

The Society's HOW TO BUY ENGLAND

Thanks to a combination of warmer, drier summers, better understanding of soils and micro-climates and water tables, and heavy and clever investment in vineyards and wineries, English wines are now better than ever.

There are now more than 400 vineyards planted totaling some 1,500 hectares, with a 75% increase in the last six years alone. Because of our northerly latitude and maritime island climate, site selection is crucial. Not surprisingly, the majority of vineyards are found in the southern counties of Sussex, Kent, Gloucester and Hampshire though there are some found as far north as Yorkshire.



Styles of wine

English wine producers as a whole continue to make major improvements to their wines, but it is the producers of premium sparkling wines which have received the most accolades in recent years, blazing a trail for the industry as a whole to be given the serious attention it deserves.

Sparkling wine

This is a major growth area for the UK with our climate well-suited to the production of sparkling wine which accounts for 15% of total output. But it is the premium, bottle-fermented wines that have made the rest of the world sit up and take notice. Sussex and the South Downs are perfect for growing the classic mix of Champagne grapes, chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier. The South Downs are actually on the same geological formation (limestone on top of a sandstone belt) that continues down through the east of France to Champagne. The best English sparkling wines give the Champenois a good run for their money and are better than many a mediocre Champagne. We currently buy top-quality premium sparklers from Nyetimber in West Sussex, who with 400 acres are the largest in the UK, and Ridgeview in Ditchling Common, Sussex.

Dry white

Reflecting changing tastes, English wines are increasingly made on the drier side, helped along by warmer summers and improved techniques in vineyard and winery. Still dry white wines show a natural acidity and crispness in their youth. They tend to have a certain nettley, hedgerow freshness about them that is peculiarly English and most attractive. For many years we have followed the wines of Three Choirs in Newent Gloucester, one of England's most significant and well-established producers. Their Midsummer Hill and Stone Brook whites are exclusive to us. From the other side of the country, Chapel Down in Tenterden Kent, have supplied us for some years with beautifully crafted single varietal wines carefully blended from hand-picked grapes from a number of vineyards.

Rosé & red

A style that is also increasing in popularity and one at which the UK can excel, rosé again shows well in its youth, often with attractive strawberry aromas and just a hint of sweetness to balance out the acidity. Three Choirs Rosé has long been popular with members. Its ability to partner a wide variety of foods from summer picnics to mild curries is a bonus. Reds are a minority as they tend to sometimes lack the necessary ripeness to allow them to show at their best, but advances are being made here too as producers experiment with different varieties and vineyard sites to find which ripen best here. Front-runners are dornfelder, rondo and pinot noir (see below) but at the moment, none has impressed sufficiently and prices are rather high so we have not yet selected any to offer to members.

Wine labelling

English wines are produced and labelled under a Quality Wine Scheme which was established in 1992. They are classified in ascending order as table wine, regional wine or quality wine.

Grape guide

Faced with a blank canvas, what should a grower of English wine plant? Many of the varieties planted have German origins, partly because it was originally German-trained winemakers who helped UK growers with advice and expertise. It was also felt that these varieties would have better success in such a northerly latitude and, in the 1970s, when there was a resurgence of wine growing in this country, German wines were in their heyday. It is vital to choose early-ripening varieties with good resistance to fungal disease; many of those that have had success are in fact hybrids, again developed in Germany.

Today, there is a patchwork of a multitude of different varieties found in the vineyards of England and Wales. With one or two notable exceptions, these are generally blended together to create wines with a real point of interest and difference from those found elsewhere in Europe. As many of the grapes will be unfamiliar to members and because they rarely appear on their own, so may be difficult to get to know, we provide the principal characteristics below.

The following are the main grape varieties grown in England and Wales

Whites

Auxerrois

With low acidity, can add body to blended wines. Used as a base wine for many cheaper sparkling wines. Bacchus: Strong and distinctive with an aromatic flavour and quite high sugar content. Regularly used as a single variety, can take on sauvignon blanc characteristics and when particularly ripe leans towards a Sancerre. The third most widely planted variety in England.

Chardonnay

Classic grape variety grown mainly as an important part of the blend for the finest sparkling wines. Also used in still wines, usually blended. The most widely grown variety in England. Huxelrebe: Has a style rather reminiscent of the muscat grape, crops well with good sugar levels. Often used in blends for dessert wines.

Madelaine Angevine

Light and fruity, with a pronounced muscat bouquet and palate. Low in acidity and therefore usually blended with higher acidity grapes.

Muller-thurgau

Was among the most widely grown varieties in the 1980s now slightly out of favour. Early ripener, but can be a poor cropper. Medium acidity.

Optima

First registered in the early 1970s an early ripening variety capable of reaching high natural sugars and therefore most suitable for dessert wines.

Orion

Introduced to England in 1984, one of a new generation of hybrid varieties bred for wine quality and disease resistance. It is particularly fruity and aromatic and slowly increasing in usage.

Ortega

Particularly suits the English climate, planted quite widely. Produces full flavoured wines with high natural sugar, often used in 'late harvest' dessert wines.

Phoenix

Again a recent hybrid particularly bred for quality and disease resistance. Rather bacchus-like in style, can lean towards a sauvignon blanc in character.

Pinot blanc

Often likened to chardonnay, ripens well and can produce particularly full fruit flavours. Good cropper.

Reichensteiner

A popular variety in England, ripens early, usually used in a blend in both still and sparkling wines having good sugar levels.

Schonburger

Produces really good quality wine, low acidity but with high sugar levels that give a hint of gewürztraminer. When fully ripe has a pink tinge, and eats well as a table grape.

Seyval blanc

Fourth in volume production in English vineyards. Reliable variety with crisp acidity, takes to oak ageing well, also ideal for sparkling wines.

Siegerrebe

Early ripening, small berried and aromatic with elements of muscat and gewürztraminer. Generally used to bolster less distinctive grapes in a blend.

Reds

Dornfelder

First appeared in England in the late 1980s. Can produce fresh wines more in the style of gamay than cabernet sauvignon.

Pinot noir

A noble grape variety that is of course the classic grape for red Burgundy. In England it is an important element in a blend for the best sparkling wines, it is the second most widely planted and is particularly suited to oak ageing.

Pinot meunier

The other red grape element of top sparkling wines. Although grown in England for the last 40 years or so, it has never shone as a single variety wine.

Regent

New generation of hybrid variety that is starting to show real promise in England. Low acidity. Rondo: Has adapted to English conditions well. Produces wines with good colour and style, blends well, sometimes likened to a cross between tempranillo and syrah.

Triomphe

Originally known as Triomphe d'Alsace. Yields well and ripens early. Has low acidity and high sugar levels, probably best blended.

The Wine Society is a mutual organisation, owned by and selling only to its members. Since it was founded in 1874, The Society's aim has been to source the best possible wines for members, seeking neither to maximize growth nor profits. To find out more call 01438 741177 or visit thewinesociety.com

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