

English wines may be the talk of the town, but how do they stack up against their counterparts from further afield? Imbibe's panel found all was not as it seemed... **Susanna Forbes** reports

# bottles of britain

**W**hether it's global warming, eco-consciousness, or simply experience and maturity, English wine is on the up. No self-respecting supermarket is without its clutch of English wines – some, such as Waitrose, are even buying their own vineyards – and with appearances on lists from Claridges and The Capital, to Skylon and Texture, clued-up members of the on-trade have also caught on to the somewhat unique offerings from these shores.

Refreshingly in these economically strained times, ring round the vineyards of Blighty, and there's excitement and talk of new plantings rather than doom and gloom.

Not that it's not a difficult challenge. Last year's weather meant that there's precious little 2007 still or vintage sparkling to go around. And the sheer lack of size of many of these boutique producers can make prices seem on the high side.

But is it just patriotic romanticism and low carbon footprinting that has put the wines front of mind, or do they warrant their new found popularity? Imbibe's intrepid explorers put a load of English wines up against wines of a similar style from other countries to find out.

## PANEL

**Andrea Briccarello**, buyer & head sommelier, Bentleys **Christine Parkinson**, group wine buyer, Hakkasan  
**Emily O'Hare**, sommelier, River Café **Nicolas Angelina**, group wine buyer, Noura **Deborah Kemp**, Company of Cooks



### WHY BOTHER WITH ENGLAND?

'English wine fits in with the seasonality of our approach. I don't want tokenism though. The reds need more work, but whites like Chapel Down's Bacchus can be great by the glass and pair well with asparagus.'

Robert Giorgione, Orrery

'English wines do well at Bentley's because they are quite fresh and easy to drink with shellfish and oysters, low in alcohol and a touch of residual sugar that helps customers who don't like dry wines. Our English rosé is on the set menu for lunch and goes well with fish soups and macaroni with lobster.'

Andrea Briccarello, Bentley's

'We may look to expand our offering, perhaps introducing still whites, but on evidence tried thus far, I believe superior quality is available elsewhere. Still, this is very much an industry in the ascendance and is on a perpetual learning curve so we cannot be too judgemental at this embryonic stage.'

Ivan Dixon, Harvey Nichols

### HOW IT WORKS

The cream of English wine was called in, based on results from all recent major wine competitions.

Reflecting the ENGLISH wines available, there were three main flights: still white, sparkling white and sparkling rosé, plus small still red and rosé selections.

Selecting wines from the REST OF THE WORLD we chose ones that typified the region they came from. So no homeless brands from the Middle of Nowhere, but, for instance, a Riesling that spoke of the Rheingau.

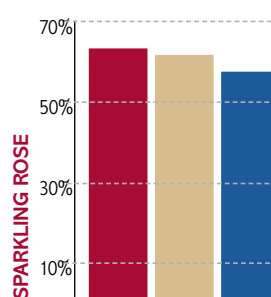
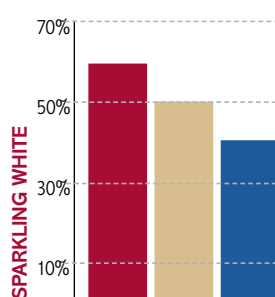
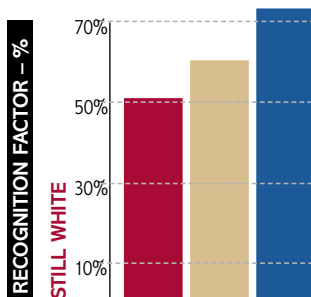
As well as evaluating the wines, tasters were asked to identify whether it came from England or the Rest of the World, these results being recorded to give a RECOGNITION FACTOR, as a %.

As ever, the panel was nothing if not strict. Using a pure 20-point scale, scores below 10 were quite possible. These marks were totalled for the final score, making the *Imbibe* system more like a school exam grading scheme than a Parker/*Wine Spectator* system, where all marks above 50 are creditable.

