

Setting standards for a vintage performance

Peter Wills explains the work involved in enforcing standards at English and Welsh vineyards – of which there are now more than 350



ARE YOU surprised to learn that there are more than 350 vineyards in England and Wales? The Wine Standards Board is one of the UK enforcement agencies for European Community Wine Legislation, and has a responsibility to ensure vineyard compliance and to manage the UK Vineyards Register.

The board was established in 1973 as a registered private company, limited by guarantee, and is sponsored by The Vintners' Company and Defra. Eight regional inspectors visit both wine traders and vineyards in the UK.

UK vineyards are situated mainly in the south, south-east and south-west of England and south Wales with more than 800 hectares under vine (1 hectare = 2.47 acres = 1 football pitch). This area under vine is, of course, minute in comparison to the main wine growing areas in other parts of Europe but, nevertheless, some excellent UK wines are produced and

vineyard visit for a 'wine enthusiast' is well worth the effort.

Do not confuse a product labelled as 'British Wine' with wine produced at a UK vineyard. British Wine is made from the fermentation of an imported grape concentrate diluted with 'tap' water, whereas wine produced at a vineyard is made from the fermentation of freshly picked grapes. The difference in taste is evident.

VINEYARDS

Nearly one-third of the vineyards, covering 40 per cent of the total area, are in south-east England, while 14 vineyards are larger than ten hectares and represent 42 per cent of the UK area under vine. Half of all vineyards operate in an area of less than one hectare each.

There are few vineyards styled as truly 'commercial' operations. Many are owned and

managed by dedicated, retired professional persons with the vineyard adjacent to their homes. A number have 'farmyard' type shops, where wine and other local produce is sold.

LEGISLATION

EC Council Regulation 1493/1999 covers the main aspects of wine-making (oenological) practices and processes with Regulation 753/02 covering detailed labelling rules. In the UK, implementation of these regulations is via a statutory instrument 'The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Wine Regulation'. This specifies the powers of authorised officers (board inspectors) including powers of entry, seizure and 'control on the movement' of wine sector products. A major activity for inspectors is raising awareness of the legislation, and encouraging growers and producers to seek advice.

VISITS

Visits of inspectors to vineyards are central to the work of the board, and are often unannounced (this was the case in 59 per cent of visits in 2002/3). Large vineyards and wineries, with higher risk operations, can expect to be visited at least twice a year, mainly at harvest time (October) and during bottling/labelling (April). Smaller vineyards, making their own wine on a commercial basis, can expect to be visited once a year and vineyards only selling grapes, or having wine made for them, every two to four years.

VINEYARD REGISTER

Vineyards are required to be registered if they exceed 0.1 hectare (0.25 acre) of planted vines, and the board has the responsibility for compiling and maintaining the register. Details of vine varieties, relevant areas of vines, training



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systems, rootstocks, density, aspect, soil types and height above sea level represent some of the important data to be recorded. This information is always subject to change with additional plantings and the grubbing up (removal) of vines.

VINE VARIETIES

Most of you are familiar with the noble grape varieties such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz and Merlot and will not be surprised to learn that it is extremely difficult to grow these varieties under typical UK weather conditions. Growers successful with 'better known' varieties often require the use of poly-tunnels. Vine varieties are either recommended or authorised and this classification is based on overall performance, including quality of wine, production costs and susceptibility to disease. Mainly 'germanic' varieties are grown in the UK with names like Seyval Blanc, Reichensteiner, Orion, Regent, Rondo and Madeleine Angevine.

However, plantings of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier (the classic components of champagne) have increased by over 30 per cent in the past ten years, largely due to a growing interest in sparkling wine production.

Careful thought should always be given to the type of wine desired to be produced and, perhaps more important, the type of wine practicable to grow in an area. White grapes only produce white wine but red grapes can produce red, white or rosé, depending on whether the grapes are pressed straight away or put into fermenting vats.

The climate and chalky soil conditions in England and Wales are ideal for sparkling wine production, and the increasingly high quality on offer has been recognised with a number of well deserved international awards.

TYPES OF WINE

European Wine Legislation categorises wine produced in the EC as either 'Table Wine', 'Table Wine with a Geographic Indication' (Regional Wine) or 'Quality Wine' PSR (Produced in a Specified Region). There are many requirements for classification in the quality and regional categories - including yield, variety, region, type of training system and sweetness of grape.

In the UK, the board administers the Quality Wine scheme for both English and Welsh vineyards and in excess of 50 applications are made each year. This requires samples of the bottled wine to be submitted for analysis and tasting by a panel of 'experts'. An inspector then visits the vineyard to check the winery records to ensure that the wine has been produced and bottled in accordance with regulations. Disappointingly, there have been very few 'Regional' Wine applications.

LABELLING

Regulation 753/02 (implemented 1 August 2003) is quite prescriptive and gives detailed labelling rules for all wines produced in the EC, and directs that a vintage (year of production) or grape variety can only be shown on those wines with either 'Quality' or 'Regional' status. A table wine without geographic indication can

only show the term 'table wine' on the label, together with other mandatory information – including bottler's details, level of alcohol and nominal volume. The information on the label must be accurate, to ensure the consumer is not misled. Inspectors encourage producers to seek advice when preparing new labels. European law is written such that you can only do what it says. English law allows you greater freedom.

INSPECTORATE FUNCTION

All UK vineyards are required to submit completed harvest and production declarations to the board, showing the weight of grapes sold or sent to 'contract' wineries and, in the case of wineries, the amount of wine in production as at December 1 of that vintage. Volume of wine in production and intended for 'quality' or 'table' wine is an important feature of the inspection. All oenological practices and processes are checked, including details of enrichments, acidification, sweetening and coupage (blending).

Did you know that it is permitted to add sugar (known as enrichment) to the equivalent of 3.5 per cent potential alcohol at the fermentation stage? It is only in exceptionally good growing seasons, when grapes have attained high levels of ripeness, that enrichment is not required. Inspectors use refractometers and hydrometers to determine the potential alcohol of grape must (juice), and an ebulliometer is used to determine the actual alcohol content of a wine. Samples are taken if further analysis is required.

Due diligence, bottling records and procedures and hygiene are important aspects of an inspection. Excessive enrichment, illegal blending, illegal use of flavourings and additives are examples of major infringements encountered in recent years. In one case, a vineyard producing 'British Wine' from imported grape concentrate, falsely labelled the wine with a vintage and grape varieties, thereby deceiving customers into thinking it had been produced from freshly picked grapes at that vineyard.

It is the aim of the board to ensure authenticity of the product. This is achieved by verifying that the wine has been produced in strict accordance with the relevant regulations.

Why not sample the delicate style and aromatic floral nose and taste of traditional English/Welsh white table wine, or perhaps sample a light, fruity red wine, or even one of the excellent sparkling English wines. You never know, you may just like it!

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