

It's a smash!

English sparkling wine is the toast of England, and a huge range of sophisticated wines are being exported around the globe. *Roger Jones* gathers together some real sparklers

English sparkling wine has come a very long way in a short period. Customers are becoming as familiar with brands like Nyetimber, Wiston and Hattingley as they are with Bollinger or Pol Roger – even the Queen is using English sparkling to launch her ships.

There is a surge in investment, planting and development all over the UK, and Kent, Sussex and Hampshire seem to be reaping the best rewards, having an identical chalk line and geology to Champagne in France. English sparkling wines are even being exported and, along with the falling pound, they are attracting ever-more followers across the globe.

The French are also no longer ignoring our success and are coming over the Channel and investing their own money into one of Britain's fastest-growing success stories – sadly for them, a decade too late.

Grape varieties

While some winemakers have dabbled, it is now predominately the classic Champagne grapes, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, that make up these sparkling wines.

Method

The key is that English and Welsh (just like the cricket, Wales is often silent or missing from the title) sparkling wines are made in the traditional, lengthy and expensive champagne method. The wine is bottled and sealed with crown caps (beer bottle tops) and aged for up to three years. The wine is then disgorged (the neck of the bottle is frozen and the cap taken off, removing the sediment) before being topped up with a sugar solution and sealed with a cork.

Vineyard profiles

Wiston Estate, South Downs

Although the Wiston Estate has been owned and managed by the Goring family since 1743, it took the conviction and passion of Harry Goring's wife, Pip, to change its course. Though it

did take her three decades to persuade her husband to turn the family's turkey production plant into a winery.

Pip's dream to create a vineyard similar to the ones she was brought up with in South Africa is testament to her faith. Each bottle of Wiston has a Huguenot Cross on the label in memory of a group of protestant reformers who left France for South Africa and set up the first vineyards in Franschoek.

The first vines at the Wiston Estate (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier) were planted in 2006 on a 16-acre periglacial dry river valley on the upper cretaceous chalk of the South Downs, a land that has all the hallmarks of the Côte de Blancs.

Inside, the winery has one of only four antique Coquard presses that have ever left France. The head winemaker is Dermot Sugrue, one of the UK's most prolific sparkling winemakers, who joined Wiston in 2006 from Nyetimber. As well as being in charge, he produces his own sparkling wines under the Sugrue Pierre label and makes wines for numerous other Sussex vineyards.

Wiston Blanc de Blancs 2010

This is 100% Chardonnay, aged both in old oak barrels and stainless steel, which offers a wine that not only delivers now but will age gracefully. Great depth and texture from the aged oak, figs and nougatine is balanced by a lovely freshness and a citrus background. The wine sits easily on the palate and has the finesse and style to go with quite full-flavoured dishes.

Wiston Cuvée Brut 2010

Fermented in old Puligny-Montrachet barrels, this is a stunning blend of Chardonnay (33%), Pinot Noir (45%) and Pinot Meunier (22%). It has soft, toasted brioche on the nose and then it bounces around the palate with a concoction of flavours including pink grapefruit, lime, hints of toffee and caramel. It's a beautiful wine.



Britannia was launched with a Nebuchadnezzar from the Wiston Estate hitting her bow



Hattingley Valley Blanc de Blancs 2010

With a honeyed nose this very fine, precise wine has had plenty of time to age on its lees, which gives it a wonderful complexity. This is a beautiful wine and a bargain – bearing in mind that the cost has gone into the oak barrels and five years of ageing, this will continue to evolve.

Hattingley Kings Cuvée 2011

This is a limited release, which is on allocation, and based on Rice's first love, a 1979 Krug that she tried in her youth. The wine has refined toasty, brioche, creamy rich flavours and evolving stone fruit with a lingering freshness on the palate. A complex, super-premium sparkling wine.

Nyetimber, Sussex

World-renowned and world-class, these guys continue to lead and fly the flag for English sparkling wine the world over. From their top cuvée, Tillington (the 2010 has just been released) to their game-changing Nyetimber Demi-Sec NV.