90-100 astounding  
80-89 excellent  
70-79 very good  
60-69 good

### CAN YOU RECOGNISE ENGLISH WINE?

KEY ■ ENGLISH ■ OVERALL ■ REST OF THE WORLD



## RESULTS

% = Recognition Factor

### STILL WHITE WINE

*The Rest of the World team took in northern Italy, the Rheingau, Argentina, France and New Zealand.*

#### 72 Don David Torrontés 2007, Michel Torino Estates, Argentina 0%

Much admired, and had the panel pondering possible food matches. 'Very aromatic, almost Gewürz/Muscat. Peaches, flowers, pears and bananas. Green apple acidity, long and rich textures. Asian-style cuisine.' AB  
'A floral nose, almost like bath salts! Light floral canned grapefruit palate. This is very zesty and very light. An aperitif wine, great by the glass, but too light for food.' CP  
£6.02, Hallgarten, 01582 406459

#### 72 Chapel Down, Bacchus Reserve 2005, Kent, UK 40%

A touch too much sulphur prevented the

Bacchus Reserve from edging ahead. 'Off-dry, good white fruit core, with balanced acidity. Best as aperitif or with light starters such as tuna tartare.' AB  
'Sweaty citrus fruit. Tastes like a verdejo. Long fruity and attractive. Good with creamy pasta.' CP  
£6.95, ex-cellar, 01580 763033

#### 71 Wickham Special Release Fumé 2007, Hampshire 80%

Pipped by a point, this scored highly with all but one judge, the panel appreciating the real value. 'Essence of grapefruit, then attractive smoky minerality. Long elegant, fresh and balanced. Very light and very good value.' CP  
'Fresh, dry nose. This is a great, definitive wine, with a lovely mouthfeel, mineral and floral notes and very pretty lemon finish.' DK  
£5.78, ex-cellar, 01329 834042

#### 71 Lis Neris Pinot Grigio 2006, Friuli, Italy 100%

One of four correctly placed by the entire

panel, the texture offered great potential for food matches.

'A complex, developing palate with scope for further ageing. Plenty going on, here: stoned fruit, and a spicy long finish.' DK  
'A warm ripe, honeyed nose leads to a light-medium body which packs in good fruit flavours, with a touch of nuttiness, and spicy notes on the finish.' EoH  
£8.45, FMV, 0207 819 0360

#### 67 August Kessler Rheingau Riesling 2006, Germany 60%

'Sweet, citrus, long, fresh and charming palate. Could be good with salt and pepper squid, but maybe too sweet.' CP  
'Riesling nose, mineral, citrusy. Off-dry kabinett style with a tropical palate of pineapple and guava. Long and elegant finish. Fusion cuisine.' AB  
£9.15, WineBarn, 01256 391211

#### 66 Denbies Vineyard Select Schonburger 2006, Surrey 80%

'Pretty and fresh, not sure it's worth its price. Dry but floral style of wine that would be good with shellfish and seafood.' DK

'Rich flowers, elegant nose, this is fruity and easy going. Bit pricy but OK. Off-dry and medium-long finish.' AB  
£11.06\*, ex-Cellars, 01306 876616  
\* price is post 2008 budget

#### 66 Chapel Down, Pinot Blanc 2005, Kent 60%

'Tart, sour fruit characters, with a very fresh apple/stony fruit character. The acidity balances the fruit character. Shellfish.' DK  
'Extremely dry and zesty acidity, this is steely with a long finish.' AB  
£7.95, ex-cellar, 01580 763033

#### 65 Nutbourne Vineyards Sussex Reserve 2006, West Sussex 80%

'Very Bacchus nose, with Sauvignon Blanc character. Dry mineral palate. Zesty and citrusy. Good aperitif or with oysters.' AB  
'Fresh, fruity and balanced. Great by the glass.' DK  
£5.90, Party Ingredients, 020 7501 0508

#### 64 Biddenden Ortega 2006, Kent 20%

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PHOTO: COURTESY ENGLISH WINE GROUP

'Simple nose of raw apricots. Crisp, apricot, zesty palate, rather like Clare Riesling. Would be great with Japanese or Thai food.' CP

'Banana-skin nose with more tropical notes on the palate. I like this expression, but it's a bit fat.' DK

£4.88, ex-cellars, 01580 291726,

#### Also tasted Stanlake Park

*Gewurztraminer 2006, Berkshire; Staete Lande Sauvignon Blanc 2006, Marlborough; Château Vieux Georget 2006, Bordeaux; Ludlow Clee Mists 2006, Shropshire; Beeches Vineyard Dry White 2006, Herefordshire.*

