

History of English Sparkling Wine

The production of sparkling wine (made from grapes) in Britain – although not from wine made from grapes grown in the UK – is certainly over 350 years old and the full story of how Britain's 17th Century “wine coopers” made their wines “brisk and sparkling” by the addition of sugar is well documented in the report presented to the Royal Society by Dr. Christopher Merrett on 17 December 1662. This practice was certainly older than this as cider makers had experimented with “a walnut of sugar when bottling” and made sure they used the strong *verre Anglais* which Sir Kenelm Digby had been perfecting since the 1620s.

Exactly when the first sparkling wine made from English grapes was produced is open to debate. Certainly wines being made in England in the 1750s were considered comparable to Champagne and the wines produced at Painshill Place between 1741 and 1779 were often described as such. The Honourable Charles Hamilton, who owned the vineyard, planted it with the varieties *Pied rouge*, *Muscat blanc*, *Muscat rouge*, *Guillan blanc*, and *Sauviot*, and employed a French Huguenot refugee, David Geneste, to tend the vines and make the wine. In December 1754 Geneste wrote to his sister in Bordeaux and reported “*that four barrels of wine had been made, two of which were sold as vin de Champaign [sic] at 50 pièces [7 guineas] a barrel*” – a high price for the time. In 1775, by which time Hamilton had given up the lease on the property, he wrote that he had also planted “*two sorts of Burgundy grapes, the Auvernat, which is the most delicate, but the tenderest, and the Miller grape, commonly called the black cluster, which is more hardy*” and that “*in the very first year I made white Wine, [he had previously only tried making red wine] it nearly resembled the flavour of Champaign; and in two or three years more, as the Vines grew stronger, to my great amazement, my Wine had a finer flavour than the best Champaign I ever tasted*” and that the wine “*sparkled and creamed in the glass like Champaign*”. Of course, Champagne in those days was not always the sparkling wine that we know today and both “Champagne mousseux” and “Champagne non-mousseux” were available.

The first recorded production of bottle-fermented sparkling wines – made from UK-grown grapes – is probably that carried out by Raymond Barrington Brock at his Oxted Viticultural Research Station in the 1950s. The *Daily Mirror* of 17 August 1950 carried an article entitled *A bottle of Maidstone '49* which praised the work of Brock and another viticultural pioneer, Edward Hyams, which ended by saying: *perhaps ten years hence you'll be raising a glass of sparkling Canterbury in honour of the men who made an English wine industry possible*. In August 1960 Brock put on the Station's first official trade wine tasting and offered a large number of different wines, including sparkling wines. Some of these sparkling wines survived undisturbed in the Station's cellars until the 1980s.

The first commercial producers to make bottle-fermented sparkling wines were Nigel (de Marsac) Godden at Pilton Manor in Somerset – first planted in 1966 – and Graham Barrett at Felsted Vineyard in Essex – first planted in 1967. As was quite usual at that time, the main varieties grown were Müller-Thurgau and Seyval blanc and it is probable that it was these that were used. Their wines – never produced in large volumes – were certainly interesting, maybe even worth drinking and in the 1978 English Wine of the Year Competition (EWOTYC) the 1976 *Felstar Méthode Champenoise* won a Silver Medal and the *NV Pilton Manor De Marsac Brut Méthode Champenoise* won a Bronze. These

early successes, however, didn't seem to help sales much and their production seems to have faded out. Sir Guy Salisbury-Jones at Hambledon, whose initial (1953) plantings included 20 Chardonnay vines, expanded the Chardonnay in 1970 with a further 1,000 vines and experimented with the production of a bottle-fermented sparkling wine. In 1979 his winemaking consultant Anton Massel helped produce a batch in 1979 with favourable results. Salisbury-Jones also grew Auxerrois and Meunier, which ripened more easily, and these became the basis of their sparkling wine *cuvée*. However, Sir Guy considered that the production costs were too high and the length of time the wine needed to mature was too long to make the product commercially viable and production ceased.

