



ENGLISH SPARKLING WINE

The last decade has seen a dramatic improvement in the quality and quantity of English sparkling wines. Although we have a long heritage of viticulture and wine making, the vicissitudes of our climate - combined with the ease of importing high quality wines from elsewhere - has, until recently, meant that it has been hard for English wine estates to be turned into viable enterprises. For much of our history, keen amateurs and enthusiasts have sought to experiment with wine making, but it is only since the turn of this century that production has increased significantly, and the quality has also improved considerably over the last decade. UK wine production in 2000 was only 14,215 hl, which rose to a new high of 30,346 hl in 2010. The increase in vineyards then led to record yields of 98,289 hl in 2018, although production fell in both 2020 and 2021. In 2023 there were 1,030 vineyards totalling 4,209 ha and 221 wineries, and yields were the highest ever, being some 50% more than those of 2018. Around three quarters of



production is sparkling wine, reflecting in part a belief that our soils and climate are closely similar to those of Champagne and thus well suited to such production.

However, English sparkling wine is not Champagne. Although our best wines are winning increasing numbers of awards, they have their own special character, and are different in flavour and style from Champagne. They should be treated as a category in their own right. Good quality English sparkling wine tends to be elegant, is often somewhat austere when young, has quite high acidity, and often tends to have flavours and aromas associated with apples and damp pebbles (minerality). Only a few such wines have the complexity and intense brioche characteristics of top Champagnes. The UK climate, although getting warmer, is not the same as that of Champagne, and though many of our vineyards are planted on chalk slopes, the terroirs are indeed different. Most of our vineyards are also still very young, and wine quality will undoubtedly improve as the vines age. In general, I find

that English sparkling wines made purely from Chardonnay (what the French call *Blanc de Blancs*) tend to be richer and more rounded than those that include the classic Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier grapes used to make much Champagne. Those grapes often do not ripen sufficiently well here in England.

The real challenge for English wine, though, is the variability of the weather, with good vintages only being reliable in two out of every three years. Very significant levels of financial investment have also gone into our largest vineyards



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and wineries, which means that prices tend to be high in order to provide investors with the returns that they expect. Two of our leading producers, Chapel Down and Gusbourne, were, for example, put up for sale in 2024, although potential buyers were not forthcoming. The dismal harvest in 2024, with yields down by around half, has only put more pressure on the industry.

If you are feeling patriotic, and can afford to spend the sort of money that English sparkling wines now command, then there are many good wines to choose from. The best brands, such as Nyetimber, Gusbourne, Ridgeview and Chapel Down all produce good quality wines. Nyetimber's head winemaker, Cherie Spriggs, was the first ever woman and the first of only two outside Champagne to win the IWC Sparkling Winemaker of the Year award in 2018, and her wines have set the standard for others to follow. I particularly like Gusbourne's range, which also regularly wins international awards, and their Blanc de Blancs has more subtle complexity than many. However, I also think highly of the Leonardslee wines, first released in 2024 and made by the award-winning team from their sister winery and vineyards at Benguela Cove in South Africa, which are already beginning to receive impressive reviews. More locally, do visit Greyfriars Vineyard just to the west of Guildford, and explore their range of good still wines alongside their very good value sparkling wines.

ENGLISH SPARKLING WINES

(please drink responsibly)

LOCAL FAVOURITES

🍷 **Windsor Great Park Vineyard Release 7 (Windsor, Berkshire) 11.5%.** In 2011, Tony Laithwaite

gained permission to plant a 3 ha vineyard in the Great Park with the classic grapes of Champagne, and this wine (made for them by Ridgeview) is based mainly on the 2019 vintage but uses some reserve

wines to add complexity. It combines light flavours of apricot and apples, with a slight toasty finish (Laithwaites £44, **reduced to £40 if you present a copy of this magazine in store**).

SLIGHTLY FURTHER AFIELD

🍷 **Nyetimber Classic Cuvée Brut (West Chiltington, Sussex) 12%.** Nyetimber's signature wine blended from several vintages, dominated by Chardonnay, and balanced by Pinot Noir with a small amount of Pinot Meunier. It has distinctive slightly spicy aromas, with apples and a touch of honey on the palate (Majestic £29 mixed six, **reduced to £28 if you present a copy of this magazine in store**).

🍷 **Ridgeview Bloomsbury (Ditchling Common, Sussex) 12%.** A good, crisp non-vintage wine, with refreshing acidity and citrus and light honey aromas (Waitrose, £34.99).

WORTH GOING FURTHER FOR

🍷 **Gusbourne Blanc de Blancs (Appledore, Kent) 2019, 12%.** An elegant but vibrant Chardonnay, with apple and citrus flavours and a touch of minerality (Noble Green Wines, £45 mixed six).

🍷 **Greyfriars Blanc de Blancs (Puttenham, Surrey) 2015, 12%.** A light, quite mineral, clean sparkling wine with good acidity, combining baked apple and lemon flavours. Matured on lees in bottle for six years (Greyfriars, £28).

🍷 **Leonardslee Blanc de Blancs (Horsham, Surrey) 2020, 12.7%.** A young wine that will age well, combining rich green fruit and citrus flavours, with a touch of spiciness and a slight saline finish (Leonardslee, £60).

(Wine prices and availability correct at going to press, but are subject to change at short notice)

🍷 **Next issue:** Georgian wines

