

FT Weekend Magazine

Jancis Robinson Wine

Grape Britain



There can be no doubt that the quality of the wine produced from vineyards in England and Wales is better than it has ever been. The problem is what to call it. A single name would be awfully helpful.

English and Welsh Wine is a bit of a mouthful. The usual solution would be to call it British Wine, as so many careless commentators have. But that's a term reserved for a particular concoction made from reconstituted imported grape concentrate, often for cheap copies of fortified wines. Very different from the piercing, hedgerow vitality of a wine made from freshly picked grapes grown on these shores.

You might think that UK Wine could be a suitable alternative and, theoretically, it could be used on labels, except a certain political party has arguably tainted that umbrella term. Certainly it isn't used much. When the several organisations representing wine produced in the UK got together to form one big promotional body, they decided to call it Wine GB, sounding distinctly athletic.

The official label designations are English Wine or Welsh Wine, so long as they meet a set of criteria carefully negotiated with the EU, in order for them to qualify as a "quality wine". English Quality Sparkling Wine, for example, is generally made from the same grape varieties that grow in Champagne, using the same winemaking method. This means that Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are by far the UK's most-planted varieties.

If the wine is made from grape varieties that do not belong to the common European *Vitis vinifera* species, which is responsible for more than 95 per cent of all wine made, it has to be labelled as an English or Welsh Regional Wine or Varietal Wine, supposedly inferior categories. Because the British Isles are cooler and wetter than most European wine regions, early-ripening hybrids of *vinifera*



As imagined by Leon Edler

with other vine species were grown widely in the late 20th century. The hybrid Seyval Blanc, for example, is still the fifth most-planted vine variety and would not qualify as an English or Welsh Quality Wine, which is generally limited to wines made from *vinifera* grapes.

But complex early-ripening hybrids created in the 1960s and 1970s to withstand vine diseases and reduce reliance on agrochemicals - notably Regent and Rondo grapes for red wines and Solaris for whites - are reckoned to produce wine good enough and to be sufficiently beneficial to the environment to have been given what is in effect honorary *vinifera* status by the EU. They are

'Gone are the days when English wine was dominated by those with a superfluous pony paddock'

increasingly popular in England and Wales - as well as in the burgeoning vineyards of the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.

One sign of the potential of English wine is the investment it has attracted, not just from two champagne houses, Taittinger and Pommery, but from a wide range of those with sufficient financial nous to have made fortunes in other spheres. Rathfinny, near Brighton, and Woodchester, in Gloucestershire, are two examples of substantial British-owned wine operations funded on the back of financial careers. Gone are the days when English wine was dominated by those who tried out viticulture in a superfluous pony paddock.

Another is that there have already been successful attempts to create more specific geographical appellations. The Lindo family of Camel Valley, in Cornwall, has managed to register Darnibole, where their Bacchus grapes are ▶

Plucky English sparkling wines

These wines stood out in a blind tasting last November when compared with Champagne's finest prestige cuvées.

- Coates & Seely, La Perle Blanc de Blancs 2009, 770.60 Norwegian krono/Vinmonopolet state monopoly
- Nyetimber 1086 Brut NV, £119.50 Whitebridge Wines, also The Finest Bubble, The Oxford Wine Co, Hedonism, Harrods and others
- Nyetimber 1086 Rosé NV, £139.50 Whitebridge Wines, also The Finest Bubble, The Oxford Wine Co, Hedonism, Harrods and others
- Nyetimber Classic Cuvée NV, £25 D&D Wine and very widely available
- Ridgeview Rosé de Noirs 2014, £35 GP Brands; £44 The Wine Society



Stockists from Winesearcher.com. Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com

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grown for still wine, as an official EU designation of origin. And, partly thanks to the initiative of Mark and Sarah Driver of the vast Rathfinny estate, Sussex is also now a Protected Designation of Origin for both still and sparkling wines.

Hampshire, another major wine-producing county, has swathes of chalk, similar to much of Champagne's most admired territory. Here, vigneron's efforts have been focused on organising group tastings and vineyard tours for the press. Simon Robinson, chairman of Wine GB, is based in Hampshire and his Hattingley Valley wine operation already exports almost a third of its production.

Tourism and exports were the two major themes of Robinson's speech at the Wine GB dinner in Vintners' Hall a month ago, when he described a "seismic change" affecting the industry. There are now 2,888ha of vineyards in England and Wales, nearly 350 of which were planted last year. The whole picture has evolved, from the under-ripe still wines based on Germany's least exciting grape varieties of the 1970s to sparkling wines with confidence to challenge not just supermarket champagnes but the likes of Krug, Cristal and Dom Pérignon.

Many producers depend on local tourists and farm-gate sales. Like the wines themselves, there are signs that English wine tourism is getting more sophisticated. Tourism is a major part of Rathfinny's plans, for example. Denbies in Surrey has long marketed itself as a tourist

destination; it is one of several wineries, along with Camel Valley and Hush Heath, near Tonbridge, to offer bed as well as board. Chapel Down of Kent welcomes 60,000 visitors a year and has opened an outpost in King's Cross, London, for a gin distillery, also with restaurant. High Clendon in Surrey was awarded best "cellar door" at the last International Wine Challenge.

Vineyard trails are the order of the day, and I was amazed to hear Robinson claim that a Yorkshire wine trail was on the cards. Vine-growing as far north as Yorkshire is still a struggle but the exceptional warmth of last year must have put a spring in the step of all English and Welsh vigneron's.

In 2017 frost hit English (and Welsh) vineyards as badly as the rest of Europe, reducing the crop to just six million bottles. But in 2018 enough grapes were harvested to fill 15.6 million bottles, inspiring many an order for extra tanks. Instead of the usual concern that the grapes wouldn't ripen fully, the 2018 crop was ripe enough, by all accounts, to make very respectable still wine. (Tarter, less ripe grapes are ideal for sparkling wines.) I look forward very much to tasting the results.

Perhaps global warming will see the vine continue its spread northwards to such an extent that Scottish and Northern Irish wine will become a commercial reality? If so, a national name for its produce really will be needed. **FT**

More columns at ft.com/jancis-robinson

MY ADDRESSES — BUENOS AIRES

DIEGO CARDOSO, CHEF



I was born and raised in Buenos Aires, where my memories are of big indulgent lunches with family and relaxed dinners with friends. It's where my love of cooking began. BA has since become a melting pot of cultures and cuisines - there's so much to try.

— **Bar Napolés** in San Telmo is a good spot for lunch. What started as a speakeasy behind an Italian deli soon transformed into a large bar and restaurant. Settle in with a cocktail and a bowl of fresh pasta.

— For a casual bite, visit **Chori** in the Palermo district. No asado (barbecue) is complete without a good **choripán** (above left), an Argentine chorizo sandwich, with chimichurri (a classic South American herb, chilli and garlic sauce).

— **Proper** (above right), also in Palermo, is great for casual dining. You can pick from a range of "small plates", such as haricot bean purée with an almond and pumpkin seed mole, while gazing at the large wood-fired oven in the open-plan kitchen.

— At the other end of the scale, hidden away in El Centro, is **Aramburu Restaurant**. It celebrates local indigenous ingredients in a fine-dining tasting menu from chef Gonzalo Aramburu. Expect gastronomic creativity, from scallops encased in foam to popcorn semifreddo.

— Finally, no one should come to Buenos Aires without trying steak. Competition is fierce for the title of top **parrilla** but Palermo's **Don Julio** is a long-standing favourite in this saturated market.

Diego Cardoso is chef-director of Harry's Dolce Vita and Harry's Bar in London; harrysdolcevita.com; harrys-bar.co.uk

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