



WELCOMBE HILLS VINEYARD – A GUIDE

2024

“GOOD COMPANY, GOOD WINE, GOOD
WELCOME CAN MAKE GOOD PEOPLE”

Planted in 2001, Welcombe Hills vineyard near Stratford upon Avon is a growing producer of high quality English Wines. This guide contains all you need to know to conduct an informative tour and provide responses to the majority of consumer questions.

Dominic Hewett – Tour Host, Welcombe Hills Vineyard

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1. History

1.1 Shakespeare

Welcombe Hills Vineyard is located approximately 3 miles from Stratford upon Avon. The area is famous for being the birthplace of the playwright William Shakespeare (1564 to 1616) who was the son of John Shakespeare who was a glove maker from Snitterfield and Mary Arden. The vineyard is planted on land once owned by Shakespeares paternal grandfather , Richard Shakespeare. Welcombe Hills wines are named after Shakespeare plays and characters.

1.2 The Monarchs Way

In 1651 King Charles II army was defeated by a Parliamentary force under Oliver Cromwell. The battle was the last major engagement of the English Civil Wars. After the battle King Charles was able to evade capture managing to reach Shoreham on sea before his pursuers where he took ship to France. His escape route was a long one and his flight included various incidents including a famous one where he hid in a hollow oak tree near Boscobel House. This gave birth to the name 'The Royal Oak' that is the name of many public houses in England. The 'Monarchs Way', established in 1994, is 625 miles long and follows the route the king took. The route runs along 'Kings Lane' which passes the vineyard.

1.3 Snitterfield Fruit Farm

The Vineyard is located on land once owned by and part of Snitterfield Fruit farm. This large fruit growing business was famed for PYO in the 1970's and 1980's. It was once home to hundreds of Apple, Pear, Plum and Cherry tree's and supplied large businesses such as Waitrose and Mr Kipling. The business failed in the early part of the 21st century and the land was sold to a mix of private and business buyers. The land is now home to a number of small businesses including Cobb's Farm Shop and The Apple Barn.

1.4 Vineyard Planted

The vineyard was planted by Chris Gallimore in 2001 as part of a retirement project. Chris also combined the two cottages on site , named 'Vineyard' and 'Lamplighter', into one property. The vines were planted in three stages with additional vines planted in 2003 and 2006 taking the original vineyard up to around 2,500 vines. As it was planted as a hobby vineyard it was, somewhat unconventionally planted with nine

different grape varieties. More detail can be found on these in the next section. After some notable success, with wines sold to the Houses of Parliament and The Savoy Hotel, sadly Chris passed away in 2011.

1.5 Current Ownership

Following a job move to the midlands Jonathan & Nichola Kelsey bought the property in 2017. Whilst they had been looking for a home/business combination a vineyard was not a specific objective. However, they fell in love with the property and site. In 2018 they started running the vineyard as a business. Not without significant challenges they have achieved great success over the past 5 years and have won a number of domestic wine awards for the wines including their first gold medal for the excellent 2021 white wine 'Twelfth Night'.

2 The Vineyard

2.1 Climate

The UK climate is defined as a 'humid temperate oceanic climate'. It is 'temperate' in that temperature differences between summer and winter are less pronounced than found in truly continental climates. In Warwickshire temperatures peak at an average of 22 degrees centigrade in July. Rain tends to be plentiful and is evenly spread throughout the year with an average of 8 days of rain each month. Daylight hours are highest between April and August with 14 hours in April , 16.5 hours in June reducing to 14.5 hours in August. Summer is from June to August and Autumn from September to November. The UK often experiences 'Indian Summers' where warm conditions continue into September.

2.2 Location & Topography

The vineyard is located near Snitterfield in the 'Welcombe Hills'. These gentle hills are just a couple of miles north-east of Stratford Upon Avon. The vines are planted on a gentle, south-east facing slope that starts at approx 100m above sea level and slopes down to 80m. The positioning of the vineyard provides advantages for viticulture. The aspect helps to maximise sun exposure whilst the slope helps with sunlight interception and drainage. The soil is made up of very stony clay which combines drainage with good water retention. Finally, the site is exposed to cool breezes which help reduce humidity and reduce disease pressure.

