

Fizzing with ambition



RICHARD BALFOUR-LYNN
HEARS TO THE OCCASION



SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR RICHARD BALFOUR-LYNN WAS EMBROILED IN WHAT THE FINANCIAL TIMES DESCRIBED AS AN "INCREASINGLY BITTER" TAKEOVER BATTLE WHEN HE OPENED HIS NEW WINERY IN KENT LAST MONTH. BUT, AS ERIK BROWN REPORTS, YOU WOULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED



Richard Balfour-Lynn strides across the floor of his gleaming new winery towards me, hand outstretched. The last time we met, four years ago, he had just pulled a £2.6 billion Stock Exchange flotation at the last minute. This time he's involved in a battle for control of the serviced-office group MWB Business Exchange. Shaking his hand, I mention the coincidence. He shrugs and smiles. There's always something. And today is a triumphal day: the official opening of the Hush Heath Estate winery on Balfour-Lynn's 400-acre estate near Maidstone in Kent.

This is the platform from which Balfour-Lynn has launched his attack on French champagne growers. His ambition, he tells scores of wine industry insiders at the opening, is quite simply to produce the best sparkling rosé in the world.

And just in case they miss the point, he replays an early conversation with Master of Wine Stephen Skelton, in which Skelton asked which German grapes Balfour-Lynn wanted to grow. "I said, I don't. I want to grow the three champagne grape varieties and I want to take on the French."

Moments earlier, the eyes of the home-grown English winemaker Owen Elias had twinkled a little, as he told me that in a blind tasting Balfour Brut Rosé had beaten Laurent Perrier and Lanson pink champagnes, with 60 per cent of the tasters preferring what is always referred to as The Balfour.

In 2009 it became the first English wine to win a gold medal at the Decanter World Wine Awards - one of several awards it has picked up since the first vineyard was planted on the estate just nine years ago.

It's a boutique operation. Balfour-Lynn freely admits. This year the winery will produce 40-50,000 bottles. The maximum Hush Heath will produce will eventually be 100,000.

Today, the Balfour is flowing freely among the hoteliers, wine critics and restaurateurs invited to the gleaming, stainless steel and glass winery, as pristine as any operating theatre.

A blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, The Balfour is pale pink,

full of soft, red fruits and has a delicate mousse and elegant structure. It is remarkably easy drinking.

"We argue for hours over the colour," Balfour-Lynn says, "to ensure that we get a very pale colour. We argue over making sure we get really fine bubbles. The Balfour was designed to be very light, very fresh, very young and we seem to have succeeded in producing a taste that people like."

Chef Jason Atherton certainly likes it: it's on the list at his new Mayfair restaurant Pollen Street Social. It's also in the air, in the first-class lounges on BA's international flights. And on the sea - Dama Shirley Bassey recently launched a P&O cruise liner, the Adonia, with a magnum of The Balfour.

We Brits are not allowed to call it champagne, of course. It has to be sparkling wine or, colloquially, pink fizz. But Balfour-Lynn wryly points out that when French champagne growers finally start growing in Kent and Sussex - and with global warming and hence land prices at home they will - they will probably call what they produce champagne.

He's a remarkable character, Balfour-Lynn. Ambitious and urbane, he has a reputation for being a tough businessman - he once described himself as "a street fighter in a suit" - who has evolved out of commercial and residential property and climbed through the Catersearch.com top 100 to become, last year, the sixth most important hotelier in the country.

Most journalists don't have time to silt through his directorships - more than 150 last time we met - to get a firm grasp of the business structures he and his team have created, and there's always the chance of picking up on old information if you don't.

But the last time I looked, MWB - founded in 1994 - owned the boutique hotel chains Malmaison and Hotel du Vin, and as chairman and a major shareholder of Alternative Hotel Group. Balfour-Lynn also has the De Vere Group of hotels and fitness centres in his portfolio.

At the time of writing, MWB owns 72.3 per cent of the serviced office provider MWB Business Exchange - the target of an offer by larger rival Regus. Both have outlets in Mayfair.

Throw in Liberty, which MWB bought, resurrected and sold last year, and ownership of the Bombay Sapphire distiller G&J Greenall, and you begin to get some idea of the scale of Balfour-Lynn's empire.

And yet here he is, passionately promoting not only The Balfour but a still rosé (Nanette's English Rose) and a still chardonnay (Sky Chardonnay), named for his daughters, and an estate-produced apple juice named for his son (Jake's Tree). It's amazing that he can find the time.

He does it well, too. Climbing a gantry in the former cow shed turned winery, he is like a preacher proselytizing for the country: "English wine has had a renaissance recently, with the royal wedding and the Olympics coming up. More and more people are proud of English brands. In the past everybody was apologetic. Today, we are world beaters."

"There is no question that southern England - Kent, Sussex - has a real opportunity of producing fabulous wines, sparkling wines, that can compete with the best in France," he adds.

"To do that it will take time, it will take investment, and we will have to be uncompromising in our approach. We bought the very best equipment and we have an absolutely state-of-the-art winery. We can compete with anybody anywhere in the world, and be proud of it."

When I slip away, the weather has cleared and groups of wine buffs are being led across fields and through the vineyards to Balfour-Lynn's Tudor manor house with its immaculate English garden. Others stand around chatting, all of them still sipping The Balfour in the rolling landscape.

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