



ENGLISH SPARKLING WINE COMES OF AGE

WORDS ADAM LECHMERE



The announcement late last year that Champagne Taittinger had bought a substantial parcel of land in Kent in a multi-million dollar investment was the best Christmas present the English wine industry has ever been given. For a house of this renown to endorse English wine in such unequivocal terms is a massive boost to the industry. Taittinger aims to produce 25,000 cases of “Premium English sparkling wine” from vines that are yet to be planted.

The only people who weren’t surprised were the British wine press. We were told the news by Pierre-Émmanuel Taittinger in an upstairs room at London’s Westminster Abbey. He explained that the wine will be named *Domaine Evremond* in honor of the 17th century poet, bon viveur and Champagne ambassador Charles de Saint-Évremond, who is buried alongside Chaucer and Charles Dickens in the south transept of the ancient church. The general reaction was, “it had to happen.”

There will be more. Champagne Vranken-Pommery Monopole has just announced it will be making an English sparkling wine with Hampshire vineyard *Hattingley Valley* (established 2008), and any substantial English wine producer expects regular calls from Champagne. One of the biggest names in the business told me he had been offered £6.7 million (\$9.8 million) by a major Champagne house.

Big investments in English wine are not unusual, of course. In 2004 Eric Heerema, a Dutch millionaire with a penchant for fast cars bought a 900-year-old estate in Sussex called *Nyetimber*. The estate was based around an ancient, crooked-roofed manor house and a five-century-old barn of astonishing beauty. Then there is Mark Driver, who made his pile in hedge funds, then decided to go into wine, planting 250 acres of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier. The *Rathfinny* estate is a beautiful slice of rural England, its acres of spindly young



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vines complementing the fecund loveliness of the South English Downs, where rolling hills and sparsely wooded valleys fall away to the sea. Driver is typical of the new generation of investors in English wine. Rathfinny will be one of the biggest vineyards in the country, with at least \$13 million invested and a purpose-built, gravity-fed winery with capacity for 1 million bottles, of which he expects to export at least half.

Wine has been produced in England for hundreds of years but only in the last few decades has there been any sort of coherent commercial wine industry—and only in the last ten years has serious investment brought production up to international standards. Its modern era dates from 1988, when a couple from Chicago, Stuart and Sandy Moss, first planted their vineyards in Sussex. They won a gold medal for their 1992 Blanc de Blancs, thereby alerting people to the potential of English sparkling made under the traditional method.

Another landmark date is 2010, when the East Sussex winery Ridgeview's Grosvenor 2006 won world's best sparkling wine at the internationally recognized Decanter World Wine Awards. Since then the sector's tally of international tasting triumphs has grown exponentially.

Today there are 470 vineyards operated by 135 wineries, producing some 5 million bottles from 4952 acres of vines (the majority planted within the last ten years). The market was worth \$230 million in 2014. While there are vineyards as far north as Yorkshire, and as far west as Cornwall (the Lindo family's excellent Camel Valley is a pioneer on the peninsula) the climate and soils of the southeast are most conducive to grape growing, with the most renowned vineyards concentrated in the counties of Kent, Hampshire and Sussex.

Around half of all plantings are devoted to Champagne's three varieties, though in the top vineyards this proportion is



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FIVE ENGLISH WINERIES TO WATCH

COATES AND SEELY: A highly professional, 30-acre Hampshire estate owned by Christian Seely (who runs Château Pichon-Longueville, Quinta do Noval and Château Suduiraut, among others, for the giant AXA Millésimes). Exquisite, scented rosé. Seely has championed the (slightly pretentious) generic name "Britagne" for English sparkling, with little effect.

CAMEL VALLEY: Cornwall's biggest vineyard, planted by Bob and Annie Lindo to Seyval Blanc, Reichensteiner and Triomphe in 1989. Pinot Noir came later. Sparkling, including the "Cornwall" Brut, is highly regarded. Also very fine still wines are made from the Darnibole single vineyard, England's only vineyard PDO.

