

INTERNATIONAL VOICES

Roger Dagorn, sommelier at Chanterelle, New York City
www.chanterellenyc.com

'English sparkling wine in restaurants? I haven't seen any in New York. But when you think of the soil and the climatic conditions, I don't think it is such an off-the-wall premise. You have my curiosity, now I am dying to try one!'

Ronan Sayburn, executive sommelier for Gordon Ramsay's restaurants, and his New York venture, Gordon Ramsay at London
www.gordonramsay.com

'I'd always sneered a bit at English wine, but we're going to have some on the list in New York. We'll have Chapel Down's single vineyard Bacchus Reserve and its sparkling rosé, both by the glass. And we'll have the Nyetimber white sparkling. They're great wines.'

Gerhard Retter, sommelier at Restaurant Lorenz, Hotel Adlon, Berlin.
www.hotel-adlon.de

'Sparkling wine has the greatest significance and certainly the most prestige for English viticulture. It's also almost the only wine coming from England that the Continent is aware of. As sommeliers, we're always looking for new ideas to amaze our customers.'

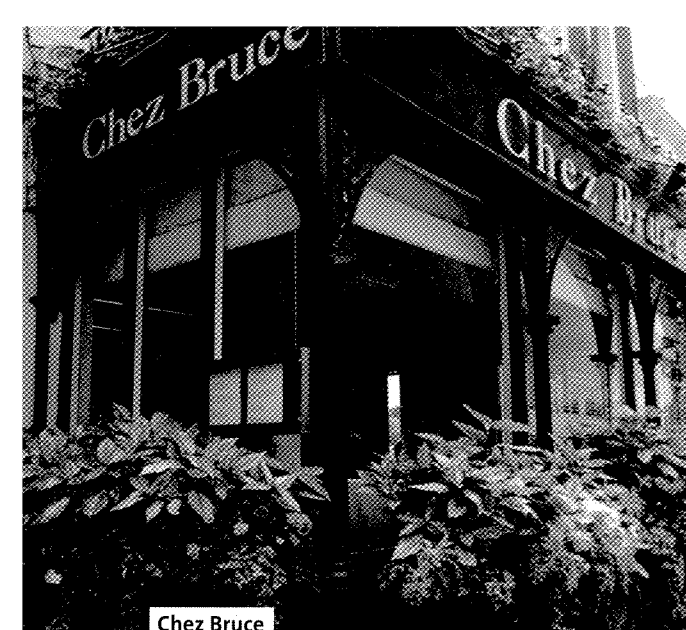
Rob Bigelow, master sommelier and director of wine, Bellagio Resort, Las Vegas.
www.bellagio.com

'I was sceptical. I just had not put wine production and England together in the same sentence before. And I was more than pleasantly surprised. I've been impressed by the English climate for growing sparkling wine grapes. I can't wait for them to be available in the States so I can put some bottles in the hotel and see what happens.'

Emile Jung, owner and Michelin-starred chef, au Crocodile, Strasbourg,
www.au-crocodile.com

On Nyetimber, Blanc de Blancs 2000: 'It's astonishing how this wine is made, I detect great technique, great savoir-faire. It's very dry, a serious wine, made by people with a feeling for beauty. A real challenger to Champagne.'

Geraud Tournier, head sommelier, three-Michelin starred Ledoyen, Paris.
 'English wine? I've never tasted it. Perhaps I'd have some on the list, but only if it was very good.'



Chez Bruce



The Dorchester



Restaurant Gordon Ramsay

WHAT DO THESE THREE RESTAURANTS HAVE IN COMMON?

They all serve English wine. But are they doing so out of professional objectivity, ethical concerns or blind patriotism asks **ANNE KREBIEHL**

Itruly believe in quality,' he says. 'It deserves to be on the list. Being a British restaurant, not supporting this would be a mistake.' Sitting in the dining room of Roast above the busy stalls of London's Borough Market, sommelier and wine buyer Sergei Gubars enthuses about English sparkling wines. Glasses of Ridgeview's Bloomsbury and Fitzrovia are lined up in front of us, as are samples of still English Bacchus and Pinot Noir that Gubars can't stop nosing. Sourcing fresh and seasonal ingredients from the famous market below, Roast's premise is to showcase the best of British produce. For Gubars this also includes English wines.

Finding England on any wine list is still rare, and only the more forward-thinking restaurants are starting to list wines from Sussex, Kent and Cornwall. But are they just waving a little Union flag from the bandwagon of provenance, sustainability and food-miles to suit an urban vogue? Or do their choices reflect the ever-improving standards of English winemaking?

