A peek into Pinot's future

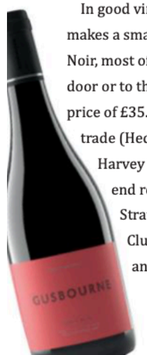
It's a key component of English sparkling wines, but a superb 2018 vintage showed what Pinot Noir is capable of producing on our shores as a still wine in its own right. **Lisse Garnett** assesses the progress that this trickiest of varieties has achieved as a single varietal

Pinot Noir is the UK's most widely planted grape, thanks to the boom in sparkling wine production. But what kind of still wines does this capricious variety create? Too often they have been thin, astringent and overly acidic. Happily, things have changed, as the 2018 vintage proved to many of the doubters.

Pinot destined for red wines is grown in Cornwall, Hampshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex. The Crouch Valley in Essex is tipped by some to be a potential hotspot, thanks to its particular microclimate and geology.

According to English wine pioneer Stephen Skelton MW, "we can make a very few decent ones, and this will increase slowly as growers determine which are their best plots and which clones and rootstocks suit their soils". This will be "a generational process", he believes.

In good vintages, Kent-based Gusbourne makes a small amount of still red Pinot Noir, most of which is sold at the cellar door or to their subscribers at a retail price of £35. Less still reaches the off-trade (Hedonism, Fortnum & Mason, Harvey Nichols) and a few high-end restaurants such as Salt in Stratford upon Avon, The Clove Club in London and The Hand and Flowers in Marlow, which occasionally offers it by the glass. Yields are kept low (approximately two tonnes an acre) and fruit is sourced from Boot Hill, where 15-year-old Burgundian clones flourish. This is the favourite parcel of head winemaker Charlie Holland, not least because here the vines always ripen first.



Inspecting the fruit at Gusbourne

"Increasingly we are able to ripen Pinot Noir to a stage that we couldn't before, and the results are really exciting," he says.

"In 2018 we made wine which was 13% natural alcohol with levels of ripeness that 12 years ago, when I first got involved with English wines, I thought wasn't possible.

He adds: "There is no point in us trying to make a Central Otago Pinot Noir – we don't have the ripeness; we don't have the power and the structure. What we can do in this country is make pretty, fruit-driven, attractive wines in a lighter style, a perfumed style. That's what suits our climate."

It's not just the bigger boys who are growing Pinot Noir for still red. Kent and East Sussex-based Will Davenport makes his Diamond Fields Pinot Noir from certified organic grapes. He sells out every year with the majority of what he makes going to the on-trade via Les Caves de Pyrene.

The wine retails for £19.95 and clears a very healthy return for its maker. A small amount is kept back for the cellar door and local subscribers, who cannot get enough: his last new release sold out in 48 hours.

Doug Wregg, marketing director of Les Caves de Pyrene, believes England can make a go of still Pinot Noir but first we need to master the basics: work out where to grow it, and take our time.

"It's probably the most difficult grape, because it's the most terroir-driven," he says. "That's why in Burgundy one vineyard is separated from another 10 yards away.

"If you get the right clones, the right soil, you have the humility not to oak the death out of it and you are ready to take time – because no one ever made great wine on the first go, and it's a learning experience – then you can make a great Pinot Noir."

Tillingham makes artistically labelled natural and biodynamic wines not far from Gusbourne on similar soils of Wealden clay and sandstone. Magnificently situated on rolling hills above Rye, it specialises in not specialising: sometimes there are 40 or 50 wild ferments on the go from varieties as obscure as Trousseau.

Founder Ben Walgate's Pinot Noir (Germanic clone GM2013) has no additions, minimal sulphur, no filtering and is, he says, "as fresh as a daisy". Every bottle of Tillingham Pinot Noir (RRP £35) comes with a technical sheet detailing how it should be served. Much of the fruit comes from Essex's Crouch Valley which Walgate cites as the best place in the whole of England for decent yields, high sugars and clean fruit.

Business is booming. Six pallets have gone to Norway this year and Japan and America are lined up for future exports.

"Financial constraints mean we must sell our wines now," says Walgate. "We have no reserve stock and who knows – the 2018s might be some of the best wines we will make.