Ancre Hill Estates, Monmouth, Wales

This is the UK's first biodynamic vineyard, and it is located within its own microclimate in a small valley outside Monmouth, with a winery built from straw bales. It specialises in vintage Blanc de Blanc (100% Chardonnay) with the release of its 2010 this autumn.

Ancre Hill Blanc de Blanc 2009

Delicate toasted brioche on the nose, full flavoured with a masculine depth and luscious stone fruit – a wine that is complex and exciting.

Ancre Hill Blanc de Blanc 2010

This is a stunning, full-bodied wine with delicate tangerine on the nose, fine bubbles and clean, refreshing fruit. This is one of the best sparkling wines I have tried for some time.



Food and wine matching



The joy of these wines is the fabulous food pairings they offer. Nyetimber's voluptuous demi sec oozes class, fruit and depth and would be perfect with sashimi or richer dishes, such as foie gras and terrines. Wiston's Rosé, a beautifully refined and scented wine, is a good match for lamb or monkfish.

Hambleton's seriously impressive Prestige Cuvée has the depth and acidity to match a dish of slow-cooked octopus, served with a creamed parsnip purée and Exmoor caviar. The earthy parsnips and the salty caviar seasoning the textured octopus are all highlighted by the sparkling wine, which has layers of delicate stone fruit, hints of spring floral herbs and citrus to cleanse the palate.

Wiston Rosé 2011

This wine is Pinot Noir (57%), Chardonnay (33%), Pinot Meunier (10%) and is barrel fermented. No red wine has been added, so this is a delicate, clean-looking pale-pink sparkler that oozes charm. While there are hints of English strawberries, it has depth and

structure, which provides a more savoury undertone and leads to a very delicate finish.

Wiston Brut Non Vintage

This is a wonderful example of how good non-vintage sparkling wine can be. This is a blend of more than one vintage to produce a wine of perfection. There is purity, class, and texture and, if you're looking for further recommendation, it was the wine the Queen used to launch the ship Britannia.

Hambleton Vineyard, Hampshire

Hambleton is clearly based on French philosophy – it has a French winemaking team and I noted many charts and to-do lists in French in the winery – in fact, Pol Roger was involved in establishing the vineyard in the 1950s.

In 2009 founder Ian Kellett persuaded Hervé Jestin (ex-cellar master of Duval-Leroy) to oversee the rebuilding of the winery at a cost of £10m. His new state-of-the-art gravity flow cellar was opened by the Duchess of Cornwall in July 2013. Jestin is still very much involved in the wine-making, together with resident winemaker Felix Gabillet.

Hambleton Classic Cuvée NV

This has a wonderful, gentle biscuit nose and is Chardonnay-led, with luscious white peaches, tight, precise bubbles and citrus flavours. It's a fabulous, vibrant wine, perfect as an aperitif or with shellfish.

Hambleton Premiere Cuvée NV

An elegant bottle holds wine tasting of soft, toasty brioche and praline with a touch of lemongrass, delicate herbs and Seville oranges. This is layered and is continuing to evolve and a fabulous match to a number of dishes, such as guinea fowl or wild sea bass with truffles.

Hattingley Valley, Hampshire

Over at Hattingley, Emma Rice, the English winemaker, who has made such an impact on the English sparkling wine scene, rules the roost with a very English team.

Hattingley Valley Classic Cuvée 2013

Very pure, with bright, fresh citrus, soft wild flowers and orchard fruit with a delicate toasty underlay. Perfect on a summer day relaxing in the garden with some sushi.

Hattingley Valley Rosé 2013

The 2011 Rosé won best in class and world champion trophies in the 2014 Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships – not bad for a first release. The 2013 has a subtle colour and is very elegant with spiced fresh berry fruit. This is not a sweet fruit bombshell, but a wonderful expression of what classic sparkling rosé should be like.