BOLNEY: A long-established West Sussex estate, situated on sandstone. Bolney's Blanc de Blancs recently beat every other sparkling wine entered—including Champagne—to win Gold Outstanding at the International Wine and Spirit Challenge 2012. Some fine still whites are also made here.

JENKYN PLACE: Excellent Hampshire estate with sparkling-only vineyards on former hop fields planted initially in 2004. Blanc de Noirs tops a range of world-class wines. Nyetimber's former winemaker, Dermot Sugrue, makes the Brut Cuvée

HAMBLEDON: First planted by a Francophile Major General in 1952, grubbed up in the 1990s, and revived and replanted by Ian Kellett in 1999, Hampshire's Hambledon is one of the First Growths of England. Its Classic Cuvée is opulent and balanced. Hambledon also makes the Berry Bros. & Rudd house sparkling.

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far higher. Some produce no still wine at all. While there are some very good aromatic still whites made from grapes such as the German hybrids Bacchus and Ortega, and even Chardonnay, they are generally far more expensive and less reliable than their counterparts from elsewhere, such as New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc or Italian Pinot Grigio. Many commentators see little future in still wines. “The only opportunity for growth is in sparkling,” notes Mark Pardoe of Berry Bros. & Rudd.

Commercially, English sparkling wine is on a steep upward curve. Supermarkets Marks & Spencer and Waitrose reported massively increased sales for Christmas 2015. Berry Bros. & Rudd CEO Dan Jago reckons the category is, “Within a whisper,” of being taken as seriously as Champagne. Professionals such as head sommelier, Francesco Gabriele, of the luxury hotel Chewton Glen in Hampshire, whose 80-strong list of English wines consists of 95% sparkling wines, says the best are extraordinarily fine, precise, delicately fruited and persistent in length. “They have this wonderful acidity and mineral elegance. There is finesse of bubbles, and a richness along with this bold heart of acidity.” He sells, “About a hundred bottles a month.”

Exporters are optimistic too. Red Johnson, son of Hugh, is pushing a handful of wines—Hush Heath, Camel Valley and Bolney—to Hong Kong, Japan and the US. He’s optimistic about the future, but acknowledges that the exporting is still in its early stages. “The main issue is price. We’re coming up against Champagne, and English wine isn’t the cheap option” (Ridgeview retails for between \$37 and \$45.) Johnson is also keen to update English sparkling’s image. “It shouldn’t have that ‘Agatha Christie’ idea of Englishness. It’s fashionable and desirable rather than twee and old-fashioned. It’s more Shoreditch than Mayfair,” he says, referencing the ultra-hip regenerated East London district.

US sommeliers are learning fast. Ridgeview is the only producer with any presence at all, though all the big producers are looking across the Atlantic: Gusbourne is now imported by Broadbent Selections of Virginia, and Heerema will launch Nyetimber in the US in late 2016, for example. Andrew Stover

of Siema in Washington, DC has sold “multiple pallets” of Ridgeview since September (he has placed its Bloomsbury, a Chardonnay-dominant blend of the three Champagne grapes, in the British Airways lounge at Washington Dulles airport). He says the level of awareness regarding the category is growing rapidly. Another retailer, Liz Willette of Grand Cru Selections in New York, says, “It’s no longer a novelty. It’s now widely known that there are great sparkling wines coming out of England.”

Stover adds that the interest among sommeliers in DC is “overwhelming,” while consumers have absorbed articles such as *The Washington Post’s* recent piece on the Queen serving Ridgeview to the President of China at Buckingham Palace. “Many consumers have heard about English wine but have not yet tried it. Others cannot imagine grapes being grown in England, citing the overcast or rainy weather that predominates in typical consumer images of England.”

