

A good vintage

THE HERITAGE OF EAST ANGLIAN WINE CULTURE MAY DATE BACK TO ROMAN TIMES, BUT, AS DR SUE BAILEY DISCOVERS, IT'S IN THE MIDST OF A FULL-BODIED REVIVAL



Sitting under ripening grapes with autumn sunshine filtering through vine leaves, I look through two treasured books and ponder the local history of vineyards in this driest part of England. The first is a leather-bound volume, William Speechly's *A Treatise on the Culture of the Vine* – exhaustively subtitled as “Exhibiting new and advantageous methods of propagating, cultivating and training that plant so as to render it abundantly fruitful together with new hints on the formation of vineyards of England”.

Speechly fulsomely describes the proper restoration of vineyards in this elegant book from 1790 and talks of the ‘Great Vine of Ely’, referring to the abundance of vineyards in our neighbouring city which earned it the moniker of Isle des Vignes. When the grapes were rated as being not ripe enough for wine, they were turned into verjuice, a sharp vinegar alternative that featured heavily in medieval cuisine, for which Ely was particularly renowned.

My father gave me Speechly's book, as well as gifting me his scrapbook filled with cuttings from the 1970s about the development of vineyards near Cambridge. When I recently visited these vineyards, I was transported to those pages that talked about the establishment of the very successful Chilford Hall vineyard in Linton in the 1970s. It has continued to create prizewinning wines, recently scooping an East Anglian Wines gold medal for its 2016 Chancellor Sparkling wine.

Going back further, the history of vine cultivation possibly predates the Romans, but the Roman belief that wine was a daily necessity for all, including slaves, meant that viticulture and wine production spread to every part of the empire. Indeed, many of the ancient

Roman techniques and principles can still be found in modern winemaking.

The romance of winemaking is exemplified by the owner of local Saffron Grange vineyard, Paul Russell, who says: “When we looked back at the history of our location and land, we discovered in Saffron Walden museum the tusks of a woolly mammoth. I could imagine that some time in the past these wonderful 11-foot-high creatures paraded across the chalk and flint slopes. I had this fanciful image of them roaming through a vineyard 40,000 years ago and so our logo is a golden mammoth called Brut, with grapes caught in his tusks.” He also told me that in Saffron Walden there is an area called the Vineyard.

There were 46 vineyards recorded in the Domesday Book towards the end of the 11th century, and although England acquired Bordeaux by the marriage of Henry II towards the end of the 12th century, which encouraged cheap French wine imports, this did not halt the growth of English vineyards.

By the time King Henry VIII ascended the throne in the 16th century there were 140 large vineyards in England and Wales. Most were owned by noble families, but many were owned by the Church and then the Crown. The dissolution of the monasteries, together with climate change, meant that as Speechly bemoaned, by the end of the 18th century only a few landowners grew vines on their estates.

Not until the late 1940s was there the beginnings of a revival in commercial viticulture in England and Wales. This accelerated substantially in the late 1980s, with more than 400 vineyards being established. Today, there are over 500, with more skilful winemakers and more complex flavours in the wines produced from vines planted more than 30 years ago.

The popularity of English wines is evidenced by Grape Britannia, a new addition to Cambridge's wine scene, with owner Matt Hodgson stocking more than 160 English and Welsh wines. As Matt says, “there is still some scepticism about English wines, but it is accepted in the wine trade that English sparkling wines are world class and regularly beat champagne in blind tastings”. He adds: “When I visited Saffron Grange, I was hugely impressed



with the quality of their sparkling wines; it's a relatively new vineyard, but it won't be unknown for long. We are also lucky to have Giffords Hall, not far away from Bury St Edmunds, with their 30-year-old vines giving a depth and complexity of flavour to their sparkling, red and white wines.”

When I spoke to Linda Howard of Giffords Hall vineyard, she mentioned sales soared after winning an award ten years ago from Waitrose for most outstanding rosé. It also produces a red she describes as “bordeaux on steroids”.

Paul O'Connor of Hedley-Wright Wine merchants, based in Hitchin, comments that English wine growers often use the British Baccus grape based on Miller-Thurgau stock, that is dry but aromatic, with an easy lychee-like flavour that he says “makes for a very agreeable glass”. “The vanguard for the UK is sparkling wine at the moment, as we are not far away from the Champagne region,” he adds. “But it will be interesting to see what happens with climate change – watch this space!”

The owner of Cambridge Wine Merchants, Hal Wilson, emphasised that the economic benefits of selling wines from the cellar door, plus being able to visit local vineyards, allows viticulturists to display their knowledge and expertise. Local restaurants can also stock English wines and support local producers in this way. So with the 2018 vintage being a very good year, let's raise a glass to the growing health of the English wine producers. ●



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