

English sparkling wine: Forward and reserves

The English sparkling-wine industry now has sufficient reserve stocks to start producing Non-Vintage wines, says Anne Krebiehl MW—a sign of maturity in more ways than one

English sparkling wine has reached a tipping point. No, not the sudden oversupply and subsequent price crash gleefully predicted by doomsayers as new plantings came on-stream, but a new phase—an adolescence, even a coming of age. Since the first Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier vines were planted just over 20 years ago, English sparkling wines have come a remarkably long way, snapping up countless accolades in the process. Hitherto, most producers either harvested too little fruit or were under too much financial pressure to hold back reserve wines for blending. Generally speaking, they bottled everything and sold vintage-dated wines, on which almost all established players have built their reputation. Very few were in a position to build up reserves.

But that is now changing, and it spells the maturation of an industry that can no longer be described as fledgling. Some producers have already released NV blends; others are developing them or building reserves, while some newer players are entering the market with a Non-Vintage model firmly in mind. Increased plantings bearing fruit; two record-breaking harvests in a row (33,384hl in 2013 and 47,433hl in 2014, vis-à-vis a ten-year average of 22,352hl and a five-year-average of 28,315hl); long-term projects coming to fruition and reaching the market—all have coincided to help reach this tipping point. It is a sea change for English wine.

Under European law, any vintage-dated wine may contain up to 15 percent of wine from another year, but most English sparkling wines are true Vintages. In theory, of course, reserve wines allow for consistency across variable vintages, while adding

complexity and depth to the blend—in much the same way that a string quartet differs from a whole orchestra, even if either can include virtuoso performances. The decisions come down to cost, business model, and wine style. Two relatively new entrants—Exton Park Vineyard and Hambledon Vineyard, both in Hampshire—intend to focus on NV blends. Frenchwoman Corinne Seely, winemaker at Exton Park, who already has vintages in Bordeaux, Portugal, Tasmania, and fellow Hampshire vineyard Coates & Seely under her belt, says, “I’ve made wine in England for several years, so I have encountered different vintages here. The summers can be quite ‘sunny,’ if you forgive my understatement. Flowering often occurs only in July, so we are three to four weeks behind Champagne. Even if we share some of the same geology, we cannot really compare our climatic conditions. From my point of view as a winemaker, having vinified around the world for more than 20 years, it is not possible to make a Vintage every year in England.” Ian Kellett at Hambledon, ambitious and not afraid to ruffle some feathers, is equally outspoken: “We believe the reason that the world’s greatest sparkling wines are made in Non-Vintage styles is a qualitative factor rather than a volume-protection or mitigation exercise. We probably bring between 40 and 50 components to our *assemblage* process. Crucially, I think, the reason this matters for us is that in my opinion we’ve got by far the most experienced and capable sparkling-wine maker operating in England, Hervé Jestin. If you haven’t got a *chef de cave* who has made hundreds of millions of bottles of sparkling wine in his life, and therefore arguably doesn’t have the palate to be able to make the

best of all these tools, then I can see why you might conclude that it just costs money. But I’m absolutely certain that our wines are much more complete qualitatively because of the reserve wine.” Hambledon’s current releases—the Classic Cuvée NV and the Première Cuvée NV—are based on the 2010 and 2011 vintages. “So far, the wines are based only on two vintages,” explains Kellett, “but as each year is going by, we are adding more reserve. So, in 2015 we will have three years of reserve wine plus the harvest, so it’ll be a four-year blend, but that will increase over time.” Kellett aims to make “a very high Chardonnay-content, multi-year-blended, layered wine.” He wants to grow first-rate Chardonnay and then mitigate its “natural briskness with malolactic fermentation, judicious use of oak, and time.” Production is still small, at 200,000 bottles this year, but he has 74 acres (30ha) planted, with more to come to eventually produce a million bottles. Exton Park, on 55 acres (22ha) of newer vines, aims for an initial annual production of around 50,000 bottles with tiny vintage production—like 2,500 bottles of the just-released 2011 Blanc de Blancs. All the rest is kept in reserve. Seely thus sits on treasure. Both Hambledon and Exton Park have sufficient financial backing to do this. Seely acknowledges that her NV plans were a “gamble” for Exton Park owner Michael Isaac, while Kellett has it all written into his long-term business plan: “We probably have another five years of losing money,” he says.

