

English still life

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Wine



Last summer was so kind to the English wine business, producing record amounts of grapes that were riper than ever, that it has changed the minds of some high-profile producers of sparkling wine, who had never before considered still wine a viable proposition in England and Wales.

A chilly-to-temperate climate means that grapes grown in the British Isles have no shortage of acidity, an attribute of grapes destined for sparkling wines: it keeps them refreshingly zesty and the bubbles distract from any tartness. But too often the acid in English still wines has been so high that they have been unacceptably sour. Winemaking regulations acknowledge the vagaries of the climate by allowing English wine to be made from grapes capable of producing wines with only 6 per cent natural alcohol (the rest being made up of sugar added before fermentation – so-called chaptalisation).

But the summer of 2018 was so warm and benign that English grapes had no trouble reaching potential alcohol levels of 10 or even 12 per cent naturally. And the luminaries of English wine have been taking notice.

Emma Rice is head winemaker at Hattingley Valley in Hampshire, a wine property owned by Simon Robinson, chairman of WineGB. She confesses to having bought 30 used barrels from Burgundy and having thinned the crop of some 2019 Chardonnay with a view to making Hattingley's first still wine.

At neighbouring Hambledon, ambitious owner Ian Kellett admits: "I may be in the process of being compelled to change my view of English still wine." He is, however, adamant that if he experiments with oaked Chardonnay, it will be under a name other than Hambledon, which is to be reserved for the sparkling wine for which he has designed the estate.

These are both very well-funded enterprises. For some English wine producers, still wine has been a

financial necessity while they wait to launch their sparkling wine. As leading English viticultural consultant Stephen Skelton points out, it takes a good five or six years before sparkling wine yields any revenue at all, so long does the wine have to be aged, whereas a still wine can be produced three or sometimes even two years after the first vines go into the ground. He reckons you need £100,000 an acre to go into the sparkling wine business – which, as he puts it, "keeps the undercapitalised riff-raff out".

Mind you, he pointed out to me as we surveyed this year's WineGB tasting in London, the bountiful 2018 harvest has put financial pressure on most English wine producers because they have had to finance far more cellar capacity.

It may be the sparkling wines that have put English wine on the map internationally, with Chardonnay- and Pinot-based answers to champagne by far the most important representatives of a growing phenomenon. (Eight per cent of total production was exported last year, with the US and Norway the keenest importers.) But 31 per cent of all English wine produced last year was still. On the generic tables at WineGB's event, producers showcased 74 sparkling wines, but also 55 still wines. At the tasting, I decided to concentrate on these, mindful that many were from the favourable 2018 vintage.

It had been many years since I had tasted English still wines en masse. My memories were of painfully obviously sweetened, often sulphurous wines made from grapes bred in Germany to ripen at all costs – even in the coolest of climates. But my overriding impression this month was of perfectly creditable wines, with the best not unlike a particularly youthful Chablis.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay featured strongly since each is planted on more than 1,000 of the 3,500 hectares of the British Isles currently under vine.

The most popular variety for still

white wine, however, is Bacchus, a German crossing rich in Riesling genes (though Riesling itself is almost impossible to ripen in the UK – so far). It's being touted as an English answer to Sauvignon Blanc and some did share the pungency of a New Zealand Sauvignon, while others were more reminiscent of hedgerows or elderflowers. Some of the rosés were attractive, generally those based on Pinot Noir – while English reds are clearly still a work in progress. An avowedly light red seems the best bet. Biddenden has some fully mature Gamay vines that yield a sort of Kentish Beaujolais, and Gusbourne has made a breakthrough red Pinot Noir.

Gusbourne is one of the few top-notch producers of English sparkling wine to have taken still wine seriously. As deputy chairman Mike Paul says: "We like making still wines and people seem to like drinking them." He notes that the markets for English still and sparkling wine are quite different: whereas the fizz can be seen as a good-value alternative to champagne, most still wines look decidedly expensive compared with imported wines.

The great majority of English still wine is sold as a sort of farm-gate souvenir, the way one doesn't mind paying over the odds for, say, a lavender bag or bottle of olive oil produced in situ. As English wine tourism develops, the hope is that this will sustain sales of English still wine.

The quality is certainly vastly improved. There were a couple of still wines on the WineGB table that reminded me, not pleasantly, of the faulty wines that were common in the 1970s and are hardly seen today. But overall, they were competently made, albeit characterised by relatively high acidity – a fashionable attribute today, admittedly, and one that makes English wines slower to age than most.

For a list of Jancis's favourite English still wines, visit ft.com/jancis-robinson