

Best vintage of the decade for Devon's growing band of vinegrowers

by Roger White, Yearlstone Vineyard, Bickleigh, Devon

This was our 20th vintage at Yearlstone, though the vineyard's 34th. It was also just about the best. As we filmed the overflowing crates of ultra ripe grapes arriving week in week out in the winery (for a YouTube video) our happy pickers settled down for their hard earned food and wine, life seemed pretty good. It's been the quality of the grapes that has stood out so much. The crop was a little bigger in 2013, but this year the ripeness levels and the flavours are just outstanding. That goes for the aromatic dry whites, to the sparkling wines and yes - even - to the red. The best Pinot Gris ever. Pinot Grigio to you perhaps?

Of course it hasn't always been like 2014.

Famously in 2012 like many another English vineyard we hardly picked a grape. Our records for the Noughties show a very similar pattern of good and bad seasons to the 1980's and 1990's. Even the dear old Met Office has admitted there has been no warming to speak of between 1998 and today, so Devon growers need just as much grit, dedication and bloody-mindedness to succeed as they did when the revival of local vinegrowing began nearly 50 years ago.

Few of the names on a map of the county's vineyards back then survive. Indeed while the county now has approaching fifty vineyards on the Wine Standards database, only Sharpham, Manstree and Yearlstone have prospered through one entire vineyard lifecycle of 30 years. So are the new plantings any more likely to succeed - notwithstanding the fabulous 2014 vintage which should have set everyone up with fully stocked cellars and excellent ranges of wines?



I think the answer is a qualified yes.

There are still the most amazingly silly things being done. Lack of research or respect for the experience of older vineyards has led a number to plant varieties which are almost certainly bound to fail. We are growing on a similar latitude to the Mosel Valley in Germany or Champagne in France and new growers need to take note of this. Bad site selection, planting, pruning, or poor winemaking are all issues today as they were when we started. Personally, I think that misplaced belief in rapid global warming has played a significantly negative part too.



3 hectares of vines. Current production circa 25,000 bottles per annum.

But for all those obvious problems, making money from growing grapes and making wine in good sites of the South West is far easier than it has ever been before.

The international success of our sparkling wines has created a burgeoning demand - not just locally but nationally, and not just in our wonderfully supportive farm shops, but in the nationwide and even global wine trade too.

We only put our 2010 Vintage Brut fizzes on the market in the spring and will be sold out of both our white and pink by Christmas. We still can't supply our national distributor with anything like the volumes they need. In fact, looking back over the last decade, I reckon it has taken us about 18 months to sell each year's range of wines at the outside. We've been lucky enough to do really well at the big wine competitions too - both in London and France. But before it all sounds a bit too good to be true let's row back a bit.

Devon and the rest of the South West can make wonderful wines, and confidence is building in our own community, slowly but surely. But it is a business which needs decent capitalisation and proper business planning. Our climate will give us aromatic and light still wines and the perfect base for the long technical process for the champagne method. But even more than any other climate in the world, it will not give us grapes in large quantities or perfect quality every year. It is perfectly possible (and I've seen it) for new vineyards to hit a bad run of seasons and give up. Serious entrants should first enrol for a winemaking course or at least study under an experienced winemaker.

Above all we need to work longer and harder within our own communities to take another



step change in their confidence in our own wines. Just as when we started, it remains true, that you will find pubs and restaurants nestling cheek by jowl with vineyards who have won international reputations but breaking onto their wine list is difficult.

If none of that has put you off, there are very few in the wine trade today who don't see an exciting and growing future for English vineyards.

Devon wine is not just expanding. We're not just celebrating. We're here to stay!

Yearlstone Vineyard and the Deli Shack Cafe Bickleigh EX168RL is open Fri-Sundays Nov 1 - till Christmas. Find more details about us at yearlstone.co.uk and a video of the 2014 vintage can be found on YouTube - search for English wine.

Yearlstone has won over 200 medals at competition over the last decade. Medallist at Lyons International 2013, Decanter World Wine Awards 2014, sparkling wine reviewed in La Revue du Vin 2012, Germany's Vinum 2012, fizz glowing reviews BBC with Oz Clarke, and at the annual London English fizz vs Champagne tastings.