Be that as it may, there is far more to the terroir of this small, temperate island than rain. The most frequently-quoted fact about English vineyard land is that it lies on the same band of chalk that forms the Paris Basin, which runs up through Champagne and northern France to form the North and South Downs. Vines love chalk because it drains well, but there are many vineyards—Gusbourne in particular—that are planted on greensand, shallow marine sandstone which underlies chalk, and still more on limestone. All the main soil types have their advocates. Ian Kellett, who bought Hambledon in 1999, loves chalk for its drainage; others, like Bob Lindo at Camel Valley in Cornwall, whose soils include ancient slate, reckons chalk is, “Too austere” for the English climate. Gusbourne has just taken on a site in West Sussex with predominantly flint soils, and it is producing juicy Pinot Noir. “It’s an exceptional wine,” winemaker Charlie Holland says, “with bracing minerality and mouth-watering acidity.”

Climate is another vital factor, and for many, it’s more important than soil. Southern England is situated two degrees latitude north of Champagne, and there are key differences in climate. While July temperatures are about 2.7 degrees

Fahrenheit cooler in England, September temperatures are warmer than Champagne. Most quality vineyards are between the 50th and the 51st parallels, meaning longer daylight hours in summer. Crucially, bud-break is a week earlier, harvest generally two to three weeks later (at Nyetimber in 2015 harvest was a full five weeks later than Champagne). “We have a longer growing season,” says Tamara Roberts of Ridgeview, “so we have more phenolic ripeness.” This gives richer wines that still retain their acidity.

Visit an English vineyard and you are constantly impressed by the focus of the viticultural team. At Gusbourne, it’s a question of, “Fine-tuning the viticulture,” former chief executive Ben Walgate said. The vineyards are dotted with weather stations, constantly compiling and logging seasonal data. Working with 99 acres of sandy loam and clay on an ancient coastal escarpment in Kent and 49 acres of excellent West Sussex land, the winery will reach capacity at 500,000 bottles. Gusbourne is planted to Champagne varietals, and the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines consist primarily of Burgundy clones, with the aim of achieving lower yields and riper fruit. Holland is a restless experimenter (he’s got half a dozen small, square fermenters in which he’s giving certain parcels an extra month’s skin contact) with keen focus on detail. Clones and parcels are fermented separately in tanks as small as 1000 liters, with some 70 different components produced for blending. “A key aim”, he says, “is to find parcels capable of bottle-ageing at least seven years; the 2007 was kept six years before disgorging.”

A preoccupation with age-worthiness is one indication that English wine producers are growing in confidence; another is an increasing interest in producing non-vintage wines. While the majority of English sparkling wine is vintage—financial pressure has usually forced producers to bottle and sell everything they make from small harvests—many are now building up reserves for non-vintage wines. Economics comes into this decision, of course: the unpredictability of the climate makes keeping some wine in reserve a sound decision for lean years (Nyetimber, for example, made no wine in 2012, a disastrously rainy season). But there is also the desire to establish a house style while bringing depth and complexity to the blend. At Hambledon, Kellett reckons he will hold back some 30 percent of the 2016 harvest. “There are things that Champagne gets absolutely right and one of them is their expertise in assemblage. That’s something the English ignore at their peril.” The great advantage of non-vintage, he says, is the ability to add complexity. “We aim to bring between 50 and 80 components to the blending table.”

If there is one word that sums up the mood of English sparkling wine producers, it is “confidence.” More than anything else, this is born out of realization that this island terroir is worthy of much deeper study. Perhaps the most exhilarating part of the whole adventure is that there is so much more to learn. Vintners have only just begun to study the soils, the climate, the rootstocks and the clones. Vines that are not even adolescent yet are producing world-class wine. In the words of Randy Bachman: you ain’t seen nothing yet.

