

(Clockwise from below) At Balfour Winery, grapes harvest at Simpsons Wine Estate, and Ruth and Charles Simpson



THOMAS ALEXANDER PHOTOGRAPHY



## Focus on quality and food

There is a growing emphasis on hospitality. Most wineries have cafés and restaurants, offering sweeping views of vineyards and innovative food and wine pairings. Focus on local delicacies – oysters from Whitstable or Colchester, local Sussex and Kent cheeses – add authenticity. The wineries' proximity to London (just an hour or two's drive away) and the increasing popularity of weekend tours have been marked post the UK lockdown. "We have been very busy," acknowledges Linter, "The vineyards are beautiful and when visitors come down, you can see the weight lifting off their shoulders. It is safe, open and something special."

# English wine's irrepressible rise

With more vineyards being planted in the UK, and British wines – both sparkling and still – having their moment, our wine expert picks some winners

∴ RUMA SINGH

A few months ago, a clear and sunny weekend gave me the perfect reason to drive down to the vineyards in Kent – a busman's holiday after my wine exams. Why English vineyards? Because the English sparkling wine story has intrigued me for many years and this was an opportunity to do a reality check.

It has only been in the last decade that English wine (made from grapes grown in England and Wales) has received the attention it deserves. The first sparkling winery to strike gold was Nyetimber. Tasted blind, their Classic Cuvée 2003 surprised the world by beating several Champagne grand marques to corner the top spot in 2010's Bollicine del Mondo sparkling wine championships. Global warming – think earlier springs and warmer, drier summers – and clones, better knowledge of soils, and vineyard experiments, I learn, are behind this success.

### Sunshine in Kent

My first stop was at Simpsons Wine Estate near Canterbury, where their still wines are as highly regarded as their sparkling. As I walked through the vineyards with sales and events manager Henry Rymill, he explained why. Eastern Kent is surrounded by sea on three sides and moderated by the chalk hills of the North Downs. "The vineyards are on sunlit, South-facing slopes so the grapes ripen perfectly. The soils [similar to Champagne and Burgundy] are vital for good drainage in a wet climate," he shares. Simpsons was bought in a neglected condition by Charles and Ruth Simpson 20 years ago. The duo, already experienced winemaker-owners at Domaine St Rose in Languedoc, renovated the property, giving special attention to the vineyards: Roman Road (for the ancient Roman road that once traversed the area) and Railway Hill. Pointing to the slopes, Rymill explained how the location assists the flow of cold air downward, re-

South-East England has much in common with Champagne: divided by the English Channel both have similar soils (chalk), climate (England is cooler at 50 degree N), and grow predominantly the same grapes (Pinot Noir, Meunier and Chardonnay)

If in London, buy British



miniscent of Burgundy's climats (micro plots).

This precision and planning serves English vineyards well. It helps that the unique soils of Kent and its neighbouring Sussex are dominated by Tunbridge Wells sandstone, which when layered with clay, is perfect for viticulture.

Game changer number two has been the industry's careful selection of vine clones (cuttings from successful Burgundy grapes) and rootstocks (vines grafted on to roots of another vine for disease control). This is vitally important, explained winemaker Fergus Elias of Balfour Winery at Hush Heath Estate, at my next stop. The estate's noted Oast Meadow vineyards, like Simpson's, boasts of neatly numbered rows of vines labelled with grape, rootstock and clone, allowing the viticulturists and winemakers to pinpoint the best grapes for their wine.

Finally, the lack of stringent regulations that bind European wine appellations leaves the English wine industry free to experiment in vineyard and winery. "We can achieve higher quality without restrictions on creativity," says Rymill.

### Sparkling versus still

The English wine industry is heavily tilted towards their headline-grabbing sparkling wines: 64% produced against 36% still wine (2020, WineGB). But still wines are rapidly gaining market share. This has been happening over the last several decades with large-scale vineyard replantings. Today, England grows Pinot Noir (33%), Chardonnay (32%) and increasing quantities of the white grape Bacchus.

Elias believes strongly in England's ability to make characterful wines. "The wonderful thing about England is our clean, linear, acidity-driven wines," he says. Balfour Winery, one of the country's largest producers with over 100 hectares under vine, is pivot-

With 800 vineyards and 178 wineries in the UK, about 3,800 hectares are planted now (up 175% in the last 10 years). With year-on-year plantings of more vines, production is anticipated to increase to about 40 million bottles by 2040. (Courtesy: WineGB)



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### 'Still' so good

In Sussex, 50-year-old family-run Bolney Wine Estate, England's largest producer by volume, has refocused on still wines. Managing director and winemaker Sam Linter explained that her parents began making still wines before

switching to sparkling inspired by Nyetimber's early medal rush. Today, Bolney produces eight still and seven sparkling wines, and their Pinot Gris made history as the first English wine to be served officially at Wimbledon in 2015. "English sparkling wine brought England's reputation as a wine producer into play," she says, "But we were always about still wines and these are getting better all the time." Now, English wine is served not just at Wimbledon but at Buckingham Palace state dinners and high-level G7 summits.

Wine sales also grew 30% during the pandemic. And since everything re-opened this year, producers have benefited from local tourism.

The still wine revival was led by a handful of producers piloted by Chapel Down – with its noted 40-hectare Kit's Coty vineyards, which grow Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Bacchus grapes. Bacchus has played a starring role in many wineries' recent success stories. The grape is highly-productive, displaying good acidity and defined flavours of ripe tropical fruit from its parent grapes. Linter describes Bacchus as a grape "suited to our climate that grows really well here, producing a wine with naturally high acidity and good phenolics".

Charged by the newfound success of the still Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Bacchus, and quickly realising that global warming offers England an advantage in terms of climate, new plantings have increased. Simpsons was among the first to make a 100% Pinot Meunier – once considered the unfashionable workhorse among Champagne grapes. They chose to vinify their Derringstone Pinot Meunier, a grape better known as a component in sparkling blends, as a still white wine without incorporating the colour and tannins from the skins and seeds. "Close your eyes and you could be drinking a red," Rymill says. "It is savoury, salty, creamy all at once."