

VA-VA-VOOM VINTAGE

The wine industry in Somerset is relatively young, but its wines are gaining recognition. Liz Lowe talks to some of our local vineyards who say that their 2018 wines could be an exceptional vintage



View of the Mendips from Aldwick Estate

As the last grapes are harvested under low autumn sun, the word in the vineyards is that 2018 could be one of the UK's best vintages yet.

"There's an excitement among growers and winemakers," says Master of Wine Victoria Stephens-Clarkson. Reports so far have been "incredibly positive," she says, "in terms of the quality of this vintage, and also the large quantity of grapes".

Locally the mood is also one of optimism and anticipation. Aldwick Estate, Somerset's largest vineyard, is based near Bristol in countryside surrounding the Mendip Hills. Managing director Sandy Luck has just overseen a record harvest, which began two weeks earlier than previous years' and produced their biggest yield to date.

Producers across the region have experienced similar good fortune. "This has certainly been the most exciting year since we planted the vineyard," says James Cumming, owner and winemaker of Fenny Castle Vineyard near Wells. But in a year when many agricultural crops have suffered due to intense heat and arid conditions, why have the vines had it so good?

Tony Cox has been making wine from Mumford's Vineyard in Bath for more than 20 years and says this year has been "exceptional". He explains that the favourable weather began not with high temperatures but low ones, as the prolonged winter delayed bud break. During this stage young shoots are particularly vulnerable to spring frosts which, just last year, caused some English vineyards to lose over 50 per cent of their crop.

As temperatures rose the vines began their growth cycle and the warm, dry weather continued through flowering. Cold wind and heavy rain can damage flowers and affect pollination but this year a high percentage of flowers were pollinated, resulting in large bunches of grapes that were able to fully ripen.

The sweltering summer wasn't without challenges. At Dunleavy in Chew Valley near Bristol, Ingrid Bates manages her Pinot Noir and Seyval Blanc vines as a team of one. Most of the vineyard management takes place during the warmest months and Ingrid says wryly: "If I had staff I probably wouldn't force them to work in those temperatures; because it's just me I have to".

Like Aldwick Estate, Ingrid sends her grapes to award-winning local winemaker Steve Brooksbank and will now have to wait for the first taste of her 2018 wines. She's optimistic that her hard work will be rewarded though: "As long as you start with the best quality fruit," she says, "that's all you can do".

An exceptionally hot year can reduce grapes' acidity; an important component which gives freshness and structure to

wines. Victoria Stephens-Clarkson explains this is unlikely to be a concern for UK growers operating in a marginal climate as "even in a good year, we have significant levels of acidity". She adds with a smile, "The main pressure seems to be space in the cellar and fermentation tanks for all those grapes." Not a bad problem to face.

A recent survey commissioned by the national association for the English and Welsh wine industry, WineGB, shows the south west claiming just 11 per cent of the total area under vines, compared to 75 per cent in the south east. In Somerset the wine industry is still relatively young with mostly small, family-run producers, but its wines are gaining recognition.

"The brilliant thing about Somerset is the quality of the still wines in the region," says Ben Franks, co-founder of Bath-based online wine merchant Novel Wines. He explains how the West Country's clay soils differ from chalky soils more typical in regions such as Kent and Sussex: "The clay leads to riper, fatter grapes and you have a much softer, juicier wine when you press it". Ben cites Dunleavy's excellent Pinot Noir Rosé as an example of a wine which exhibits riper tropical fruit flavours than its south east counterparts. This year's stellar harvest could be good news for our pockets too, adds Ben. As most producers have large volumes in 2018, he hopes prices will remain stable.

For consumers new to Somerset's wines, Ben recommends trying the grape Bacchus which is "England's answer to Sauvignon Blanc". While some can be "very green and herby," he finds west country versions, like Aldwick's Bacchus, have a peachier, more approachable style. Other grapes which flourish in the region include fresh, citrusy Madeleine Angevine and pear and melon-scented Ortega.

It may be surprising to learn WineGB's recent survey identified the most planted grape in England and Wales as a red one – Pinot Noir. It's closely followed by Chardonnay and together they cover over 60 per cent of the total hectareage. Both are traditional Champagne varieties, favoured by the sparkling wine industry which accounts for over two-thirds of all production here. Pinot Noir is used for Aldwick Estate's Jubilate and Fenny Castle Vineyard's Brut Rosé, but at Dunleavy the first sparkling wine release is 100 per cent Seyval Blanc. It produces "really lovely crisp sparkling wine," says Ingrid, and the variety's resilience lends itself well to organic farming.

Red wine production is notoriously tricky in the UK climate, but we are likely to see an increase in 2018: Fenny Castle Vineyard plan to use the ripest Pinot Noir grapes for their first ever red wine. Mumfords are hoping this year's red will see similar success to their 2003, another scorching

vintage, which was served onboard HMS Victory during the 2005 bi-centenary of the Battle of Trafalgar.

With a stand-out vintage and an innovative group of growers and winemakers, the future of Somerset wine looks rosy (or should that be rosé?). James Cumming believes a strong regional identity is beginning to emerge as "producers in the region work closely together sharing ideas and expertise."

Back in the vineyards the vines can rest until next year and we'll have to wait to taste the fruits of their labour: most of the still wines will be released next year and the sparkling wines in two years. But with many local vineyards happy to receive visitors and arrange tastings, Somerset's wine drinkers have plenty to fill their glasses with. ■



Pinot grapes at Fenny Castle

CONTACT DETAILS AND WHERE TO BUY

Aldwick Estate
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aldwickestate.co.uk

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Panniers Farm, Castle Lane,
Worth, Wells BA5 1NL
01749 678900/01749 678928
fennycastlevineyard.co.uk

Mumfords Vineyard
Shockerwick Lane, Bannerdown,
Bath BA1 7LQ
01225 858367
mumfordsvineyard.co.uk

Dunleavy
Dunleavy Vineyards, Wrington,
near Bristol
07779 085420
dunleavyvineyards.co.uk

Novel Wines
11 Manvers Street, Bath BA1 1JQ
01225 667311
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