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A toast to England



Jancis Robinson

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‘England’s best sparkling wines now offer much to those who thought only champagne would do’

The one major change to my recommendations for celebratory sparkling wines this festive season is that top-quality fizz is now made in — England.

I have always wanted English sparkling wines to succeed but while most tasted well-made, for many years they were a bit simple and tart. Recently I have been convinced that the best now offer much to those who thought that only champagne would do.

Not long ago I took part in a revelatory blind tasting organised by Noble Rot, a cheeky, well-designed gastromag. The idea was to compare the editors’ favourite champagnes with their favourite English wines. The champagnes included non-vintage blends from the likes of Pol Roger, Veuve Clicquot and Taittinger as well as Bérèche, Chartogne-Taillet, Marguet and Savart.

The tasting panel included several French sommeliers and we all assumed that the dozen wines we tasted without knowing their identities would be divided equally between champagnes and English sparkling wines. To our amazement, there were only four English wines among the 12 and to our even greater amazement, the top two places, when the scores were added up, were occupied by English wines: **Hambleton Estate Classic Cuvée NV England** (£28.50 hambletonvineyard.co.uk) and **Nyetimber Classic Cuvée 2010 England** (£23.99 Hennings, also Berry Bros & Rudd).

My personal favourite overall with 17.5 points out of 20, along with what I assume was the current blend of **Veuve Clicquot NV Champagne** (£29.98 amazon.co.uk — presumably much to the dismay of brand owners LVMH), was another English wine, **Wiston Estate Cuvée 2010** (£32.95 wistonestate.com), but I gave 17 points to all



three of the other English wines, including Gusbourne Brut Reserve 2010 (£29.95 Lea & Sandeman), whereas I scored some of Noble Rot's favourite champagnes as low as 14.5.



There have been murmurs in the trade press for some time about the Champenois' being increasingly rattled by competition from Prosecco and to a certain extent Cava, but perhaps they ought also to be looking across the Channel at a new threat to their domination of the uplifting combination of wine and carbon dioxide.

Prosecco and Cava have the great allure of being generally very much cheaper than champagne. English wine, frequently grown on expensive land in unreliable conditions (the 2011, 2012 and 2013 harvests all presented particular challenges), will never be cheap — and the English fizzes in our tasting cost about the same as the champagnes they were lined up against.

But to me the really exciting development was that, during the tasting, I found myself not trying to work out which wines were the champagnes and, therefore, superior but was writing enthusiastic notes such as, “Sophisticated. Could be a very good English.”

The other source of seriously well-made sparkling wine in the image of champagne is Italy. While Prosecco is hugely popular, most of it is made by a much more industrial technique than the traditional method used for champagne. I also tend to find it a bit sweet. But both Franciacorta and Trento produce much more subtle, dry fizzes — most of which have the advantage for us wine geeks of giving full details of what's inside the bottle on the back label: vintage, date of disgorgement and, often, varietal composition of the blend (usually, like English fizz, the two finest grapes of the Champagne region: Chardonnay and Pinot Noir).

Ca' del Bosco, Annamaria Clementi 1985

Franciacorta (£85 Vini Italiani) should impress the most fastidious of champagne drinkers, and **Ferrari Perlé 2008 Trento** (£25.79 Drinks Direct) is a long-aged, particularly complex, all-Chardonnay sparkling wine from the subalpine slopes. These two producers are hardly discoveries; they are arguably the locomotives of their respective regions. But, alas, more outré examples are even harder to find from British retailers.

The only other non-champagne sparkling wine I have been seriously impressed by in the past year came from a most unlikely source: Mendoza in Argentina. Pablo Cúneo makes this blend of 75 per cent Pinot Noir and 25 per cent



Chardonnay using the traditional method and the result is seriously good for the price, with quite a bit of age and an appetising dry finish. I just hope the **Ruca Malen Sparkling Brut NV Mendoza** (£15.95 Corney & Barrow) I tasted at the Wines of Argentina Awards last February is the same blend that is currently on offer in the UK.

This, of course, is the problem for non-vintage (NV) blends of champagne and other sparkling wines. We usually have no way of knowing from the back label exactly which blend is the one currently on sale. This is where the army of conscientious growers trump most of the big champagne brands. Growers' champagne has always been more likely to provide specific information on back labels about each blend. Until recently, growers' champagne has tended to be much better value in general than the big houses' blends, once known as the grandes marques.

Alas, rather than the big houses responding to the competition by cutting their prices, many growers have increased theirs, so I can no longer generalise that growers' champagne is better value.

Today it all comes down to producers and individual blends, or cuvées. Among growers' non-vintage blends I was very taken by **Laherte Frères, Les 7 NV Champagne** (£45 The Wine Society).

Egly-Ouriet has so far been a thoroughly reliable source of growers' champagne but **Egly-Ouriet, Tradition Grand Cru NV Champagne** (£55 Roberson) does demonstrate that upward trend in prices.

As for other champagnes, those listed in the middle column of the previous page are some of my current favourites — few of them bargains unfortunately.

Tasting notes on Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com

Stockists from winesearcher.com

Overperforming champagnes

I have been lucky enough to taste many a deluxe champagne this year and it is not difficult to find truly fine wines carrying names such as Dom Pérignon, Dom Ruinart, Krug, Pol Roger Winston Churchill, Louis Roederer Cristal, Taittinger Comtes de Champagne and even relative newcomer Armand de Brignac.

These are some of the less expensive bottlings that have impressed me over the past year, listed in ascending price order.

- Henriot Brut Souverain NV, £25, Taylor's Fine Wine and many others
- Vazart-Coquart NV, £29.95, plus-de-bulles.co.uk