ENGLISH WINE PDOs AND PGIs

Stilton cheese and Shetland wool have PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status under European law, and so too does English wine. There are two levels of protection—PDO and the slightly less stringent PGI (Protected Geographical Indication). Both stipulate that a wine must come from and be produced in a certain area, must be made from *Vitis Vinifera* grapes and so forth. (Take note: English wine is very different from British wine. The former is wine made from British grapes, the latter is cheap plonk made from imported concentrate. Never confuse the two.)

There are several hundred PDO wines—and at the time of writing, one single vineyard PDO, Camel Valley’s Darnibole, awarded in 2014. Owner Bob Lindo considers this 3.7 acres Cornish vineyard unique for its ancient slate subsoil. The Bacchus from there, he says, “stands out for its intense, steely minerality.” In a new development, three Sussex vineyards—Rathfinny, Ridgeview, and Bolney—have applied for a Sussex PDO which would tighten existing rules: the minimum bottle ageing requirement would be raised to 15 months, and minimum alcohol would go up from the current nine percent, for example. The move is controversial: commentators point out that Sussex has political but not geographically significant boundaries. Soil types vary, as do microclimates, and in any case, many wineries blend from different counties (Nyetimber has vineyards in neighboring Hampshire). The European authorities are pondering the application: if successful, you’ll be able to drink a glass of Sussex, just as you can now drink Bordeaux, Champagne—or Darnibole.

THREE PROFILES

BRIDE VALLEY VINEYARD

In 2008 Steven Spurrier—perhaps the world’s most recognized wine expert—and his wife Bella started planting on the chalky slopes of their farm in the hamlet of Litton Cheney on the Jurassic Coast of Dorset in the west of England. They now have 24 acres of Champagne varietals—from the Pépinières Guillaume nursery in Burgundy—from which they make a Brut, a Blanc de Blancs and a Rosé. The vineyards are in a setting of extraordinary beauty, a natural amphitheater facing the English Channel a couple of miles to the south. Growing vines this far west is a challenge, Spurrier says. “We do everything to combat the climate,” for example, planting 1000 elder trees to mitigate the wind coming off the sea. He reckons one in ten vintages will be a washout, “Two will be very poor, four or five average, two very good, and one superb.”

They made no wine at all in 2012, just over 2000 bottles in 2013, but 2014 will produce more than 20,000. The finances work: they will break even this year, and as everything settles into place the estate will generate, “About \$162,000 per year after costs.” It’s very much a family operation, with daughter Kate running the marketing, Steven taking on the ambassadorial role, and the redoubtable Bella in charge of the farming and just about everything else. Vinification takes place at the nearby Furleigh Estate. Spurrier exports worldwide, with Jean-Charles Boisset of Boisset Family Estates importing to the US (he’ll be taking about a thousand bottles for top-end restaurants). Kate’s already exporting to Japan, the Netherlands and Germany. A quarter of the wine is handled by the big UK importer Liberty Wines.

Bride Valley Blanc de Blancs 2013 (100% Chardonnay): Fresh and light, with a pronounced waft of hedgerow and nettles. These are young vines producing zippy acidity, hints of brioche and lime zest, and an effervescent mousse. In Spurrier’s word, “Sprightly.”

Bride Valley The Rosé Bella 2013 (85% Pinot Noir, 10% Chardonnay, 5% Pinot Meunier): Aromas of red berries and strawberries rise to the fore immediately, followed by a refreshing heft of citrus on the palate. There’s an almost rustic edge to the acidity, but the wine as a whole is delicate and charming.

