

Renegades and cans: innovation in the UK wine industry

The UK winemaking industry has never been so exciting and disruptive. Max Lunn takes a look at three businesses upending tradition and cultural norms in winemaking and winedinking.

Although 2021 was a damp squib for UK winemakers, this summer's heat promises a haul of exuberant vintages. Market size for wine production in the UK is growing rapidly: current estimates put the total figure around £340M (by comparison the UK brewing industry is in the billions), with millions more acres of vines being planted each year. The ecosystem is now made up of over 800 vineyards and wineries, many of which populate the south-eastern counties of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. These counties are generally considered the epicentre of the UK's winemaking region, however, vineyards striate landscapes across Suffolk and Essex, and there are even grapes growing in cooler climes such as Wales and Scotland.

Climate change has had its part to play in the eruption in interest and investment over the last couple of decades. High profile French champagne house Taittinger acquired 500 acres of vines back in 2017, and Pommery has recently done the same by investing in a smaller plot in Hampshire. The similar chalky soils – when combined with the increasingly hot summers – means the UK can offer a product on a par with their French counterparts.

Winemaking in the UK has a chequered history. Although conceived of as a recent phenomenon, wine has been made for centuries in the British isles. Monks were some of the largest wine producers – using grapes, as well as damsons – but Henry VIII and the reformation put paid to that little hobby. Some Benedictine monks tried to revive this at Buckfast Abbey – make of that what you will.

Despite this relatively blank slate, however, English wine production is often disappointingly traditional. The prestigious face of English wines are the sparkling numbers, often made from the holy trinity of grapes – chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier – that Champagne houses have been using together for centuries. The likes of Nye Timber and Chapel Down have mimicked this combination with great success for their award-winning cuvees. Traditional method sparkling wine is the jewel in the crown in what is becoming an increasingly important sector of the UK economy.

Where it gets interesting, however, are those few businesses doing it differently: winemakers who are not concerned with aping tradition, but innovating how wine is made and tastes, as well as stripping back the cultural baggage of shaded chateaus and appellations.

Renegade

As their name suggests, *Renegade Urban Winery* is a business doing just that. Speaking to its founder Warwick Smith is just like speaking to any founder: he's got cash flow and logistics on his mind and lights up when I tell him I'd rather talk about business than grape varieties.

Founded in 2016, Warwick explains his philosophy is to make innovative wines in London from high quality grapes from the UK and Europe, but to not make them in traditional styles. He wants London, and the UK, to be a leading centre of experimentation. He mentions that the beauty of being in London – and away from vineyards – means he can throw away the antiquated rulebook. He cites the efficiency of cold-chain logistics and technological advances in winemaking, combined with a healthy disregard for appellation guidelines as being central to Renegade's mission.

Winemaking is a game of two halves Warwick explains: agriculture and production. He thinks that for too long there has been an overemphasis on the agricultural side:

'for the last few hundred years, that secondary

component has been swept under the carpet: the focus has all been on climate and terroir. Pictures of bottles ageing in cellars have romanticised wine – but that’s missing half of the product. Wine making is a completely different skill: it’s chemistry, it’s fermentation, filtration, temperature control, yeast strain selection, oak content... just thinking about the grapes is like going to restaurant, ordering soufflé and asking about the chicken that laid the eggs – whilst ignoring the chef’

Renegade’s modernism in approach is matched by their innovation in branding. The bottles take a bit of getting used to: the labels are made of horizontal strip images of peoples eyes, and they stare directly out at you. This is more than quirky marketing. Renegade – and other urban wineries – are doing something very ambitious. They are disrupting the expectation that wine is inextricably tied to place.

These wineries are terrorising terroir, and you can see why (first image). One of Renegade’s wines is made from Pinot Noir grapes from 3 different countries (Germany, Italy and England) and are then made in a city, miles away from any of the vineyards. Warwick does cede the brand is not going to appeal to the 63-year-old, South Kensington-dwelling, Burgundy drinking (Burgundy chino-wearing) drinker any time soon – but – the younger audience who have come of age in the era of craft beer are more responsive to this new approach.

Fitz

Disruptive UK winemakers wear their rebel status proudly: from the treacherous associations of ‘Renegade’ in London, we turn to the illegitimate flavours suggested by ‘Fitz’ down on the south coast – another winery which has received ‘a fair amount of flack’ from the UK traditionalists, in the words of its winemaker, Gareth Davies.