A question of house style

Simon Robinson, chairman at Hattingley Valley Wines Limited, also in Hampshire, played it differently: “Obviously we could not make Non-Vintage wines in our first couple of years,” he explains, “but it has always been our intention to do so once reserves had built up sufficiently. We have just released our first Non-Vintage for particular markets and are planning to switch our Classic Cuvée to NV in the next year or so. However, we also plan to continue making Classic as Vintage when the quality of the wine in any year supports it. Rosé, Blanc de Blancs, and Kings Cuvée will be made as Vintage wines and only in years where quality is

Right: An English vineyard under a clear blue sky, which producers were hoping would hold for the 2015 harvest.

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good enough.” He agrees that the more widespread use of reserves represents a new phase for England, indicating “increasing sophistication and experience.” He thinks that “the ability to keep significant volumes of reserve wine certainly indicates a level of maturity and forward planning within the industry” but also cautions, “It is expensive to allocate tank capacity that can’t then be used for harvest; it creates different logistical challenges. It is still seen as a luxury to be able to keep reserve wines—and one that a significant number of wineries cannot yet contemplate.” Hattingley currently holds reserves from 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014 in tank to be blended with the 2015 harvest.

Nyetimber in West Sussex, England’s largest estate, with 375 acres (152ha) under vine, has quietly been working on an NV blend for years. Its first release is not expected until late 2016. Work began when head winemaker Cherie Spriggs and her winemaker husband Brad Greatrix both started at Nyetimber in 2007. “We realized that the thing we needed first for this long-term project was to start collecting reserve wines,” Greatrix explains. “So, every year we’ve been setting aside some reserve wines, beginning in 2007. When we thought we had enough reserves to create something sustainable, we bottled a Non-Vintage style in 2012, from the previous years’ reserves. This is still on the lees now.” This was based on rigorous experiments: “Of course, once you bottle your first NV, that establishes your style, and you set yourself on a path. We’re not producing NV in order to be able to buffer volumes. When people talk about reserve wines in England, they immediately think of smoothing out uneven years. That’s not our approach at all. We’ve created the NV in order to have a house style. This is a commitment. It needs to be of great quality in a reproducible style, something that we can achieve year on year.” The style they envisage is “that combination of complexity and finesse. We try to catch the wines at the right point of time on lees and disgorgement, so we’re carrying forward some fruit flavors. We’re only using estate fruit, so if you do all the work cultivating, why not show them off? Then there is the complexity from lees aging, but all with lightness and elegance.” Greatrix stresses that there is no recipe: “In England, the

vintage has a huge imprint, so even with our Vintage wines we alter the *assemblage* from year to year in order to bring some consistency of style. But that flexibility is going to have to continue in the Non-Vintage in order to achieve consistency because the years are so different." The more interesting question, though, is whether the creation of an NV style will change their Vintages—you cannot plunder one at the cost of the other. "I guess so," ventures Greatrix. "The main wine for Nyetimber will become a Non-Vintage, so Vintage wines will be produced when we can. But if NV is the main wine we become known for, we have to be careful not to produce Vintage wines at the expense of the Non-Vintage. So, yes, it will have an influence in that way. Before we had a Non-Vintage in the family, our main tool for consistency was selection, so that affects the quantity of wines we can produce." Of the Nyetimber Classic Cuvées 2009 and 2010, around 250,000 bottles each were released. They intend to grow production substantially.

Broadening the range

Others have produced NV blends to meet market demand. While keeping reserves requires capital, there can be advantages. Apart from smoothing out vintage variation and bridging supply, being able to add reserves may also mean that blends need less time on lees before release, more "youthful" releases may also appeal to a different market segment. Hilary Green—sales director at Hush Heath Estate in Kent, which introduced white and rosé Balfour 1503 NV blends more than a decade after their vintage-dated flagship Balfour Brut Rosé—says, "1503 was introduced in late 2014 with a launch directed at multiple retail and on-trade buyers. This Non-Vintage range reflects increasing market demand for accessibly priced English sparkling wine. After building the reputation of Hush Heath, we felt it was time to bring the Hush Heath name to a wider audience in a house style much like the Champagne model." Green acknowledges practicality, too: "Besides obvious complexity and flexibility of blending components, reserves will allow us to maintain production in smaller vintages and develop a house style we can emulate each year. It also allows us a more comprehensive range to offer the market." Annual production across the

range at Hush Heath currently stands at around 100,000 bottles.

