

BRIT POP- THE SECOND COMING

The rise and rise of English sparkling wine- a Sussex story.

Noel Gallagher predicted it first.

In 1995, at the height of the Britpop movement (the first coming), Oasis recorded Champagne Supernova. The beauty of origin stories is that it's literally impossible to confirm their veracity (unless you actually check with Noel, but i'm assuming that you probably won't). So here's one of them.

The band had been holed up at Rockfield Studios in North Wales for the recording of their second album, *(What's the Story) Morning Glory?* Being a rural area, word spread around quickly of the band's presence. The rumours reached a local sparkling wine producer from the Wye Valley, who thought this would be a dream opportunity to further the cause of homegrown bubbly. So he decided to personally hand-deliver a few cases to the studio.

Half way through the recording, and after a particularly productive session, the lads felt like celebrating. So they cracked open a few bottles. Legend has it, the wine was so spectacularly bad, it inspired countless jokes. The main one had Bonehead say "this is the end of sparkling wine as we know it. This stuff will become so big, it'll literally blow Champagne off the face of the Earth. It'll be like a champagne supernova".

And the rest, as they say, is history. Apparently the image was so ridiculous and struck Noel in such a way, he began riffing on lyrics around that theme, for a half-baked melody he already had. This also explains the song's last position on the album, as well as it being the last single released, as it literally was a last-minute addition, and fully created in the studio following that episode.

Now of course, back in those early days, English sparkling wines were very much in their infancy. They consisted of a handful of semi-serious experiments- and Nyetimber. In fact, the fizz received by the lads was said to have been a trial run by a local winegrower who was preparing a vintage to be released in 1999- just in time for the millennium celebrations.

History

Vineyards had been planted in England long before that. In fact, the very first vines came into England with the Romans. Much later, in 1086 the Domesday Book (William the Conqueror's big tax-planning guide) listed 42 vineyards. Back then, wine was used primarily as communion wine for the Eucharist. And although medieval Britain ran mainly on ale and beer, the little wine that was consumed was locally produced. In 1152, Henry II married Eleanor of Aquitaine. This began a trade that would see the first 'clarets' (wines from Bordeaux) arrive on British shores.

But it wouldn't be until 1662 that sparkling wine would make its first appearance on the island. Christopher Merrett, a scientist from Winchcombe in the Cotswolds, is credited with being the first person to experiment with the deliberate addition of sugar for the production of sparkling wine. This is some 35 years prior to Dom Pérignon's discoveries, which are traditionally believed to be the birth of Champagne wines as we know them. But this is a whole other bottle of fizz.

The trouble with English wines was their chronic inconsistency. This is due to the significant climate changes experienced throughout the centuries. In Roman times, England enjoyed a relatively warm climate. But in subsequent centuries, the situation was not always so favourable.

This, together with a growing international trade and a new found taste for French wines, meant that local wines were pretty much all but forgotten.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, English winemakers continued to experiment, with varying degrees of success. What became apparent was that some terroirs started to prove more suitable than others, particularly in the southern counties.

England had traditionally followed the German school of winemaking. This meant using grape varieties like Bacchus, Müller-Thurgau, Reichensteiner and Seyval Blanc. But a few mavericks, like Ray Barrington Brock, began seeking to identify the grape varieties most suited to the island's climate.

The after war period saw a revival in British viticulture, and so in 1952 when Major General Sir Guy Salisbury-Jones returned home from France, he was inspired to plant the first vines in his birth town of Hambleton in Hampshire. Thus began a whole new chapter in English winemaking, as this would turn out to be the first commercial vineyard in the UK.

The wines were still on the sweet side and of very low complexity. And they were still produced using the German grape varieties and methods (Blue Nun or Black Tower with your prawn cocktail, Madame?). But what made these vineyards different was the soil. Hambledon's subsoil is made out of chalk- and not just any old chalk, but the exact same one as that formed on the seabed of the Paris basin some 65 million years ago. So Hambledon's terroir has the same belemnite content as some of the best Chardonnay areas in Champagne.