The vineyard is approximately 5 acres in size (2ha) Vine density is around 3,000 vph. Yields have varied from 0.5 tonnes to 5 tonnes. Best year and worst year?

2.3 Vines & Varieties

The vineyard has been planted in various stages over the last 23 years with the original plot of 2,500 vines planted between 2001 and 2006 and then the new section of 3,500 vines planted in 2020 taking the total to c6,000.

The original plot contains 9 varieties detailed below with proportions and the new section was planted to one third each Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Bacchus.

2.3.1 Pinot Noir (20%)

One of the worlds most famous varieties and one that almost every winemaker aspires to make a great wine from. Pinot Noir buds and ripens early thus making it suitable to grow in cool climates. Unlike Chardonnay, yields must be limited to produce high quality wines. It is a delicate variety with thin skins and often tight bunches meaning greater susceptibility to botrytis bunch rot. It is also prone to millerandage and diseases like downy and powdery mildew. It is a versatile grape that can be used to make both still and sparkling wines. In cool climates, when vinified as a red, it has flavours of strawberry, raspberry and red cherry. Wines are often oaked but gently to avoid overwhelming the varieties delicate flavours and aromas. Vessels used for ageing thus tend to be used barrels. At Welcombe Hills Pinot Noir is used to make sparkling wines, Rose and in good years a light Red wine.

2.3.2 Pinot Noir Precoce (30%)

Known as 'Fruhburgunder' in Germany this variety is a mutation of Pinot Noir with the principle difference being that it ripens around 10 days earlier than Pinot Noir. The descriptive nomination 'Precoce' means early. Wines made from Pinot Noir Precoce are very closely similar, if not indistinguishable, from those of Pinot Noir. However, due to it's earlier ripening characteristic the wines may be slightly fuller bodied with slightly lower acidity. The grape fell out of favour in Germany due to problems with vine diseases but in recent times has seen something of a revival. At Welcombe Hills the variety is used to produce Rose and Red wines.

2.3.3 Chardonnay (15%)

Chardonnay is one of the most planted grape varieties in the world and is planted to differing degrees in most wine producing countries around the world. It is not as fussy as Pinot Noir and will happily grow in a variety of climates producing different

expressions. Similarly to Pinot Noir it buds and ripens early making it suitable for cool climates. It will grow on a variety of soils but some of the worlds finest examples come from the limestone/clay soils of Burgundy. The vine can be quite vigorous and therefore careful canopy management may be required to avoid shading that would reduce the quality of the fruit. One of the grapes great advantages is that it can produce relatively high yields without loss of quality. This characteristic is one of the reasons why it is favoured for production of sparkling wines. At Welcombe Hills Chardonnay is used to make sparkling wines.

2.3.4 Dornfelder (10%)

This is a black grape of German origin. It was created in 1955 via a crossing of Helfensteiner and Heroldrebe. It was created to enable the production of darker and more 'internationally styled' reds in a country where traditionally reds were light and pale. Dornfelder is easier to grow than Pinot Noir as it has better resistance to rot and it also achieves higher must weights. The grape was introduced to England in the late 1980's where it is mostly used for production of Rose and Sparkling wine. At Welcombe Hills the variety is mostly used for Rose.

2.3.5 Bacchus (10%)

Named after the Roman god of revelry and wine, Bacchus is another grape of German origin having been created as long ago as 1933. It has found great success in England where it is otherwise very difficult to ripen top white wine grape varieties sufficiently to make good still wine. In Germany's warmer conditions, and according to Oz Clarke, it's something of a 'sugar machine' but in England it ripens much more slowly and retains it's hedgerow scent of Elderflower along with grapefruit and peach notes depending on how warm the vintage was. The wine also has slightly lower acidity than Sauvignon Blanc and is less aromatic. Due to the fact that it will grow almost anywhere in England it has become something of a 'poster boy' for English still white wine. Whilst it's flavour may not be directly comparable it's bright and refreshing style sits comfortably alongside Sauvignon Blanc as an English alternative. At Welcombe Hills the variety is either vinified on its own to make 'Tempest' or sometimes blended with Sauvignon Blanc to make 'Twelfth Night'.

