

England: the new old world producer
After years as a running joke for smug southern Europeans, English wine is being taken seriously, says Stephen Moss

Stephen Moss
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'Are you Christopher Ann?' I ask a tall, grey-haired man in a beige jacket. I had been told to look for a man in a beige jacket. He laughs. "No, Christopher is short, red-faced and ..." He can't think of a polite word so traces the outline of a curved stomach with his hand. A helpful picture of a bon vivant and oenologist.

Ann, who happily I find shortly afterwards, is the eminence rosé of English wine. He launched the English wine festival in 1975 and here it is - in its 33rd year - at its new home in Glynde Place, near Lewes in Sussex, joining forces with the Glynde Food and Drink Festival in a tranquil, country-house celebration of the good life. English wine was almost an oxymoron when Ann set out on his pioneering way, but now there are 350 vineyards in England, 70 wineries, 2,000 acres of vines under cultivation, and even the French are looking to buy land in southern England to make champagne. Not, of course, that it can be called that, but connoisseurs reckon English fizz can compete with the best France has to offer.

Ann and five other experts, under the chairmanship of wine writer Charles Metcalfe, have hidden themselves in a small office to decide on the best in show. Dozens of bottles, wrapped in polythene, are lined up on tables, surrounded by ledgers and flow charts. They invite me to join them, perhaps not realising the staggering depth of my oenological ignorance. They are coming to the end of the judging, and the spittoons are hideously full. I arrive as they are assessing eight reds - because of the relative coolness of the climate, English reds are not quite the quality of the whites, but they're not bad. "You've joined us for the most challenging sector of the English wine industry," says Metcalfe. "Just beware 302." Each bagged-up bottle has a number, against which the judges assign points. Poor 302 has been deemed a nul pointer. They don't have any more wine glasses, so I have to drink out of a tall glass. And I can't bring myself to rinse the wine round in my mouth and spit it out, so end up swallowing too much. They are all perfectly drinkable - even the hated 302. I fear my nose may not be the most discriminating.

Ann gives me a running commentary on the progress in English wine during his 30-odd years selling it, drinking it and evangelising on its behalf. "We've seen a dramatic change," he says. "Eight or nine years ago, we wouldn't have had a single red. Two years ago a red, the 2002 Sandhurst Estate Pinot Noir from the Chapel Down Winery, was wine of the show."

I've missed out on the sparkling wine, dry whites, medium whites and rosés, but I get to taste all the category winners when they are brought back into the room to judge best in show. Even I can tell the fizz is top-notch. The whites are very quaffable, and only the rosé disappoints. We've had some pretty good wines today, says Metcalfe.

Six wines in the dry white category which I would be perfectly willing to drink and two worthy winners. Fizz equally - some cracking wines. Rosé we struggled a bit, we found one that was reasonable, the 2006 Gribble Bridge Rose from Biddenden Vineyard, but the rest were shocking.

When the numbers are added up, there is a clear winner - a sparkling wine from the nearby Breaky Bottom vineyard, which is run by a charming, ruddy-cheeked Anglo-French eccentric called Peter Hall. He has been cultivating vines on six acres in the South Downs since 1974- placing him in the vanguard in the resurgence of English wine - and his award of best in show is greeted with delight by his fellow viticulturalists. After the prize-giving, Hall, Ann and I grab a bottle of the winning fizz, a snip at £17.50, and go to celebrate in the late-September sun, stretched out on the lawn beyond the tented village in which visitors to the festival are sampling wines and scoffing wild boar burgers. How did you come to start a vineyard? I ask Hall. "Alcoholism," he replies, quick as a flash. "I planted when there were only a handful of other vineyards, in a lovely place, a magic little fold in the Downs. I've always liked wine, twice a day without question, and no real qualification other than I just taste it every day to understand it."

Is English wine now truly arrivé? "For a long time people refused to take English wine seriously," he says, "And quite a few of them still don't. I call it plausibility. We were lacking it, despite our efforts and despite the good wines. What's going to happen now and in the future is that sparkling wine is going to be recognised as something that can be really good from the UK. We've got the same chalk and a similar climate to Champagne, and we now have some flagship vineyards here for fizz." Hall says the credibility gap is closing fast. "For the past 30 years, for many stiff-collared English gents it has been implausible. We make Stilton, Lancashire hotpot and Cornish pasties, but we don't do wine. But now they're having to swallow their words, because people like Jancis Robinson are standing up and saying - this is it!"

With that resounding declaration, Hall heads back to the marquee to sell his prize-winning wine to a growing snake of eager customers, and I must go and rest my throbbing head. This wine-reporting beat is tougher than it looks. Maybe I can blame the dodgy 302.

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