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It's hard organising friends when I'm alive. What chance they'll show up after I'm gone? Ariel Leve

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From The Times July 6, 2009



Wimbledon roof's quiet fortnight points to fine British wine harvest



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Valentine Low

The connection between the state of the English wine harvest and the Wimbledon roof may not be immediately apparent, but there were times in the past fortnight when Mike Roberts paid as much attention to the latter as anyone sitting in Centre Court.

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It was not so much about how it would affect the fortunes of Andy Murray as what it would say about the prospects for English wine this year — and the message among the more optimistic growers is that 2009 could prove to be the best year ever.

However, for Mr Roberts, one of the most highly regarded producers of English sparkling wine, it is about more than just one good harvest. He believes that not only are the English producing champagne-style wines as good as any in France, but that growing conditions are now better here than they are in the Champagne region. The English wine business may be tiny compared with its European counterparts, but it is expanding at a brisk pace. In the past four years the area under cultivation for grapes has grown by 45 per cent to more than 1,000 hectares. Annual production is 2.5 million bottles.

Mr Roberts runs the Ridgeview vineyard in West Sussex, which last year produced just over 100,000 bottles; by 2011 he hopes to get that up to nearly 300,000. More importantly, his wine is regarded by many as being as good as that produced by similar small-scale wine producers in France.

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Last week he won a trophy for Best English Wine; more convincingly, in 2005 he won Best Sparkling Wine (other than champagne) at the International Wine and Spirits Competition, beating contenders from all over the world. Jane MacQuitty, The Times's wine critic, wrote that Ridgeview's 2004 Bloomsbury Merret had a "clean, appley, nutty, lemony palate" and was "summer in a glass".

That is all very good news for Mr Roberts: what is more heartening for English wine producers is his assertion that growing conditions are better in Sussex, where his vines slope away over the chalky Downs, than they are in the Champagne region.

"We have got the same soil as Champagne, the same geology. But there is one degree of latitude between us," he said. Because it is warmer in Champagne, growers there have to pick their grapes earlier to avoid high alcohol levels. "They have the history — we are still learning. But the conditions here, I think, are better.

"We can grow and pick really good grapes that are fully ripe. They have got all the flavour profiles that come from being fully ripe. The longer the growing season, the better they are."

Hence the interest in the Centre Court roof, which was scarcely used

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during this year's tournament. The flowering season coincides with Wimbledon fortnight, and if it is warm and dry it presages a good harvest, not only for this year but next.

Julia Trustram Eve, marketing director of the trade body English Wine Producers, said: "If we have the sort of weather the Met Office has forecast then it is shaping up for a really good year. But there is a long way to go between now and October."

She believes that the quality of English wine has improved immensely because of a more professional attitude among growers. They are also producing more marketable wines, with many opting for the classic champagne grape varieties rather than the German ones grown here in the 1980s.

"In blind challenges, English sparkling wine can beat both champagnes and sparkling wines from other parts of the world. It is definitely a style we can do."

Ridgeview sparkling wines are excellent, I would recommend anyone giving them a try versus their usual champagne tipple.

Gemma, Horsham, England

It's due to French wine being held up as the highest quality, Béziat.

Jimmy, Birmingham, England

It's is indeed wonderful stuff. What Stephen is referring to is the vital distinction between British wine (imported concentrated paint stripper) and English Sparkling Wine (world beating, sparkler made using traditional method, by professionals using the correct root stock).

Bob, London, UK

The report is good, but the headline' s wrong. I know The Times is a unionist paper, but English Wine is different from Welsh wine and "British wine" doesn't really exist, except as some funny old drink. English winemakers are trying to build their brand, or you might as well call it "Euro wine"

Chris, Northampton, England

Why extol your wines in comparison with ours ? Let them form their personality. I am sure they have character of their own.

Béziat, André, Ste Colombe, France

I had some wine grown by Surrey based Denbies recently. I thought it was excellent, easily as good as any French or Aussie wine I've tasted. BTW Stephen, English vineyards do grow their own grapes rather than import

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Luke, London, UK

Please do not refer to English and Welsh wine as "British Wine" as this is a product made in the UK from imported grape concentrate and water. Thanks.

Stephen Skelton, London, UK

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