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Sommelier INDIA

THE WINE MAGAZINE

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Squerryes and the art of joyful living

Top award-winning English sparkling wine producer, Squerryes, offers winery tours, gastronomy and wine tasting sessions a short drive out of London.

Ruma Singh makes a day trip



The spacious Terrace restaurant at Squerryes allows you to make the most of good weather in summer



Henry Warde, owner of Squerryes, the 2,500-acre property in Kent, which has been with the family in 1731 for eight generations

Although Squerryes began planting its vines only in 2006, it beat many venerable Champagne Houses to the top ranking

Squerryes, the boutique, family-owned English sparkling wine producer in Kent is in the news for all the right reasons. After becoming the only English wine estate to have won a gold medal for five consecutive vintages in the World Championships of Champagne and Sparkling Wine, Squerryes crowned its achievements by winning 'Best English Sparkling Wine' at the International Wine Challenge 2021 and finally the 'Best in Show' in the 2021 Decanter World Wine Awards, with its Late Disgorged Vintage Brut Reserve 2011, 94 months on lees, placing it among the top 50 wines in the world. Although Squerryes began planting its vines only in 2006, it beat many venerable Champagne Houses to the top ranking. It makes just three vintage-only wines – a Blanc de Noirs, a Blanc de Blancs, and a Rosé (a hot seller in step with current world trends).

One sunny summer weekend, I set off from London into the countryside. An hour's drive away, my destination was pretty Westerham above the North Downs of Kent, officially deemed an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' and home to Squerryes, the producer of the award-winning trio of sparkling wines. After a series of frosts



in April, the sunny weekend was “manna from heaven”, Squerryes’ owner, Hendry Warde told me when we met for lunch at his spacious Terrace restaurant. Truly, the atmosphere could not have been more festive. The terrace was full of people eating, drinking and enjoying the sunshine. “Look, almost every table has a bottle of sparkling rosé on it,” Warde pointed out. He was right. The salmon-pink bubbles on virtually every table seemed to reflect the convivial mood

The formal, fine-dining Bottle Store restaurant offers an elegant, luxury experience

of the day.

The history of Squerryes is interesting. The 2,500-acre property has been with Henry Warde’s family since 1731 – for eight generations. “We hadn’t thought about making wine until 2006, when a Champagne House visited us and got excited when they saw our location and the soil. It got me thinking and I decided I didn’t want to sell the property to them; I wanted to make the wine myself. That was the start of our journey.”

Warde visited Champagne to learn more about the making of its world-famous sparkling wine. Armed with French expertise and “the secret of terroir”, they planted 36 acres of vines – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier. The best way forward seemed to be to produce a delicious, high-quality, sparkling wine, something that England was already getting noticed for.

“Our family motto is *Licet Esse Beatis*, Latin for, ‘It is permitted to be joyful’. Indeed, we

WINES TASTED WITH HENRY WARDE

1. Squerryes Vintage Brut 2017

30% Chardonnay, 48% Pinot Noir, 22% Pinot Meunier

36 months ageing on lees

Tasting notes Fresh citrus, apple and floral notes on nose and palate. Rich, bold and satisfying.

2. Squerryes Vintage rosé 2018

65% Pinot Meunier, 35% Pinot Noir

24 months ageing on lees

Tasting notes Attractive fresh red fruit – strawberries and redcurrant – with a creamy fullness upheld by crisp acidity. A delightful wine with food or as an aperitif. “It embodies our motto, it’s all about joy,” says Warde.

3. Squerryes Vintage Blancs de blanc 2016

100% Chardonnay

45 months ageing on lees

Tasting notes Rich, creamy complexity with notes of brioche and baked red apple leading to a long finish. A fine, persistent mousse lends texture, leading to a lingering finish.



have been in the business of creating joy for 300 years – now we are bottling it,” he tells me. Squerryes, its wines and its beautiful location, seem made for wine tourism.

Warde was inspired by the Napa Valley model of offering visitors top quality wine-centric experiences through on-site winery restaurants designed to showcase the wines. At Squerryes, he has set up two. Besides the Terrace restaurant, there is their fine-dining Bottle Store restaurant, the first offering the

THE ENGLISH SPARKLING WINE STORY

The leap in quality taken by the English wine industry in the few short decades since it came into being is astonishing. To understand it better, it is necessary to look into its backstory.