The next appearance of a bottle-fermented sparkling wine in the EWOTYC (ignoring the carbonated *1983 Barton Manor Sparkling Rosé* that won a Gold Medal in the 1984 competition – delicious though it was) was in the 1987 EWOTYC when the first Carr Taylor sparkling wine won a medal. David and Linda Carr Taylor first planted vines at their vineyard in Westfield, near Hastings, East Sussex, in 1973 and until 1983 their grapes were sent to Lamberhurst Vineyards for winemaking. For the huge 1983 vintage however, when their Reichensteiner vines cropped at 15 tonnes per acre and their total output came to 186,000 bottles, they decided to start making bottle-fermented sparkling wines using a Polish-French consultant winemaker based in Champagne called Clement Nowak, whose name at one stage actually appeared on the neck-label. For a few years Carr Taylor became the major producer – in fact almost the only producer – of bottle-fermented sparkling wines in the UK and achieved considerable success. Their Vintage Sparkling won a Gold Medal in the 1988 EWOTYC and their Non Vintage Sparkling won the Jack Ward Trophy (best large volume wine) in the 1989 EWOTYC. In 1993 they won the International Wine and Spirits Competition (IWSC) English Wine Trophy with their 1987 Vintage Sparkling. They also entered their wines into overseas competitions – a rarity in those days – and did surprisingly well. Their 1988 Vintage Sparkling Wine was awarded a gold medal at the prestigious *Concours European des Grands Vins* beating 1,800 Champagnes and other bottle-fermented sparkling wines from around the world and in 1999, in the same competition, their 1996 vintage was awarded a Gold Medal, this time out of 4,300 entrants! A fact that tends to get forgotten in these days of the UK's mega-vineyards planted with Champagne varieties is that the Carr Taylors were certainly the first to make serious commercial quantities of bottle-fermented sparkling wines. They did, however, only ever use what might be termed “native” varieties for the UK – Reichensteiner, Schönburger, Kerner and Huxelrebe – being the most important ones. This reliance on non-classic varieties whilst it gave their wines a point of difference from other Chardonnay and Pinot based wines, also gave the wines a character more akin to Sekt or Asti than Champagne, something not all critics and commentators liked.

At the same time as the Carr Taylors were starting producing sparkling wines, Karl-Heinz Johner at Lamberhurst Vineyards was also experimenting, but using Chardonnay, Pinot blanc and Auxerrois, which were being grown by Piers Greenwood at New Hall Vineyards in Essex, a major grape supplier to Lamberhurst. The non-vintage Lamberhurst Brut was launched in 1989 after about 3 years on the lees and whilst only ever produced in small volumes, was well received by both critics and the wine trade.

The next on the UK sparkling wine scene was David Cowderoy who, working at his father's winery at Rock Lodge, produced the *1989 Rock Lodge Impresario* which won the IWSC English Wine Trophy in 1991. When David joined forces with others to create Chapel Down Wines (in 1992) one of their first

wines, the non-vintage *Epoch Brut*, made from a blend of Müller-Thurgau, Reichensteiner and Seyval blanc, was in fact a re-badged Rock Lodge wine. The fact that Chapel Down were not using the classic Champagne varieties (which, with the exception of New Hall Vineyards, were not being grown in enough quantity for them to buy), gave them something of a marketing advantage and enabled their prices to remain reasonable – under £10 – although at the time this was at least twice that of still wines. In the end though, once Chardonnay and Pinot based wines started to appear in 1997/1998, this marketing edge disappeared and their Müller-Thurgau, Reichensteiner and Seyval blanc based wines, although very good and well-priced, were always playing second fiddle to the Champagne lookalikes in quality (and quality perception) terms.

The production of sparkling wines from the classic varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier – started in the mid-1980s when growers like Piers Greenwood, already mentioned, Karen Ostborn and Alan Smalley at Throwley¹, Faversham and Martin Oldaker at Surrenden, near Ashford, both in Kent, all started growing Chardonnay and Pinot noir with the encouragement of Christopher (Kit) Lindlar. Kit, after leaving Horam Manor in 1976, where he was one of the winemakers, set up as a contract winemaker firstly at Biddenden Vineyards, and then, in around 1985, at his own High Weald Winery at Grafty Green, near Ashford, Kent. Kit, who also supplied vines, persuaded the two Kent vineyards above to experiment with these varieties which had, by and large, been very unsuccessful. Brock had grown Chardonnay in his collection at Oxted, but could never get it to ripen properly. Ian and Andrew Paget at Chilsdown Vineyard planted Chardonnay and had no luck getting it to ripen. In 1981, a very dismal year for UK vinegrowers, the acidity (in grams per litre) was higher than the degrees Oechsle! Ouch. Extreme unripeness was a common finding among those early growers who persevered with it, although most decided to give up and removed the offending variety. Only in really hot years would Chardonnay produce anything like ripe grapes and tolerable wine. Pinot noir, like many of the black varieties then being grown, suffered from terrible *Botrytis* and was very difficult to ripen without huge losses. It was only with the arrival of better anti-*Botrytis* sprays – initially Rovral and Ronilan, but more recently Scala, Switch and Teldor – that growing these fungus-sensitive varieties like Pinot noir has been possible. Meunier, in the guise of Wrotham Pinot, had always been grown in small amounts, but never used for anything other than blending with other, riper, reds. Kit's biggest, and subsequently best-known clients, were Stuart and Sandy Moss who decided, in 1988, to plant a vineyard at Nyetimber near Pulborough in West Sussex.

