

WSET Advanced Certificate UKVA Scholarship, 2007

I arrived, as instructed for a days grape picking, at 9am at the Setley Ridge Vineyard, Brockenhurst to a very warm welcome, a cup of tea by a small log bonfire. We all introduced ourselves as we waited for the final pickers to arrive and Paul the vineyard owner gave us all a briefing on how to avoid getting cut using the secateurs and how he would like us to work in pairs sweeping through the vineyard harvesting this years grapes.

I worked with Roger Marchbank of the UK Vineyards Association (UKVA) and as we picked our way through the Seyval, Schonburger, Regent, Triomphe and Rondo varieties he gave me not only a very interesting insight into English wine but also a lot of detail about grape picking in general. Throughout the picking the grapes were taken in loads, on the back of the truck, to the pressing shed where they were pressed as quickly as possible. After the picking I was invited into the shed where Roger showed me the various pieces of equipment - press, bottling machine etc. He also gave me a demonstration of some of tests that are carried out in order to ascertain sugar levels.

The Setley Ridge Vineyard as a business model seems to work very well. Not only do they have a vineyard to produce quality English wine, but they use the site as a wedding venue with full catering to supplement income and introduce the vineyard to a wider audience and boost the vineyards reputation. Also at the entrance to the vineyard is an excellent shop that is well stocked not only with their own wines but with other local produce. They also have regular business from overseas coach tours and conduct tours of the vineyard; invariably these guests spend money in the shop afterwards.

Sadly in 2007 the harvest was not fantastic, at least 50% down on the 2006 harvest so as a business they still have great and viable opportunities for income. The last 4 years have been excellent for the majority of English wine makers. This year the vines seemed to thrive in April due to the fine, dry and sunny weather. However, in the summer many areas experienced high levels of rain that will have affected many vineyards. In short I think that the 2007 vintage will produce quality wine, but may be not in the quantities of previous years.

With approximately 400 vineyards in England producing about 2 million bottles per year it is small but gradually increasing enterprise in the UK. The perception of English wine is gradually being changed in the general public's psyche. Marketing initiatives such as English Wine Week have more and more coverage each year and English wines are promoted on mainstream television programmers, on the BBC, ITV and in the national press. In particular English sparkling wine creates a real buzz and rightly so! In the UK we drink 5 times more sparkling wine than in the United States and considering we have a fifth of their population, that is significant. So there is clearly a market for quality sparkling wines and the English wine makers are really stepping up to the plate and producing wines that compare very well, and sometimes exceed the quality of those created by their French counterparts in Champagne.

The climate, geology and the skill of wine makers in England, particularly in the South are some of the contributing factors that seem to make such superb products. English wines are available by well respected retailers and merchants such as Bibendum, Berry Brothers and Rudd and Waitrose making these wines accessible to the public and can be found on some top restaurant wine lists such as Gordon Ramsays. The experts clearly see English wine as a quality product and this is just creating more and more awareness and increasing interest and popularity. It is the case that most English wine is sold at the cellar door, but I am sure that as the number of larger players in the market increase this will only help to increase supply and make it more available to the general public. It is just a shame that currently there just is not enough supply to meet the ever-growing demand!

It is true to say that there are a number of 'hobby' wine makers in the UK, however there are also some serious players such as Denbies, Chapel Down, Nyetimber and Ridgeview to name a few. Their wines have won not just national recognition but numerous wines have awards at the International Wine Challenge. There has been a great improvement over recent years to improve both viticultural and vinification techniques in English wine, combined with increased investment in some of these wine estates has helped produce wines of the highest quality.

It remains to thank not only WSET for the arranging the opportunity of the Scholarship but to Roger Marchbank and the UKVA for organising the case of English wine and the days grape picking. I know that there are more dates for the diary Roger has planned and I am looking forward to those with anticipation. I have so far, had a wonderful opportunity to learn so much about the English wine industry and have developed a real passion for the wine that we can produce in our own country. We have on sale English wines from Chapel Down on our wine list and am doing my best to spread the word among friends and contacts within the drinks industry.

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