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Leading English winemaker reveals the secrets of success behind his internationally acclaimed vintages and describes how the timely application of new technology saved the 2008 production from an exceptionally bad growing season.



As anyone who has taken a ‘sunshine break’ in England will testify, there is no such thing as an average summer. And someone who knows this far better than any rain-soaked tourist is award-winning winemaker Sam Lindo of Camel Valley Wines in Cornwall. He and his father have been making wine on a level with the best Champagne for twenty years and every season has been unique. But therein lies the secret of their success

English character

The winery was started by Bob Lindo in 1989 when he decided to convert eight acres of sheep pasture to vines. Two unusually hot summers in a row had left the grass bare so it was not a great sacrifice in terms of grazing area and as Sam says: “It was a lot more interesting than sheep.”

Turning the medium loam soil on the South-facing slope next to the Camel river was just the start of a long learning process for Bob who was then quite new to winemaking. Sam recalls how his father’s naivety was actually an advantage. “We never tried to make wine like anyone else because we didn’t know what anything else was,” he says. “We tried to do it our own way.” The approach proved to be right for the special conditions associated with English winemaking.

Sam explains how, in traditional winemaking regions, you can get a perfect year if everything –grape maturity, weather and picking –comes together at just the right time. In England there is never a perfect year because the capricious climate determines that grapes never quite achieve their full phenolic ripeness. The wine produced cannot match the strong mature flavours of more Southern counterparts, but nonetheless can compensate with other uniquely English characteristics.

Slow ripening is the key. The grapes take on the same aromatic characteristics as other fruits such as strawberries ripened naturally in an English garden under the alternating rain and sun of early June. It may be irritating when rain stops play during Wimbledon fortnight, but hey, those strawberries taste just great.

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The slow ripening of grapes retains subtle aromas that, correctly handled, can lead to spectacular results, especially for delicate whites and sparkling wines. For instance, the Camel Valley Brut won a gold medal at the International sparkling wine awards, 2005. Twelve gold medals were awarded in total with all the other eleven going to producers from Champagne. Sam has now taken over the running of the winery and was awarded UK winemaker of the year, 2007.

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The unique quality of Camel Valley wine fits perfectly with the seafood and fresh air culture in the south west corner of England typified by Rick Stein’s famous sea food restaurants. If you are visiting Cornwall you can still buy good old fish and chips, but now there is a refreshing note of sophistication in English seafood culture and the aromatic and crisp Camel Valley wines are a perfect complement. Production is in demand, with sparkling wines retailing at around £20.00 a bottle.

Investing in the future

Over the years the winery has built on business success, investing in technology and equipment to help meet specific goals. “We could always see what was preventing us from making better quality wines and could find the solution,” says Sam. Examples include a new crusher to help remove bitterness and a cooling system to retain more aromas. This forward looking approach proved especially important as they worked on the 2008 vintage.

“The weather during 2008 has been the worst on record,” says Sam. An unfortunate combination of frosts (which are extremely rare for the area) rain during flowering and poor weather before and during the ripening period left him with a major headache over high levels of acidity in the grape juice. For the first time ever, he was considering the need for deacidification. But even that was not an option because it would have thrown out the essential balance between malic and tartaric acids.

Because the weather was so bad before the normal ripening period, the malic acid stayed high while the tartaric acid ripened as normal. “If we had deacidified we would have lost most of the tartaric acid and possibly not all of the malic acid, resulting in a papery salty type of wine,” says Sam. “But then along came another possibility in the form of the new OenoFoss wine analyser.”

Knowledge provides the edge

The simple-to-use OenoFoss analyser measures up to seven parameters of grape must and wine from a single sample within two minutes. Among the parameters are total acidity and malic acid – just what they needed to know with three tanks of grape juice about to go to waste and major improvement on existing chromatography methods that could identify if there was malic acid, but not how much. The new analyser provided the data they needed to determine acidity in each tank. With this knowledge, the juice from the tanks could be blended to achieve desired levels going into the malolactic fermentation.

“The weather during 2008 has been the worst on record”

“The new instrument meant that we could make the right decision,” says Sam. “There was no searching in the dark and this made an especially big difference for our sparkling Cornwall Brut where getting the right malic acid balance was crucial before the malolactic fermentation. If we hadn’t had the OenoFoss there was no way we could have done it.”



Two generations: Bob and Sam Lindo

With an expectant customer base and a year’s production of the flagship wine at risk, the value of the new technology was obvious. “For a winery of our size it seemed like a lot of money to spend, but the fact that it helped us to make the correct decision for just one wine means that it has paid for itself,” says Sam who is also looking forward to other uses for the instrument.

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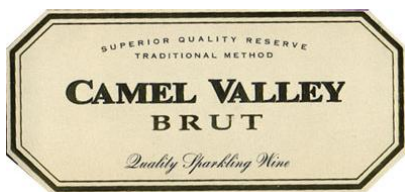
For instance, more analysis information will also help with pre-bottling checks and will help to monitor grape ripeness and picking dates for 2009 – hopefully a kinder year than 2008.

How much can England make?

In Sam’s view, activity and investment in English wine production has reached an exciting phase. Vineyard planting has doubled in recent years and professionals with valuable knowledge are pouring in from overseas. In this respect, England’s emerging industry can be compared to that of New Zealand in the early seventies. “There is a big experiment going on,” says Sam. “We have a longer picking window, and a lot of problems that producers have in hotter countries don’t exist.”

Word is spreading about the quality of English wine and not just through official awards competing for shelf space in the Camel Valley trophy cabinet. Sam describes how his parents took a working holiday on a tour around European vineyards. No matter where they went everyone had heard about Camel Valley. With this reputation, Sam Lindo can look forward to a future where English wine is an established part of the global industry. And no matter what the Cornish climate throws at him, he will be increasingly well equipped with knowledge and technology to take on the challenge. It is only the productivity of his vines that remains at the mercy of the elements. “The quality is always the same, but the yield varies a lot depending on the year;” he says.

Windblown clouds and fleeting sun will remain the secret behind subtle, delicate and aromatic wines just as that same weather will determine how much English wine we can find at our local supermarket. As anyone heading off on a summer break in England should be advised –be sure to take a waterproof with you.



Camel Valley Wines

Founded in 1989, Camel Valley wines produce delicate, aromatic wines reflecting the landscape and culture of Cornwall – inviting, bright, versatile and refreshing. With wide, sunny south-facing slopes, a mild climate that allows full yet slow ripening of the grapes and methods have been developed specifically to retain the delicate flavours of the fruit.

The results of which can be found in a range of international award winning wines such as Camel Valley Brut ‘Cornwall’ described as the most impressive English wine on the market today and the smooth aromatic and complex ‘Atlantic Dry’ – a perfect complement to seafood.



The simple-to-use OenoFoss

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