



A bumper crop: Seyval Blanc grapes used in the Camel Valley sparkling brut



Bob Lindo with a glass of the award winning wine Camel Valley Brut 'Cornwall'

Sparkling future for English wine

English wine is going from strength to strength with routine analysis playing an important role in building the quality

In Focus last spoke to winemaker Sam Lindo of Camel Valley wines at the end of 2008 when he described how the growing season had been a particularly hard and how rapid wine analysis had helped him maintain quality despite having to use grapes affected by a cold wet summer.

Thankfully, the 2009 season has been much kinder, especially during flowering in June which is critical for a good year in England. "We've had a tremendous crop here as have other growers across England," says Lindo.

Today, there are over 400 producers in England. Although these are not all commercial businesses, increasing investment is strengthening the foundations of professional winemaking while achievements by producers like Camel Valley are keeping the English wine scene in the international spotlight.

Camel Valley won a gold medal in the 2008, 26th International Wine Challenge

(IWC) for their Bacchus still white wine and a trophy as well to squash into their already crowded awards cabinet. Lindo remarks: "When you think that there are around 10,000 wines worldwide, winning one of the 300 hundred or so medals available is a pretty difficult thing to achieve wherever you are in the world, let alone England."

France retained its top gold medal status for the competition with a total of 49 medals closely followed by Australian and Portugal. But English wines are catching up fast winning a record 24 medals. An IWC gold medal was won by Camel Valley in 2005 for their sparkling white Brut 'Cornwall' – the only gold for a sparkling wine awarded to a wine outside Champagne.

The awards are mirrored by strong sales which dispel any doubts that some may still have about the credibility of English wine. According to Lindo though, issues

such as image have never been a problem. The main challenge is still the number of grapes available. "In the last six to seven years yield has been improving and is not far off what you would expect from New Zealand, so we are getting there," he says. Figures available from the industry show the year on year variations. Over a million bottles of quality white wine were produced in 2006 but this was down to 444,533 in 2008.

Despite limitations on yield, English winemakers appear to have found a winning formula based on production of high quality and sought after award winning wines, mainly whites and in particular sparkling wines as well as soft, unique reds – all of which take on unique characteristics from the mild climate and cool growing season. In this way, producers like Camel Valley can thrive and afford investment in high quality buildings and equipment to secure even better results.



“English wines are a great alternative to Champagne,” says Sam Lindo.

Technology for tracking and improving quality

An example of the adoption of new technology is in the use of the OenoFoss™ wine analyser at Camel Valley where it is firmly established as part of the routine production.

There were some initial doubts about the reliability of the results with the new instrument because they did not always match laboratory results based on traditional wet chemistry. But it turned out that it was the wet chemistry that was inconsistent. “The problem was due to different people doing wet chemistry and getting different results, whereas different people using the OenoFoss will always get a consistent result,” says Lindo.

Because it is so quick and easy to use and requires such a small sample, the new instrument has also allowed him to look at the evolution of grapes by sampling every

day. “That’s something we could never do, because in order to collect enough juice for tests with wet chemistry, you need to collect quite a lot of grapes,” he says and adds: “I didn’t realise the potential of routine analysis until the OenoFoss experience – having the FOSS, I have learned so much extra than before.”

The experience fits with Lindo’s largely self taught approach. He sees practical experience as vital for learning the art of winemaking describing his work experience at a large producer in New Zealand as the most valuable experience he has had.

More formal training is also available however to budding winemakers. A specialist unit at Plumpton college in South East England provides viticulture education and training at a new winery completed in 2005.

Analysis is an important aspect of the curriculum and the college is currently assessing an OenoFoss analyser for potential use in the winery. Winemaker and lecturer at Plumpton, Peter Morgan says: “Analysis is vital for winemakers. No aspirant winemaker can expect to make quality wines without such knowledge.”

Growth industry

Graduates of the college and experienced hands alike can all look forward to the future, it seems. According to most indications, the climate is becoming more suitable for grape growing, a lively niche market has been established and modern technology promises improved quality management. The unassuming rolling green pastures of Southern and middle England have become a rare hotspot of steady development in an unsettled global industry.

Lindo is certainly upbeat, predicting even better wine and more good producers leading to a doubling of available wines in three or four years. England may even become an exporter with domestic consumers unable to drink the increasing volume.

His optimism is well founded. Camel Valley has just had its best ever year for sales. “English wines are a great alternative to Champagne,” he says. “With more people staying at home for their holidays, this year has been good for tourism too.” ■

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English wine

There are around 400 English vineyards producing around 2m bottles per year but with significant yearly variations according to the growing season. The largest vineyard is 250 acres at Denbies winery in Surrey on the outskirts of London.

White: Traditional English white wines often have floral bouquets and a refreshing high acidity

Reds: Once thought impossible they vary from light to mellow and even full-bodied.

Sparkling: English sparkling wines are a great success with some offering serious competition to the Champagnes.

Source: The marketing association of the English wine industry

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