RIDGEVIEW

In late 2010, Ridgeview’s Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs 2006 beat competition from five Champagnes, including Taittinger, Charles Heidsieck and Thiénot, to win the International Trophy for Sparkling Wine at the Decanter World Wine Awards. It was a seminal moment for the winery that Mike Roberts (who died in 2014) and his wife Christine established in East Sussex in 1995. No strangers to big trophies, Ridgeview’s endorsement from Decanter nevertheless propelled Ridgeview into the limelight. They now make some 300,000 bottles, two thirds of it with grapes from contract growers. They plow all their profit into winemaking expertise and equipment, Mike’s daughter Tamara Roberts explains—including running upmarket Waitrose’s vineyard in Hampshire, and the Queen’s own vineyard in Windsor Great Park. They are also pioneers in America. Roberts says that on her first trip to New York in 2011 the response was often, “English what?” However, she was quickly snapped up by importer Grand Cru Selections, and later by Siema in Washington DC. “English wine isn’t a category yet, but now every sommelier knows it’s cool to have at least one on their list.”

Ridgeview Bloomsbury 2013 (60% Chardonnay; residual sugar 8.6 g/l): Very rich, creamy nose with a flinty edge, and a tannic heft to the palate. Fine chalky texture balanced between richness and salinity, with citrus and sweet-juiced cooked apple. Lovely length.

Ridgeview Cavendish 2013 (Blended from equal parts Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier): Savory nose, very full and rich, then lime and grapefruit braced by fresh acidity and a tannic dimension, a perfect conjunction of opulence and precision.

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NYETIMBER

Many who know next to nothing about English wine still know a bit about Nyetimber. As noted above, it was founded by a reclusive American couple in the depths of Sussex in the 1980s, and subsequently sold to Dutch millionaire Eric Heerema, under whose benevolent eye it has taken its rightful place as England's very own first growth. From the 500-year-old cruck barn to the obsessively tended vineyards, Nyetimber is a classy operation. The wines are made by the Canadian couple Cherie Spriggs and Brad Greatrix, both of whom have impressive pedigrees, including stints at Domaine Drouhin in Oregon and Château Margaux. The original owners, Stuart and Sandy Moss, knew what they were doing when they planted their 14 acres on greensand slopes in 1988. Only one of those original parcels failed, and the rest regularly produce some of the best grapes of the estate. There are now 145 acres in production (Greatrix and Spriggs use only estate-grown fruit) split into 74 parcels; one of these produces the single vineyard Tillington bottling, which many consider the apotheosis of English sparkling wine.

Nyetimber Classic Cuvée 2010 (51% Pinot Noir, 36% Chardonnay, 13% Pinot Meunier): Among the very finest English sparkling wines; lovely intensity and tart, chalky acidity setting off flavors of sweet hay, lime, honey, and pastry. Perfect with smoked salmon. From 2011 on, this will be a non-vintage wine.

Nyetimber Tillington 2010 (79% Pinot Noir, 21% Chardonnay): From a parcel planted in 2006 and 2007 that gives consistently excellent grapes. This wine shows wonderful concentration and precision, with an earthy nose showing hints of pastry and cooked Bramley, followed by a palate that is opulent and cherry-tinged, with fine acidity and minerality and a little kick of citrus oil.



LAURA RHYS MS AT GUSBOURNE



Gusbourne employs its own ambassador in the person of Laura Rhys MS. The soft-spoken Rhys, a member of the Court of Master Sommeliers and UK Sommelier of the Year 2009, cut her teeth as Head Sommelier at Gerard Basset MS MW's Hotel TerraVina, and at London's La Trompette. Her role at Gusbourne is ambassadorial, "Plus sales and marketing, training and education, with some input into export. I can't make wine though. Yet." She is frequently asked why she left a burgeoning career as a top-flight sommelier for a less-certain future in English wine. She knew Gusbourne through listing it at La Trompette. "I wanted to work for an English winery, and I saw the winemaking philosophy, the drive for quality, the passion for the vineyard. I wanted to get behind the industry—to champion it," she says. Rhys spends a lot of time on the road, talking to sommeliers all over the country. "There are still some raised eyebrows when I say I'm bringing English sparkling, but all I have to do is get it in front of them, and they're amazed." She says the next big development is going to be non-vintage wines. "Not only does it take away a bit of the risk of a bad year, but it also shows how serious you are about terroir."