

No method in the madness

Tom Stevenson



An application to register a “British Fizz” PDO and PGI for sparkling wines produced exclusively from grapes grown in England and Wales has set a cat among the pigeons in the UK wine trade. The application was not really intended to create a new name for English and Welsh sparkling wine but to prevent the word “British” from being used for sparkling wines made from imported grape must or concentrate at the very time that English sparkling wines are establishing a reputation on export markets. It is difficult enough for British consumers to understand that so-called British wine can be made from imported grape juice or concentrate without confusing the issue abroad.

Rightly enough, the Duchess of Cornwall, who is president of the United Kingdom Vineyard Association (UKVA), expressed a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the term British Fizz but, unfortunately, suggested that the industry should “have another think,” which encouraged the press to promote the idea of a new name.

Such a call has popped up a few times over the past 25 years but was given the royal seal of approval in May 2011, when the duchess was quoted as finding it “so annoying” that English sparkling wine could not be called Champagne “when it is Champagne” (oops!).

Two years later I was at the opening of Hambledon Vineyard’s new winery when the duchess suggested, “Everyone ought to put their heads together and find a new English name for sparkling wine.” Oh, dear. Admittedly, there was a time when I was in favor of an alternative generic appellation for English sparkling wine, but that was for the very same outdated reason that Cava and Cap Classique were invented: The dire quality of sparkling wine produced outside Champagne had so tarnished the term “sparkling wine” that even the Champenois prostituted their own appellation in Argentina and Brazil where they made and sold domestic “Champagne.” Since then, however, the

quality of non-Champagne fizz has soared to the extent that “sparkling wine” has no negative connotations whatsoever for consumers, making it pointless and pretentious to look for a new name. It would be as naff as American Champagne. I do hope that the Duchess of Cornwall comes to realize this and publicly calls off the search.

The UKVA is also at fault because it did not carry through its own strategy to its logical conclusion. I am certain that there was no intention in the UKVA’s application to promote a new generic name, if only because the author of the document, Bob Lindo of Camel Valley, has always adhered to the belief that brands, not generic names, sell wine, but I fear that if this application goes through, some producers will inevitably take advantage of it one day to sell British Fizz, which will sow the seeds of confusion. The problem of the uncertain provenance of British wines was at the top of the agenda at the very first meeting of the UKVA, and it has been on the agenda of every meeting since. So, if the application to register a British Fizz PDO and PGI was not intended to create a new name for English and Welsh sparkling wine, and if, as I have heard, the UKVA passed the PDO/PGI application unanimously, they should also have agreed to include in the rules of membership that the term “British” will never be permitted on the label. It would be madness otherwise, and if the application is accepted by both the UK government and the EU, the UKVA will own the PDO and PGI, so it will be up to them to control its use anyway.

Merret’s method?

While a new name for English sparkling wine would be an unnecessary step backward, a new name for the sparkling wine *method* would be most welcome. As readers of this column know, English vintners were the first to add sugar and yeast to create a second fermentation (Christopher Merret, The Royal Society,

1662), whereas the French did not start making a sparkling form of Champagne until c.1698, and even that was the product of a single fermentation—that is, bottling before the fermentation had completed, as in *méthode rurale*. It took the French 175 years after Merret to record the first deliberate second fermentation (Jean-Baptiste François, *Traité sur le Travail des Vins Blancs Mousseux*, Châlons-sur-Marne, 1837).

Consequently, to describe the process of a second fermentation as *méthode Champenoise* is, to say the very least, misleading. If English sparkling-wine producers want to write themselves into the history books, they should take legal action to remove *méthode Champenoise* from the EU’s statute book. Although this term was replaced by *méthode traditionnelle* more than a quarter of a century ago, EEC Regulation 2333/92 still permits its use for Champagne. As I have seen such usage only once, a court case to deny Champagne this privilege would have no material effect on the Champagne industry. But a legal battle to have the term *méthode Champenoise* replaced with, say, “Merret’s method” or “English method” should repay the lawyers’ fees many times over in terms of the publicity it would generate for English sparkling wine!

What better way to finish here than with an English sparkling-wine story? Although Merret referred to “all sorts of wines,” Champagne obviously proved most popular because just 14 years later George Etherege referred to “sparkling Champaign” in *The Man of Mode*. But an intriguing quote uncovered by Victor Keegan in 2014 infers that the earliest English sparkling wine could have dated from the same era. In *The Compleat Vineyard* (William Hughes, London, 1663), which discusses wine-producing vineyards in Kent, Essex, and the west of England, the author asks, “If the wine be not brisk, how shall we make it without the addition of Sugar, Vinegar, Vitriol to sparkle or rather bubble in the Glass?” ■