"For most of the winemakers I admire it's all about long élevage; one or two years for still wines. If we do that, I believe that we have the raw materials here to really smash it, but it will take patience.

"Pinot is revered and there are people who want to try Pinots from all around the world. If it's something that is genuinely high quality and exciting, then people are prepared to pay a premium for it."

SCHUSTER TAKES A SHUFTI

The renowned taster and educator runs the rule over six English Pinot Noirs from 2018

MW bootcamp coach Michael Schuster is enthused by the recent crop of English Pinot.

"I'm not sure weight and substance are what one looks for in Pinot Noir," he says. "More a sweetness of flavour, purity of fruit and fineness of texture, with 'class', if present, as a bonus.

"Given these criteria, and a good vintage, this little tasting suggests that English Pinot Noir can certainly deliver, and that its future is brimming with delicious promise. As with English sparklers, there is just an extra level of acidity, but these wines, remain perfectly balanced, with no suggestion whatsoever of meanness, leanness or unripeness.

"The best are currently nudging, and occasionally nestling comfortably within, Premier Cru territory."

Davenport Diamond Fields Pinot Noir 2018; 12%, East Sussex
Deepish purple; black cherry nose with a suggestion of carbonic maceration bubble gum; nicely balanced, medium full wine with a fresh to lively acidity and nicely judged light tannin; a touch of residual CO2 spritz, a sweet, smooth, distinctly Pinot taste, with a fine purity of fruit, a nice length of flavour without being complex, and a good light, fragrant length. Very attractive Villages quality. Delicious – most likely to drink young.

Bolney Pinot Noir 2018; 12%, West Sussex
Pale ruby red; fairly closed, slightly reduced, faintly mineral nose; light to medium full, fresh, with a fine if slightly dry tannin; a pure, sweet, flavour, a modest depth of fruit but of a very fragrant character, moderately long to taste, in a taut, contained style, with a nice light persistence. Refined, subtly aromatic, and full of promise for the future. A top-quality Villages level.

Tillingham Pinot Noir 2018; 13%, East Sussex
Deepish purple; a light sweet black cherry nose with a hint of high-toned volatility; medium full, quite crisp in acidity, a little CO2 presence, a very fine, firm tannin; long and sweet and juicily sapid to taste, a touch warm from the VA on the finish, but with a fine persistence of both fruit and fragrance. Richer in flavour and proportions than the first two wines; another very promising Pinot of fine Villages Lieu-dit quality. Delicious.

Gusbourne Boot Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir 2016; 12%, Kent
Mid purple hued red; a fairly dense nose, still very closed up with the merest hint of reduction; medium full, fresh in acidity, fine but firmish in tannin; overall a denser, firmer style; a very attractive length of rich, sappy flavour, behind a lightly dry tannin texture which just pinches the finish a touch at the moment, and with a very good length of aftertaste. Top Villages / Lieu-dit level, with a greater concentration and depth than the first three wines. Needs a year or two.

Gusbourne Pinot Noir 2018; 12.5%, Kent
Mid youthful purple red; a particularly pretty black cherry fruit scent, persistent too; medium full, fresh, delicately tannic, with a touch of residual CO2; sweet, pure, gently juicy, long and subtle to taste; a real aromatic complexity here, and with excellent aromatic, lightly spicy length. This is very good indeed and, as with the earlier wines, really shows the promise of English Pinot Noir. On the cusp of lesser Premier Cru.

Gusbourne Reserve Pinot Noir 2018; 12.5%, Kent
Deepish youthful purple; a rich and persistent nose, new oak marked (but not coarse), black cherry in aroma; generous, fresh, firmly but finely tannic; deep, sapid, and juicy, with a touch of the wood tannin texture clear, long to taste, gently spicy, with a very attractive aromatic complexity, and with a very nice length of gently spiced aftertaste. If this is English Pinot Noir, well, its future is assured and exciting. This is very special, and brings to mind a fine, complete, mid rank Premier Cru Gevrey-Chambertin, where bottle age will doubtless make for a splendid bouquet, and greatly rewarding glass of mature wine. Bravo!