## CONCLUSIONS

- Two out of five of the top placings went to English wines, suggesting the sector can hold its own in the global wine game.
- Much freshness and food-friendly quality to be had.
- A fair number of faulty wines, plus a number with too much sulphur made this the least consistent flight in terms of quality.
- English wines were harder to identify (average Recognition Factor: 53%) than those from further afield (72%). Although overall, still white wines were more identifiable (60%) than sparkling (50%).
- With one exception, the pricing of English still wines was in line with the norm.
- 'Still wines seem marked by weak character. They taste chaptalised and lacking in fruit.' CP
- 'Two of my top three favourites were English, showing lots of personality and purity of flavours.' AB

## SPARKLING WHITE WINE

*The Rest of the World contingent included wines from Champagne, Spain, New Zealand and Tasmania*

### 84 Jacquart Brut Mosaïque NV, Champagne 60%

A combination of classic style, poise and balance took Jacquart to the top.

'Fresh bread nose, nutty and toasty. Elegant, feminine and well balanced.' AB  
'Creamy, butterscotch, malty flavours. Nutty. Long, slightly vegetal finish. Good with vegetable dishes and salads.' CP  
RRP: £23.99, PLB, 01342 318282

### 81 Nicolas Feuillatte Brut Reserve Particulière NV, Champagne 60%

'Huge mousse. Citrus, leafy, brioche characters. Some density and texture on the palate. Mid-length.' CP  
'Great drinkability. Good aroma, palate, mousse and finish. Good balance of fruit, nuts and toast. Well integrated flavours.' EoH  
£18.77, Bibendum, 020 7722 5577

### 76 Meopham Valley Sparkling 2004, Kent 100%

'Apple nose, tangy acidity, very citrusy and crisp. Excellent with seafood cocktail or mackerel tartare.' AB  
'Superb freshness. Good acidity. Good for Mediterranean and Lebanese food.' NA  
£12.00, ex-cellars, 01474 812727

### 74 Chapel Down, Pinot Reserve 2002 40%

'Floral with honey and lots of fruits, interesting character. Definitely English!' AB  
'Nose: wow! Mint apricot and citrus. Vivid citrus palate with tarragon and oranges. Not elegant but enjoyable. Would stand up to earthy fish like mackerel.' CP  
£12.75, ex-cellars, 01580 763033

### 74 Denbies, Greenfields Cuvée Brut 2004, Surrey 40%

Terrific mousse. Nose of red fruit. Palate with lots of red stone fruit character. Nice tasty lees notes. Balanced, elegant.' CP  
£18.71\*, ex-Cellars, 01306 876616

### 74 Nyetimber Classic Cuvée 2001, West Sussex 50%

'Very interesting nose, with intense, juicy tropical fruits and fresh bread aromas. Nutty in character.' AB  
'Dry, fruity zesty, full-bodied palate with a long apricot finish. Would handle deep-fried food.' CP  
£18.00, ex-cellars, 01798 813989

### 73 RidgeView Merret Bloomsbury 2005, Sussex 60%

A panel-splitter, with some finding it elegant and others neutral.  
'Intense ripe peaches and apricots, with zesty acidity and a tangy finish.' AB  
£13.40, 01444 241441

### 72 Hunter's Miru Miru 2005, Marlborough, New Zealand 0%

'Elegant floral and botanical nose. Interesting palate, with a delicate, floral finish.' AB

'Cloves and citrus on a light-bodied palate. Not a food wine.' CP  
£8.81, Laytons, 020 7288 8888

### 71 Codorniu Reserva Raventos Brut NV, Penedès, Spain 60%

'Foral, lilac nose, leads to a long, creamy, mint, floral butterscotch-like palate. Intense and elegant.' CP  
'Pretty good for £7, although it lacks a bit of purity.' DK  
£7.65, Matthew Clark, 01275 8914500

### 70 Nutbourne, Nutty Brut NV, Sussex 60%

'Excellent mousse. Floral nose, leads to a grapefruity, citrusy, grassy palate. Very zesty aromatic style. Long and assertive. Too much for food.' CP  
'Elegant acidity. Great aperitif.' AB  
£12.35, ex-cellars, 020 7627 3800

### 67 Langlois-Château, Cuvée Quadrille Crémant de Loire 2000, France 0%

'Rich toasty nose, with ripe fruit and hints of oxidation. Very nutty – almonds – at the end. Good with food.' AB  
£15.57, Mentzendorff, 020 7840 3600

