

The future of English fizz II

Tom Stevenson



Two things in particular impressed me at Gusbourne in Appledore, Kent: the 2015 *vins clairs* and how quality has shot up since 2013. The 2015 *vins clairs* demonstrated not only the high quality of the vintage but also differences of Gusbourne's terroir. I found the clay-over-sand Cherry Garden site expressive for both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but particularly the latter, while the chalky Selhurst Park Field produces the most intense Chardonnay, and the clayey Boot Hill's seemingly "blended" character makes it a safe and useful base to build on... the flinty/clayey/gravelly Down Hill plays a similar role for the Pinot Noir, though more minerally than safe. As for the finished wines, it is clear that winemaker Charlie Holland has had a more relaxed and confident approach to the whole winemaking experience since 2013. By this juncture, he had disposed of all clear-glass bottles and was enjoying full control over every aspect of production in his own on-site winery. Although I rate all of Gusbourne's 2013s very highly, I adore the Blanc de Blancs and Brut Reserve, both of which should be released by the end of the year. In fact, the Gusbourne Brut Reserve 2013 was entered in this year's Champagne & Sparkling Wine World Championships (CSWWC) as a "future release" and won a silver. With a little more bottle age, it will be a serious contender for a gold medal.

At Ridgeview Estate in Ditchling Common, East Sussex, I saw the foundations laid for a new £2-million eco-friendly facility that will allow production to double. I fell in love with a prerelease of a rerelease (if that makes any sense) of the 2009 Blanc de Noirs in magnum, which has amazing finesse and is in a different league from any late-disgorged magnums of English sparkling wine released so far. Not surprisingly, it won Best in Class for the magnum category of English sparkling wine at the 2016 CSWWC.

Gosh, there was so much to like at Wiston. That Irish devil Dermot Sugrue has a magical touch! Wiston 2010 Blanc de Blancs and Wiston 2010 Blanc de Noirs are both lovely wines, winning a gold and a silver respectively at the 2016 CSWWC. The Wiston Winery is on the Goring Estate just north of Brighton, where Sugrue makes not only Wiston but his personal label Sugrue Pierre, too, not to mention the many other sparkling wines he consults for. These include the Digby that won Best English Sparkling Wine at CSWWC 2014 and Squerryes, which won the same trophy this year. Sugrue is without doubt one of England's finest winemakers, as these top awards demonstrate. It is only a matter of time before he picks up a Best English Sparkling Wine trophy for himself.

That is if Sam Lindo of Camel Valley in Cornwall does not beat him to it. The Pinot Noir Rosé is normally the clear winner in his range, not just for me but at CSWWC and other competitions, too. However, with the can't-wait-for 2014s about to be released, I cannot decide which I prefer from this vintage—the Pinot Noir Rosé, White Pinot Noir, or Chardonnay. Not to mention that it's the best Annie's Vineyards ever made! At the 2016 CSWWC, Lindo entered the 2013 Rosé, which ran away with a gold, and the 2014 Chardonnay, which won a silver despite its youth—one to follow.

An amazing debut

I visited Rathfinny Wine Estate in Alfriston, East Sussex, twice this year, and it was very instructive in several ways. Even though this estate did not produce its first sparkling wine until 2014, and that was a tiny second-year crop, Rathfinny was on my "must visit" list because it will one day be the largest single vineyard in the UK. When hedge-fund manager Mark Driver took early retirement in 2009, it was his wife Sarah who encouraged him to find a project, for fear that he would quickly get bored and go back to trading.

Never one to hang back, Driver bought the 600-acre (240ha) Rathfinny Estate at £6,000 an acre in 2010 and began planting in 2012. He currently has 180 acres (over 70ha) under vine and hopes eventually to reach 400 acres (160 ha).

The first time I drove Rathfinny's mile-long drive, winding gracefully through its vineyards, I was blown away by the location and wondered how on earth Driver found such a massive parcel of land on the South Downs. If you look south from the top of its highest unplanted slope, you can see how a natural ridge of national park land protects the vineyard from winds blowing off the glittering blue sea beyond. However, it does not prevent the wind funneling through the Rathfinny bowl parallel to the ridge, as evidenced by the permanent lean of the mature shrubs and stunted trees all around the property. To combat this, Rathfinny erected a series of windbreaks, which they hope to strengthen with rows of trees, but the spacing is too optimistic, as indicated by the middle rows of vines, which look noticeably weaker, due presumably to the effect of top and side leeward winds. Since these vines will never crop like the rest, it would make sense to replace them with additional, half-height, intermediate windbreaks.

In March, when I first tasted Rathfinny 2014, I was so amazed by its style that I tweeted, "It will piss off a lot of people, as the French winemaker Jonathan Medard is supposed to make English sparkling wine not Champagne!" At such an early stage, the aromatics can very quickly open up and shut down, and sure enough, on my next visit in June, Rathfinny 2014 was miserable. If that had been my first visit, the best I could have come away with would have been an open mind and a reserved opinion, but having seen a glimpse of what it is really like, I know that Rathfinny will not only be an important player, it will be a serious quality one, too. ■

Illustration by Dan Murrell