While historians debate whether wine was first produced in England in the times of the Roman occupation, it is certain that modern English winemaking came of age in the 1990s. Initially hampered by a wet, marginal climate and a preference for planting German hybrid grapes, the wine industry was quick to shrug off its early reputation for insipid, still wines. Especially as it soon discovered that it had several things in common with the world's most famous premium sparkling wine region – Champagne.

Across the English Channel from France, divided by a narrow body of water but sharing the same soil profile, England found it could grow top quality Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier – the very same grapes which dominate Champagne blends. With a cool climate (which helps grapes to retain acidity) and quick learning at hand, England began to produce wines of quality similar to Champagne's grands marques, using the same traditional methods of production. This quality was endorsed when English sparkling wine went on to beat top champagnes in global blind tasting competitions.

Quality has continued to improve steadily over time. When the COVID19 pandemic and associated lockdowns made travel impossible, champagne-loving Britishers began looking towards Kent- and Sussex-made sparkling wines to satisfy their thirst for quality bubbles. Today English wine, both sparkling and a growing amount of still, may be found in top fine dining restaurants.



The pleasures of the table in an idyllic setting



The panelled Cork Room furnished with books and family portraits is where wine tastings are held

pleasures of al fresco dining in summer, the second a more formal, luxury experience.

You can also book a tour of "Squerryes Court", home to the Wardes, where a private guide handles visits and tastings. Then there is the wood-panelled Cork Room for experiencing tastings surrounded by books and photographs of the Wardes and their ancestors. A meal at the Bottle Store restaurant gives you the opportunity to delve into Laura Evans MW's exclusively curated wine list, where top names from France, Italy, Spain and the New World sit alongside the best of English still and sparkling wines. This

is matched with a special menu by Squerryes' estate chef, Alexander Baillieu.

Baillieu, who wandered up to our table while I was chatting with Warde to discuss the food, centres his seasonal menus around local fare. Here, seasonal vegetables (including vegetables from their own kitchen garden), seafood (the coast and Dover's white cliffs are not far) and cheese (we finished with a platter of fine English cheeses) among other local delicacies are incorporated into the menu. For instance, classic favourites include a rack of English lamb from Romney Marsh in southeast Kent and Dover Sole with lemon and parsley butter.

But the wines are the main reason to drive down for a meal at Squerryes. Almost

85% of their wine is sold directly to their own clientele. With limited production, the wines go fast. So, it benefits lovers of vintage sparkling wine to become members of the Squerryes Club, where they get a discount on the bottles they buy as well at the restaurants when they dine in.

Squerryes' director James Osborn explains, "In terms of membership, ours is more than a wine club, it is also the opportunity to get a step closer to a working English estate. Wine is at the heart of it, but we also host a number of (cultural/food/drinks) events across the estate during the year. Some are complimentary to our members, others come at a discounted ticket price."

It is not unusual to find Squerryes hosting a wedding party or even a 1000-person garden soiree in the summer months. Given its proximity to London, day trips for lunch or dinner are very popular. And come harvest time, there is the chance to pick grapes at the Harvest Picking Party.

Warde recognizes the value of location and its effect on Squerryes' quality. The North Downs ridge features chalk similar to that found in Champagne's Côte de Blancs. The south-facing vineyards ensure that every bit of sunshine gets to the vines, an important factor in England's marginal, cool climate. The grapes ripen slowly, so much so that harvest is relatively late, in late October, but the freshness and acidity are retained – more evident in their linear Blanc de Blancs (my own favourite of the trio) than in the others which are richer and riper.

For Warde, every vintage is unique and different. "Each vintage is a voyage of discovery. It's like they are my children – it is easy to see how the terroir reacts to each different season. It all comes back to creating joyful experiences." v

The wines are the main reason to drive down for a meal at Squerryes. Almost 85% of their wine is sold to their own clientele

Squerryes, Beggars Lane, Westerham, Kent, TN16 1QP. T+44 (0)1959 562345, Tour bookings: events@squerryes.co.uk celebrations@squerryes.co.uk