### 63 Domaine Barmes Buecher Crémant d'Alsace 2006, France 60%

'Good for the price. Sweet, rich and toasty.' EoH  
'Quite floral and green nose. Hints of caramel and honey.' AB  
£8.37, Gauntleys of Nottingham, 0115 911 0555

### 62 Camel Valley Cornwall Brut 2006 20%

'Fresh, floral with good fruit and zesty acidity and a touch of toast. Intense, well-balanced. Good way to start – or finish – a meal.' AB  
£12.54, ex-cellars, Great Western Wines, Wine in Cornwall, 01208 77959

*Also tasted: Bay of Fires Tigress Sparkling NV, Tasmania.*

## CONCLUSIONS

- The top two spots went to champagnes, with the next five going to English.
- This shows me that the English palate still prefers French bubbly,' said Bricarello, whose own first two choices had been English.
- This was the hardest flight to guess correctly the origin of the wine, with an average Recognition Factor of 50%.
- English sparklers were easier to pick out (60%) than fizz from the Rest of the World (40%).
- Apart from a trio of faulty wines which were ruled out, there was good consistency.

• 'Whereas I found the English still whites uneven and unbalanced, often with odd floral aromas, the English sparklers were definitely more promising, with depth of flavour and creamy texture.' EoH

## ROSÉ SPARKLING WINE

*Wines from Champagne, the Loire, Spain and New Zealand made up the Rest of the World team.*

### 85 Hush Heath, Balfour Brut Rosé 2004, Kent 80%

This top scorer got the panel bringing out the superlatives. 'Best wine of the day,' said Kemp. 'Brilliant,' said Parkinson. 'Pale onion skin colour. Fine powerful mousse with a nose of stoned fruit and herbs. Red fruit on the palate, with leafy, citrus and mineral notes. Delicate but lots of character. Lovely with Dover sole.' CP  
'Dry roses, cherries and plums. Very dry and crispy. Classic.' AB  
£23.66, Bibendum, 020 7449 4054

### 76 Lindauer Sparkling Rosé NV, New Zealand 60%

'Ripe red berry nose and ripe cherries on the palate. Elegant.' AB  
'Good concentration and balance. Good with Lebanese cuisine and Spanish tapas.' NA  
RRP: £7.99, Waverley TBS

### 75 Denbies Rosé Cuvée 2005, Surrey 60%

'Deep and intense red fruits on the nose. Rich and full on the palate. Fruity and luscious.' AB  
'Good for off-dry lovers.' EoH  
£15.31\*, ex-Cellars, 01306 876616

### 74 Camel Valley Cornwall Pinot Noir Rosé 2006 80%

'Mid-pink with big persistent mousse. Tangy, marmalade-laden palate with citrus and earthy notes. Long, fresh and drinkable. Might work with bacon and eggs!' CP  
£16.00, ex-cellars, Great Western Wines, Wine in Cornwall

### 72 Biddenden Gribble Bridge Quality Sparkling Rosé 2005, Kent 60%

'Touch of sulphur on the nose. Cherry and green plum on the palate. Good acidity. Excellent as an aperitif.' AB  
£10.28, ex-cellars, 01580 291726

### 72 Chapel Down, Rosé Brut NV 60%

'Soft, black cherry fruit flavours. Good balance of acidity and sweetness.' EoH  
'Juicy palate with liquorice, orange peel,

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The UK Vineyards Association is made up of six regional groups. See [englishwineproducers.com](http://englishwineproducers.com) for further info, including details of English Wine Week which runs from Sat 24 May to Sun 1 June, and to order your own map, with vineyard locations and opening times.

PHOTO: CAMEL VALLEY



pomegranate and minerals. Elegant and long with a spicy finish.' CP  
£12.75, ex-cellar, 01580 763033

**70 Pannier Brut Rosé NV, Champagne 20%**

'Very mineral and flinty. Tight fruit but good long acidity. Good balance. Interesting.' AB  
£20.01, HBJ, 020 7922 1618

**61 Codorníu Pinot Noir Brut NV, Penedes, Spain 80%**

'Roses and pomegranate with citrus and lime. Elegant palate of red berries and good balance.' AB  
£7.65, Matthew Clark, 01275 8914500

**60 Domaine de Brizé, Saumur Brut Rosé NV, Loire, France 70%**

'Great value, this is deep pink with a big mousse. Off-dry palate with pineapple, and earthy, leafy, mineral notes. Might work with BBQ ribs.' CP  
£6.30, Great Western Wine, 01225 322800

