

Excerpt from: English sparkling wine v champagne

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The 35 sparkling wines below were all tasted blind in January of this year as part of a Master of Wine dissertation. I don't know what the thrust of the dissertation is but the advantage was that after the tasting its author Sara Muirhead provided all of us tasters with lots of background information which usefully illustrates the habits of English winemakers today.

Note for example the wide variation in grape varieties used. Some producers are reliant on the early-ripening German crossings and the neutral-tasting hybrid Seyval Blanc that underpinned the original 20th-century English wine industry. Others have clearly planted with sparkling wine production in mind and use only the classic Champagne varieties Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Meunier. Unexpectedly, perhaps, two of my favourite three wines, the Camel Valley 2005 and Breaky Bottom 2003, were made substantially from Seyval Blanc, while I thought some of the Pinot/Chardonnay blends had very 'non classic' aromas.

The time spent on lees varied enormously, from 12 months to eight years! There didn't seem to be any correlation between this tirage period and quality, although all my favourite wines spent between 1.5 and 2.5 years on lees.

Sara asked us to look at the extent to which we thought the wines showed the effect of autolysis, the interaction between the maturing wine and the lees left by the second fermentation in bottle. For me this character was most marked in wines that had spent between 1.5 and 2.5 years on lees.

Most of these wines are pretty high in acidity – notably higher than most of the champagnes we (unwittingly) tasted. It is possible that some of the younger English sparkling wines need more time in bottle to soften and show their best. Lack of balance was an associated problem. The English wines typically had very high acidity and rather obvious dosage (as used to be the common failing in inexpensive champagne) – although there were certainly notable exceptions.

As you can see below, although the champagnes scored relatively well, they certainly did not jump off the table as being superior in quality to the best English sparkling wines – although their gentler acidities tended to make them taste sweet. It might have been interesting to have had one rather better quality champagne included in the line-up. In general, incidentally, the quality of the pink fizz was lower than that of the white – with Balfour Brut a noble, if not underpriced, exception.

Wines are listed below alphabetically by producer, whites before pinks, but with the champagnes listed separately at the end. The information in *italics* given for each wine is the varietal blend, recommended retail price in the UK, county where the fruit was grown and the time the wine spent on lees.

Hush Heath, Balfour Brut Rosé 2004 England 16 Drink 2007-09

approx 60% Pinot Noir 40% Chardonnay £29.99 Kent 26 mths

Very fine, pale and dense on the palate – pretty impressive – though not cheap.

In this tasting by Jancis and the team, Balfour Brut Rosé was given 16 points, with it's nearest rosé competitor receiving only 13.5 points. It was BY FAR the best rosé.