"We are doing this to be able to meet the demand for English wine going forward, because the single-vineyard/single-vintage won't," says star winemaker Dermot Sugrue about Wiston Estate's NV-range in West Sussex. Annual production of its estate-grown Vintage cuvées is just between 8,000 and 13,000 bottles. "We have scaled up the Brut NV, which is on board P&O cruise ships, and the Blanc de Blancs NV." Fruit for the NV blends is sourced from contract clients he has worked with for years, making wine for them. He loves working with Chardonnay reserves: "I just love Chardonnay on chalk. It's thrilling and exuberant, has vigor and excitement. To make blanc de blancs in England, you have fantastically pure, linear wines that have an amazing ability to age. You can do so many things: the combination of chalk, a Coquard press, using old oak barrels and careful *dosage* to let the wines shine." Sugrue confesses that, initially, "The reserve wines were created by circumstance, because 2010 was such an abundant vintage. It actually gave enough fruit to be able to keep some reserve wine back. 2009 wasn't big enough; 2008, which was our first vintage here, certainly wasn't big enough; but in 2010 I kept 2,000 liters of reserve wine to give me some options the following year." Nonetheless, the initial, small NV release in 2013 was entirely based on 2009 fruit, just to scale the range. Sugrue wants NV and Vintage to be distinctly different but emphasizes that they present different challenges. "I want the Non-Vintage wines as liked by people as possible. We're not leaving them on the lees as long as the Vintage wines, which I want to be a bit idiosyncratic, a little bit special, a little bit geeky, if you like, because they are more sophisticated. I want them to express something individual." He believes, "The inevitable future in the English wine industry is to use reserve wines, but it's a massive challenge. It's about getting into a pattern of keeping wines back. It can only have a beneficial impact on the wines."

The opposite of Champagne

At Ridgeview in East Sussex, CEO Tamara Roberts is completely open-minded. The pioneering house recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of its

Bloomsbury Vintage cuvées and has hitherto almost exclusively released Vintage wines, currently about 300,000 bottles a year. Going down the Vintage route was almost a given. "It hasn't hindered us," says Roberts, who recalls the early days of her family's business in the 1990s. "We always thought, let's just see what we can do and how good this can be. I think it took us all by surprise. The key was to get as much volume as we could as quickly as possible into bottle, so we could start to penetrate the market. My parents invested their life and soul into this business. We had to make money. We didn't have the resource within the family to finance years and years of reserves." Today, naturally, the estate experiments, but its Vintage wines have a loyal following. "There is always that nervousness of not bottling because in three years' time we want to be ahead of the game," Roberts explains. "Those are hard decisions when you are growing a business. We have reserves, and I think it's something we'd like to continue. We have a style that we really cannot go a million miles away from, because people enjoy what we are doing, so we don't want to go and change it. All we want to do is enhance and tweak and add some new dimensions. We are definitely looking at it—but whether as a house, as a brand, we'll have a Non-Vintage, that isn't decided yet." She even thinks that if they were to introduce an NV for one of their cuvées, all named after London neighborhoods, "we might not even make a song and dance about it. Never say never. For us it comes down to quality and style. You cannot cut corners in this climate—you just can't." Even so, on the whole, she is convinced that "there will definitely be much more reserve wine in the industry in the coming five years." We as consumers thus have a lot to look forward to as England increasingly sends her wines across the globe. As for every quality sparkling wine, comparisons with Champagne are inevitable and endless. Exton Park's Corinne Seely has the last word: "In fact, England is the complete opposite of Champagne. They started by blending vintages and then achieved wonderful *millésimes*; England is the other way around." At the time of writing, everyone was happy with fruit-set of 2015—and praying for warm, sunny days in September and October.