**CONCLUSIONS**

- The highest score of the tasting went to the ultra-smart Hush Heath 2004.
- This was the most consistent flight in the tasting.
- English wines took four of the five top spots.
- Easier to assess the origin, with an average Recognition Factor of 63%. Again, English wines were easier to recognise (68%) than those from the Rest of the World (58%).
- 'This flight was the highlight for me.' DK
- 'This shows what England can do in terms of producing sparkling wines with lots of finesse and elegance.' AB

**STILL ROSE WINE**

*Wines from Bandol, Touraine and Spain made up the Rest of the World team.*

**71 Campo Viejo Rosé 2006, Rioja Spain 100%**

'Ripe red berry nose. Intense, rich and full-on. Good finish of marinated strawberries and biscuits.' AB  
'Morello cherry nose, herbal character on palate and a good crunchy finish.' DK  
RRP: £7.49, Waverley TBS

**60 Domaine Terrebrune, Bandol Rosé 2006, France 80%**

'Pretty expensive, although you can tell it is of high quality. Good strawberry nose with some herbal characters. Length and finish are taut but lovely.' DK  
£10.50, FMV, 0207 819 0360

*Also tasted, Domaine de Marce Touraine Rosé 2006.*

**CONCLUSIONS**

- With one English rosé not turning up and the other proving faulty, this tiny category lost much of its direction.
- If English wines are to cash in on the rosé boom, much needs to be done.

**RED WINE**

*Wines from the Loire and Italy made up the Rest of the World team.*

**73 La Tunella, Pinot Nero 2005, Colli Orientali del Friuli, Italy 30%**

'Peppery tomato character, hints of oak with spicy notes and very soft tannins.' AB  
£ 7.90, Corney & Barrow, 020 7265 2530

**69 Denbies, Cellarmaster's Choice Redlands 2006, Surrey 60%**

'Pleasant, easy drinking but with personality. A nose of raspberry and cherries, sweet clean fruit on the palate with good acidity and pleasant finish. Good food wine thanks to fruit character and acidity. Would suggest with duck, pork and rustic dishes.' DK  
£7.65\*, Denbies, 01306 876616

**69 Beeches Vineyard Red 2006, Three Choirs, Herefordshire 80%**

'Very pale colour with a confectioned nose. Very light, soft and fresh palate, with herbs and berries, but lacks intensity.' CP  
'Very gamey, carbonic maceration-type nose; soft, juicy and easy drinking.' AB  
£6.00, ex-cellar, sales@beechesvineyard.com

**68 Langlois-Château, Saumur Rouge 2006, Loire, France 40%**

**SPOT ON**

Every taster correctly guessed the origins of this quartet  
Lis Neris Pinot Grigio 2006, Friuli, Italy  
Campo Viejo Rosé 2006, Rioja Spain  
Meopham Valley Sparkling 2004, Kent  
Stanlake Park Gewurztraminer 2006, Berkshire

**MISTAKEN IDENTITY**

The whole panel thought that these three wines came from the UK.

Don David Torrontés 2007, Michel Torino Estates, Argentina  
Hunter's Miru Miru 2005, Marlborough, New Zealand  
Langlois-Château, Cuvée Quadrille Crémant de Loire 2000, France

'Fruity nose, hints of smoke and tomato leaf. Tannins still evident on a medium body. Easy to drink with food.' AB  
£6.89, Mentendorff, 020 7840 3600

**CONCLUSIONS**

- Small, but perfectly formed, this flight surprised the panel with its high quality.
- Both English wines were relatively high-scoring suggesting that in the right hands, red grapes, do have considerable potential.
- The English wines were slightly easier to recognise.
- 'I was pleasantly surprised by the reds. There was a sense of place about all of them. Of a higher standard than the whites.' EoH

*Thanks to Christian Butler, a champion of seasonal west country influences, and his welcoming team for hosting our tasting in their delightfully-placed restaurant, Northbank, near St Pauls and opposite Tate Modern by the Millennium Bridge (northbankrestaurant.com).*



**'we shall ripen them on the beaches...'**

English wine is fast improving, and it pays to keep in touch. On the basis of this tasting, still white wine can be good, with fine aromatics, if limited food-matching potential. Still rosés need more work, while reds are punching above their weight. English white sparklers are generally good but still a fair way behind the French in appeal. Rosé sparkling shows real promise. Fancy something different for your list? There's where to start.