In 1984 Carr Taylor were the first commercial vineyard in England to produce traditional method sparkling wine. However, they used a blend of Reichensteiner and Schönburger for their fizzes.

Be Here Now

The stage was now set for England to potentially start producing some great wines: a proclivity to experiment with different wine grapes, a soil that was ideal for growing vines, much milder weather conditions which allowed better ripening, and a burgeoning national wine market.

It was then, in 1988, that the history of English sparkling wine would enter its last and defining phase. Recognising the parallels between the chalky soils of southern England and Champagne, American couple Sandy and Stuart Moss decided to experiment with the classic 'holy trinity' used in France and planted Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier on their Nyetimber estate.

Their first vintage, the 1992 Blanc de Blancs was presented at the IWSC (International Wine and Spirit Competition) in 1997 and won the Gold medal.

This was a true watershed moment, as following that event, the majority of still wine producers switched to sparkling, and a whole variety of new players jumped into the fray.

In the last 20 years, total vineyard area has risen by 400%- from 761 hectares in 2004 to today's 3,800. The 195 wineries (up from 128 ten years ago) produce from 9 to 10 million bottles a year, with sparkling wine alone accounting for around $\frac{1}{3}$ of that number- roughly 7 million bottles.

Considering that 223 million bottles of sparkling wine (including Champagne, prosecco, cava et.al.) are sold in the UK each year, that means that only 3% of the

total market is currently buying English sparkling wine. That is a huge opportunity for growth.

In terms of terroirs, the main production area is concentrated in the South East.

Kent:

‘The garden of England’ is home to the largest area under vine in the country. It also produces some of the finest sparklers on the market today.

Some of the best Kent producers include:

- **Chapel Down:** England’s leading winery in terms of surface under vine, it has 906 acres planted, and commands 33% of the total market.
- **Balfour:** Since planting their first vineyards in 2002, Balfour has gone from strength to strength. Their 2004 Brut Rosé was the first English sparkling wine to win both the gold medal and the Trophy at the IWC.
- **Gusbourne:** Also a relative newcomer, they planted their first vines in 2002. They are spread across 2 counties, with 60 hectares in Kent, and a further 30 in West Sussex.
- **Westwell:** A real boutique, family affair. One of the few to also add Ortega grapes to the ‘holy trinity’, lending extra character to their wines.

Sussex:

The first English region to have its own PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), covering the counties of East and West Sussex.

Home to the wine that started it all: Nyetimber.

- **Nyetimber:** Pioneers in every respect. From the first mention of ‘Nitimbreha’, way back in that famous Domesday book of 1086, to the first to plant the ‘holy trinity’ of grapes- they were also the first recipients of a Gold medal at the 1997 IWC for an English sparkling wine.
- **Ridgeview:** One of the early birds, their first vines were planted back in 1995 in the South Downs. Awarded ‘best sparkling wine in the world’ in 2010 by Decanter.

- **Rathfinny:** One of the latest additions to the Sussex terroir, Mark and Sarah Driver set up shop in 2010. Amazing site conditions make for some of the finest wines on the market.
- **Bolney:** Another pioneer, Bolney have been producing wines in Sussex since 1972.
- **Digby:** The first *négociant* or 'blending house' in England. Dermot Sugrue, famed English winemaker is a consultant.
- **Wiston:** A real family-run winery headed by Pip and Harry Goring. Old vines, family values, and exceptional quality wines.

Hampshire:

Home of the very first commercial winery back in 1952, it has its place firmly rooted in the history of English sparkling wine.

- **Hambledon:** Another maverick in the English sparkling wine game, they were the first to set up a commercial winery, way back in 1952. Still producing some of the finest fizzes.
- **Hattingley:** Quirky, state-of-the-art winery set up by the Robinson family in 2008. Also blenders from a variety of different producers.
- **Coates & Seely:** Another late bloomer, these guys began in 2008, and among many awards and accolades, they remain the only English wine to have made it on to the menu at the Georges V hotel in Paris.