Gareth tells me about first reading about an advert – through the Plumpton

college grapevine – about someone wanting to set up a winery specialising in tank-method sparkling wine (known as the ‘Charmat’ method) and thinking how disruptive that would be: in both an economic and cultural sense. Like, Renegade, Fitz does not grow their own fruit, although they use only English grapes. For some context, the Charmat method is the simplest way to capture fermentation’s natural carbonation. It is widely used, most notably to make prosecco. It is different from the champagne method in that champagne has its second fermentation after being bottled. With the Charmat method, second fermentation takes one to six weeks, after which the fizzy wine is immediately filtered and bottled.

This is now Fitz’s claim to fame: they were the first UK winemaker to use the Charmat method, and produce English sparkling wine in this way. They spotted a gap in the market to produce a high quality, domestically produced sparkling wine, using English fruit – but at a lower price point for the consumer. This is made possible by the Charmat method, given the second fermentation is between ten days and two weeks for Fitz, unlike two to three years for champagne.

Inevitably, given Fitz’s diversion from tradition, we broach the topic of snobbery in the wine industry. Gareth recalls conversations he had early on with winemakers making traditional method fizz in the UK who accused him of devaluing the pedigree of English wine, and the over-sized influence traditional method wines have at WineGB, the national body for grape growers and winemakers. Gareth maintains he’s producing a quality product which caters to the people: prosecco – broadly more like Fitz than Champagne – is by far the most consumed sparkling wine in the UK. Fitz retails at about £20 a bottle, this is significantly less than the average price for UK traditional sparkling wine.

This (viti)-culture war crystallises in the recent news surrounding the introduction and discussion of PDOs in the UK wine industry. In essence, these are measures to protect and regulate the way wine is made in the UK. Notably, since June, Sussex Sparkling Wine now has official Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status, as approved by the Ministry for Farming, Fisheries and Food. These are European imports: they mimic the strict appellation guidelines that characterise winemaking regions such as Burgundy, which dictate which grapes you can use.

Gareth points out that although appellation guidelines are the bedrock of traditional winemaking, they are under immense pressure as more and more winemakers are deviating from tradition – happy to have their wines declassified. Again, changing climate conditions are driving this. Last year, Bordeaux addressed the issue head on by approving six new grape varieties to join their strict ranks, upending centuries of tradition.

Aside from the Sussex PDO, the UK doesn't have these rules. Gareth comments that it's 'very exciting we have the opportunity for experimentation, to play around with what we can actually do here'. On the question of a possible PDO for Charmat-made English wine, Gareth dismisses the idea saying PDOs 'aren't worth the paper they written on' – questioning why you would want to fix a process that doesn't have the prestige of 'champagne' and is still in exploratory phase.

Innovation in the UK wine industry is as much about disrupting the culture surrounding wine drinking, as the wine itself. Urban and other progressive wineries are seeking to change the conversation about wine: making it easier to understand, more affordable, and free of the gatekeeping assumptions regarding everything from food pairings to tasting notes. The 'natural wine' phenomena is part of this shift. As the food writer Tim Hayward recently wrote on the 'natural wine wars', '[W]e're not looking at new wines, we're looking at new drinkers... it's like drinking craft beer. If you like something, you don't buy a case; you chalk up a lovely experience and move on to the next one... No generational privilege involved, no history, just simple, in-the-moment enjoyment.'

Defy

One UK business which embodies much of this thinking and is literally repackaging how we drink and think about wine is Defy, which makes canned wine using Italian grapes. Defy's motto is simply 'respect for wine, not it's traditions'. Speaking to Leslie Owensby about his decision to found a brand of canned wine, he tells that me that 'cans are freedom'. He explains that if he fancies a Sunday tipple, he doesn't have to uncork a whole bottle which may sour by next Friday. His 250ml cans are also lighter than wine bottles, they take up less space and they're up-cycleable, compared with glass wine bottles which are recyclable but often end up as hardcore. Cans generally produce 60% less CO2 compared to their glass bottle equivalents.

The descriptions Leslie uses further amplify Defy's message: IT'S FROM ITALY, IT'S ORGANIC AND IT'S WET, accompanies his sparkling red wine cans. You won't find any discussion of grapes or tasting notes here: Leslie explains that consumers just aren't that interested, although he admits the fact the grapes come from Italy lends the brand a certain pedigree. The casual branding is very much 'take it or leave it (but I think you'll like it)'. The canned wine market is gathering pace, with a recent global valuation of £643M and a 13% compound annual growth rate.

Innovating in the UK wine industry is a balancing act: as these founders and many other businesses demonstrate, there is a real appetite to drink new wines in new ways. But there are also obstacles – both from industry traditionalists and older consumers. As a luxury good, wine is also a slow product: even those most receptive to new wines still expect high-quality goods, and ones that have emerged from love and dedication. As climate change and investment accelerates the industry in Britain, the most successful businesses will be the ones that tread a fine line between innovator and artisan.

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