussex, a partnership between long-established **Nutbourne Vineyard** (approximately 9 ha) and 9 ha **Redfold Vineyard**, located a few miles away and planted solely with traditional sparkling wine varieties. The winery will have an initial production capacity of 100,000 litres a year and will be ready to receive this year's harvest in October.

Located in West Sussex (Sussex and Kent are the hub of sparkling wine development in the UK), **Wiston Estate** houses a winery operation built from a derelict food processing plant. Winemaker Dermot Sugrue (formerly winemaker at

Nyetimber) saw the potential immediately and persuaded owners Harry and Pip Goring to invest in a plant that would provide contract winemaking facilities in addition to production of sparkling wine from the estate's own 6.5 ha vineyard, planted in 2006 with the three traditional varietals. The winery boasts a traditional Coquard Champagne press and a press room located on the first floor enabling juice to flow by gravity to the tank hall at ground level. A further press is being installed in time for this harvest. Split-level stainless steel tanks are installed, with capacity to accommodate 800hl in total, together with 90hl of barrel capacity. 100 tonnes were processed last year from the Wiston estate and winery contracts and more is anticipated this year as the vineyards come in to full production.

On the smaller end of the scale, **Vivid Wines** near Ansty, just north of Burgess Hill in West Sussex, is one of the few new wineries purpose built for contract winemaking including catering for the smaller, 'boutique' vineyards. Both still and sparkling winemaking will be undertaken. Vivid is buying grapes in to produce their own label wines, 85% of which will be sparkling, ranging from traditional blends to Blanc de Blancs and Blanc de Noirs. The new winery operation, run by Ulrich Hoffman, has just been completed and is anticipating a first intake of 20 tonnes of grapes – around 12 of which will be for their own label.

Hampshire is a region less known for its density of vineyards, but now ranks second in vineyard hectareage after West Sussex. **Hattingley Vineyard** was planted in 2008, with an initial 7.5 ha. A further 3 ha will be planted next year. A new 800 square metre on site winery has been built and ready to open its doors for the first time this harvest, bringing in the vineyard's first crop and offering contract still and sparkling winemaking to other vineyards. The winery team will comprise Wickham Vineyard's former winemaker William Biddulph (who will continue overseeing the winemaking at Wickham) with the sparkling winemaking expertise provided by winemaking consultant Emma Rice. The winery will offer state of the art winery equipment, including a bottling line to accommodate all requirements. The advantage of this new winery is location; centrally placed near Alresford will provide easy access to vineyards from a wide area.

Overseas investment is not commonplace in the UK wine industry and rumours of Champagne house investment have been circulating for some years. The first direct Champagne connection lies at **Little West End Farm Vineyard**, a 4 ha vineyard set up by champenois Didier Pierson and his English wife Imogen Whitaker. Planted in 2004 and 2005 with their first harvest in 2007, the first wine to be released, probably next year, is a blend of 2007 and 2008 vintages – following a more 'traditional' champenois approach to blending for non-vintage. The winery on site comprises two presses and sufficient tank space for their own production. Mobile tirage equipment is shared with other wineries (including Wiston Estate, see above) and in time the other equipment necessary for sparkling wine production will be installed.

Another new House to launch its first wines is the anticipated Coates & Seely operation – a joint venture between Christian Seely, who heads up the insurance company AXA's vineyard operations (including Pichon Longueville Baron, Chateau Suduiraut and Quinta do Noval) and UK based Nicholas Coates. Coates and Seely took over **Wooldings Vineyard** near Whitchurch, in partnership with the Cunningham family, in 2008. The late Charles Cunningham had established a 4 ha vineyard in the late 1980's/mid 1990's, which rather ahead of his time included 1.5ha of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The remaining vines have been topgrafted with these varieties. Last year a further 8 ha of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were planted in the same valley. Additional grapes are sourced from Exton Park Vineyard, based in the Meon Valley in South East Hampshire. The new venture has established a new winery that now houses state of the art equipment, including a Bucher Vaslin Inertys controlled atmosphere press from Burgundy, brought in to ensure the gentlest of pressings. Fermentation vessels include a range of temperature-controlled stainless steel, two-year old oak barrels and ^ egg shaped concrete tanks. Gyropalettes and disgorging facilities will shortly be installed.

The wines from the first year's harvest (2009) are awaiting release next year. Come 2012 annual production is anticipated to be 75,000 -100,000 bottles.

Moving further west, **Furleigh Wine Estate** in Dorset is producing from its own vineyard of 5.5 ha (still and sparkling). Its sparkling wine production will be increasing from last year's 16,000 bottles to this year's anticipated 40,000 bottle production of a traditional varietal blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Additionally Furleigh will be producing sparkling wine for 3.2 ha Dorset vineyard **Bride Valley Vineyard**, owned by Steven and Bella Spurrier.

Three Choirs in Gloucestershire is the largest contract winemaker in the UK, aside from the sparkling and still wine it produces from its own 30 ha vineyard. The winery currently produces sparkling wine for 20 of their 32 full contract vineyard customers and performs the secondary fermentation, riddling and disgorging processes for a further 12

vineyards. One of their contract customers is Ancre Hill Estates in Monmouthshire, Wales' first producer of traditional varietal sparkling wine, with its first release due in 2014.

There are approximately 16 wineries now equipped for the production of sparkling wine, and the number will rise, as the demand for facilities grows alongside the increasing acreage in (primarily) traditional varieties. 2011 and 2012 will unveil a new clutch of 'marques', which show every promise of great things to come.

*The accolade of Winemaker of the Year is awarded in the industry's annual national competition, English & Welsh Wine of the Year Competition. Organised and run by the United Kingdom Vineyards Association, all the wines are judged by a panel comprising only Masters of Wine. Owen Elias held the title four times in the last decade