Cornwall:

Not a huge area of production compared to the three above, but what little wine is produced is of outstanding quality.

- **Camel Valley:** Created by ex-RAF pilot Bob Lindo back in 1989, it has been a beacon for the future of phenomenal sparkling wines in that area.

Into Tomorrow

Two recent events were the canaries in the coalmine testifying to the health of the English sparkling wine market, the phenomenal growth it has seen in the last 20 years, and the wild possibilities that lie ahead.

In 2016, Pommery, one of France's most established Champagne houses, purchased 40 hectares of land at Pinglestone in Hampshire. They began releasing their first vintages under Louis Pommery England as early as 2018.

The following year, it was the turn of Taittinger. This time, the land was purchased in Kent, and under the name Domaine Evremond, 52 hectares of vine were planted to produce wines for release this year.

What this may imply for the future of English sparkling wine production is very auspicious indeed.

There is no denying that global warming is real, and that climate change is by no means a good thing. However, one of the only upsides (if there can even be an 'upside' to a climate crisis of such global scale) will be experienced on the rolling hills of the English southern counties.

2018 was an outstanding vintage for English sparkling wines- the weather was warmer, producing a much higher grape yield and allowing the natural alcohol of the wines to reach 10, sometimes 12%. But most importantly, it was a taste of things to come. These weather conditions are forecast to repeat themselves at least 60% of the years between now and 2040.

This will work as a sort of double-edged sword across the Channel. As the weather conditions in England will get closer to the current Champagne climate, back in France, it may begin to create problems. The main one being over-ripening of the grapes due to the heat, but also a forecast of extremely cold springs may cause the fruit to freeze. In 2019 for example, summer temperatures were so high (a record 42.9°C) that 10% of the crops were ravaged by wildfires.

The rising temperatures don't just mean good business for the sparkling wine market. The main producers have even started to look beyond bubbles and into different grape varieties such as Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Semillon. It's suggested that in a few years, the weather conditions will resemble those of current-day Burgundy, allowing English winemakers to produce Pinot Noir as a still red.

Another key aspect determining the future of English sparkling wines is the current legislation. Unlike traditional wine countries that are broken down into smaller sub-appellations, England's wines benefit from a more lax set of legislations: a country-wide England PDO and PGI.

This is great news, as the industry is still so young, it will hugely benefit from all the experimentation.

Of course, there are also a number of challenges facing the future of this fledgling industry.

The main one, this being England after all, is the inconsistency of the weather. Unlike Champagne, which benefits from a continental climate, England's vineyards are much closer to the ocean, meaning they are more susceptible to large weather fluctuations. This means the vintages can be wildly different from year to year, exposing winemakers to unpredictable yield volumes.

The lack of consistency for yield brings on another big hurdle for its commercialisation- its current price point. As well as logistical difficulties such as lack of labour, the relative infancy of the English wine industry means there are virtually no economies of scale yet. As a result, wholesale prices of English sparkling wines often equal those of Champagne, starting around £30 and going up to £40, £50 and upward.

This represents a big challenge, particularly in terms of communication and brand perception, as English sparkling still has a long way to go if it wants to dethrone Champagne as the go-to 'special celebration' wine. In recent consumer polls, Champagne still comes way ahead as a symbol of luxury, exclusivity and affluence.

A key aspect of this image comes down to a simple yet crucial detail- its name. We are still referring to it as 'English sparkling wine', which sounds a lot more generic and resolutely less glamorous than Champagne. To this effect, some names have been thrown around such as 'Sussex' (which actually already benefits from PDO status), 'British Fizz', 'Britagne', or even 'Merrett' (in honour of the 17th century British scientist who first experimented with bubbles).

This could be a decisive factor in the international expansion of English sparkling wine as a brand. And although the growth has been pretty stellar, it's still primarily a local phenomenon. Experts argue that a real marketing push will be required in

order to raise its profile on a global scale. And it may well begin with a more memorable name.

So as Noel predicted this almost 30 years ago, perhaps it was fate that he should be the one to come up with a suitable name for our lovely bubbles.

Over to you, Chief.