The Mosses had, by all accounts, been looking at various locations to plant a vineyard – California was at one time the front runner – but it was Sandy's love of (and business in) early English oak furniture, that persuaded them that West Sussex was the place and in 1986 they bought the 49-hectare estate. Quite whose idea it was to concentrate on sparkling wine, and not just any old sparkling wine, but made from the classic Champagne varieties, history does not (yet) recount, but the Lindlar connection cannot be ignored. He it was who supplied the vines for the plantings between 1988 and 1991 and it was at his High Weald Winery that the first commercial vintage, the 1992, was taken for processing under the watchful eye of consultant Jean-Manuel Jacquinet. Their first release was the *1992 Blanc de Blancs Première Cuvée* (a 100 per cent Chardonnay wine) which hit the ground running and won a Gold Medal and the English Wine Trophy in the 1997 IWSC Competition. Their next release, the

¹ The 1989 Throwley Chardonnay Sparkling won the IWSC English Wine Trophy in 1992.

1993 Classic Cuvée (a Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Pinot Meunier blend) went one better and won a Gold Medal, the English Wine Trophy *and* the Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wine Trophy in the 1998 IWSC. Suddenly, everyone woke up to the fact that good wine, even stunningly good wine, could be made from hitherto seemingly unworkable varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Pinot Meunier – and what was more, the wine could be sold at a premium price. Nyetimber went from strength to strength, winning the Gore-Browne Trophy in 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006 and the IWSC International Sparkling Wine Trophy in 2006, 2008 and 2009.

A few years after the Mosses planted, another Lindlar client, Mike Roberts, also decided to establish a dedicated classic-variety, bottle-fermented sparkling wine business at Ditchling in East Sussex. RidgeView Winery was established in 1995 with thirteen clones of Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Meunier and today it covers 6.48-hectares, although has access to grapes from a much larger area. A modern winery, with underground storage cellar, was built and equipped with the contents of the High Weald Winery which Lindlar had decided to close. In order to kick-start their production line, Chardonnay and Pinot noir grapes were bought from other growers, including Surrenden Vineyard, and the *1996 Cuveé Merret Bloomsbury* was produced. This wine won the 2000 EWOTYC Gore-Browne Trophy for “Wine of the Year”. Since that first release, RidgeView have produced a range of wines, all named after London squares or areas – Belgravia, Bloomsbury, Cavendish, Fitzrovia, Grosvenor, Knightsbridge and Pimlico – and their tally of awards has been impressive. They won the Gore-Browne Trophy in 2000 and 2002, together with a clutch of Gold, Silver and Bronze medals in the EWOTYC. They have also been IWSC UK Wine Producer of the Year in 2000, 2002 and 2005. In the 2008 EWOTYC they won Gold Medals for both the 2005 Bloomsbury and Cavendish. In 2009 RidgeView had its best year ever in the EWOTYC, winning three Gold medals, one Silver and one Bronze, together with the Gore-Browne and Vintner’s Trophies for the *2006 Blanc de Noir Knightsbridge* and Mike Roberts won the McAlpine Winemaker of the Year Trophy. In 2009 their Bloomsbury 2006 won the SEVA Wine of the Year Trophy, with the 2006 Cavendish and 2006 Knightsbridge winning Gold medals.

When first Nyetimber and later RidgeView started selling wines and achieving the sort of prices that many in the UK-wine business had thought unachievable, the way forward for UK-grown wines started to look a lot different. Following their significant commercial and competition success, plantings of the three classic Champagne varieties in the UK increased year on year and since the very warm year of 2003, several significant vineyards have been planted. Nyetimber has expanded under its new ownership on various sites from its original 15.8-hectares to a whopping 142-hectares; Robert Fleming Wines in Essex 32-hectares; Chapel Down’s new ‘Kit’s Coty’ site at Aylesford near Maidstone 29-hectares (with possibly more to come in 2010), Gusbourne Estate 21-hectares, Squerryes Estate 11.5-hectares and Hush Heath 5-hectares, all in Kent; Court Gardens 4.8-hectares in East Sussex; Tinwood 18-hectares, Redfold 10-hectares, Tullens 7.5-hectares, Upperton 6.9-hectares, Wiston Estate 6.6-hectares, Stopham 5.6-hectares, all in West Sussex; Laverstoke Park 9-hectares, Exton Park 7.8-hectares, Jays Farm 4.4-hectares and Little West End Farm 4-hectares in Hampshire; Wodetone 11-hectares, Crawthorne 10-hectares and Furleigh Estate 5.5-hectares, all in Dorset; and Polgoon 4.7-hectares in Cornwall. By traditional UK standards, these are substantial vineyards. Apart from Nyetimber’s and Chapel Down’s new vineyards, both of which are owner-occupied, several of these larger vineyards are associated with

either Chapel Down or RidgeView as suppliers under grape contracts or as co-producers.