Sparkling wines in particular have been beating the path towards more recognition. The clay and chalk soils of the South Downs, and better climatic conditions have turned England into a terroir with a striking

similarity to that of Champagne. The traditional varieties of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and Meunier ripen fully, and England's bottle-fermented answer to French fizz is slowly making it into consumers' consciousness.

Yet 'why don't you have more Champagne on the list?' is a question that Adam Laing, general manager and sommelier of Konstam at the Prince Albert is often asked. Konstam strives to serve food grown and sourced as near as possible to home. Extending this philosophy to wine, his is probably the only wine list in London really dominated by English wines. Nyetimber, Chapel Down and Denbies feature heavily. Laing's answer is that 'the wines I have will compare to or even beat any average Champagne. People are very sceptical when it comes to buying English sparkling wine but it only takes one sip, one smell. As soon as they try it, they understand.' Like Gubars, Laing deliberately serves English sparkling and still wines by the glass.

The award-winning and opulent cuvées of Nyetimber clearly spearhead movement. Their vintages are listed at eminently British establishments The Dorchester, Gordon Ramsay's eponymous Chelsea restaurant and various Conran eateries – but what about

Right: English sparkling wines are now listed in Michelin-starred restaurants. But are they up to the task?



English fizz elsewhere? Terry Threlfall, wine buyer and head sommelier at the Michelin-starred Chez Bruce in south London, also lists Nyetimber. While it is served mainly as an apéritif, he thinks it is very compatible with French-inspired cooking: 'English sparkling wine has wonderful, vibrant acidity which goes fantastically well with starters, tuna or our lighter fish dishes, even with the creamier dishes – it can cut right through them.' His customers like it, too: 'Even people who are Champagne lovers say they have been very, very impressed. It's a good sign for English bubbly if it can hold its own with Champagne.'

English bubbly has also found advocates among London's Asian restaurateurs. Christine Parkinson, group wine buyer for Chinese Michelin-starred hotspots Hakkasan and Yauatcha, explains there is no tradition, and therefore no received wisdom, of drinking wine with Chinese food. 'When we wrote the first list we decided that it was irrelevant, in a sense, where the wine came from. Wine would be on the list simply because it was great with the food. So we bought English sparkling wines on merit, and nothing else except merit. That is probably why we were fairly early adopters.' Camel Valley's fruity Pinot Noir Brut really matches Chinese flavours and is 'incredibly lively and vibrant – it has a real zestiness'. Parkinson also emphasises that 'wines which spend a longer time on their lees tend to work better with flavours like soy. They become more complimentary to the food.'

The fresh, bottle-fermented fizz of Breaky Bottom in East Sussex proved an interesting match for Japanese food, especially sushi and sashimi. Caroline Bennett, managing director of the Moshi Moshi chain of restaurants, wanted to 'follow the Japanese tradition of using only produce that is local'. 'The vineyards we've chosen are eight miles away from our Brighton restaurant. It could not be closer, really. We are bringing your local surroundings to your plate.' On the menu since July, these refreshing wines made from

the Seyval Blanc hybrid not only fit the local sourcing bill but are an ideal accompaniment to the subtle dishes: 'When you are literally just eating raw fish, with a touch of wasabi or maybe shiso and soy sauce, the depth of a really rich white Burgundy would be lost on something so simple. You need something cleaner, clearer and crisper that does not detract from the lack of layers in raw fish.'

For completely new discoveries in the English wine world, check out the heavenly La Fromagerie in Marylebone. Owner Patricia Michelson uses Will Davenport's biodynamic Limney Estate sparkling wine, made from Pinot Noir and Auxerrois, in her cheese tastings. While it goes wonderfully with Chaource or Comté, she particularly enjoys pairing it with English cheeses like Appleby's Cheshire or Golden Cross goats cheese from Sussex. 'Our customers really like it. They understand the sort of dryness that comes through, the lime and the chalkiness – it's perfect with English cheeses because all of that is coming through the cheese, too.'

While distribution, accessibility and price pose challenges to wine buyers, no one has an issue with quality; on the contrary, there is huge excitement, real joy and great anticipation. Parkinson sums it up: 'To make wine is one thing, but to make world-class wine in England is something else...'

Restaurants:

www.chezbruce.co.uk
www.hakkasan.com
www.konstam.co.uk
www.moshimoshi.co.uk
www.roast-restaurant.com
www.yauatcha.com
www.lafromagerie.com

Vineyards:

www.breakybottom.co.uk
www.camelvalley.com
www.davenportvineyards.co.uk
www.nyetimber.com
www.ridgeview.co.uk