2.3.6 Sauvignon Blanc (5%)

Over the last 50 years or so this grape has come from obscurity to be one of the worlds most famous grapes. This grape which originates from Bordeaux is now

widely planted around the world but it is arguably New Zealand who is most famous for it. The grape buds late but ripens relatively early. It has very high acidity and flavours that range from very grassy to more tropical depending on the place it is grown. Welcombe Hills has a small planting of this variety and when fully ripe it is blended with Bacchus to make 'Twelfth Night'.

2.3.7 Seyval Blanc (5%)

This grape is a French crossing, created in 1921, that is no longer allowed in AOC wine areas due to the fact it is not pure *vitis vinifera*. It ripens early so suits the cool climate. When vinified as a still wine it produces very variable results sometimes with a vegetal character. So in England the vast majority that is still cultivated is used as the base for sparkling wines because of its ability to produce good crops of fairly neutral, high acid juice. However it is falling out of favour and none of the top sparkling wines include it anymore. At Welcombe Hills the Seyval is used as part of the sparkling wine blend.

2.3.8 Auxerrois (4%)

Auxerrois Blanc is most widely grown in Alsace in France where it is blended with, and allowed to be counted as, Pinot Blanc. It is a full sibling of Chardonnay. A number of plantings exist in England and there has been some success making both still and sparkling wines. However, despite this, the grape is not included in the UK Sparkling Wine PDO scheme. At Welcombe Hills the variety is blended into the sparkling wines.

2.3.9 Kerner (1%)

An aromatic white grape variety that was bred in 1929 in Germany where there are significant plantings. It buds late and is winter hardy. When vinified as a varietal wine it can have a pronounced bouquet of white fruit, apple, grapefruit and mango. The amount planted at Welcombe Hills in the original vineyard is very small and is therefore blended.

2.4 The Vine Cycle

2.4.1 Winter (Dec – Feb)

2.4.1.1 The Vine in Winter

During this period the vine becomes dormant. During Oct and November the leaves drop leaving only the trunk of the vines and the canes and shoots from the previous growing season. During this period the vine sustains itself using stored carbohydrates.

2.4.1.2 Winter Vineyard Management

Winter pruning is the key job that is carried out during this period. At Welcombe Hills winter pruning is conducted by a professional vineyard management team during February and March. This is followed by training and tying down mostly using the 'Double Guyot' technique which involves selecting two of the strongest shoots from the previous year and tying them down one either side of the trunk and attached to the lowest wire of the trellis. Winter pruning must be completed before bud burst in April.

2.4.2 Spring (Mar – May)

2.4.2.1 The vine in Spring

During this period the vine starts to come back to life. Compound buds that formed in the previous growing season now burst and grow into shoots and leaves over the period of April to July. The timing of bud burst depends on a number of factors that mean the exact timing can vary each year. The main factors are air temperature, soil temperature and grape variety. The hope is that buds burst in a synchronised way leading to fairly uniform growth and development. At Welcombe Hills budburst tends to be in mid to late April.

2.4.2.2 Spring Vineyard Management

During this period the vine is generally left to grow and develop. Some shoot removal and trunk cleaning ('bud rubbing') will likely be done with a focus on removing buds from below the fruiting wire of the trellis. Spraying to protect against disease often starts just before budburst. It is also the time when weed and grass growth will need to be managed in between the rows on a periodic basis.

2.4.3 Summer (Jun – Aug)

2.4.3.1 The Vine in Summer

As the shoots grow and develop, they also form what are called 'inflorescences'. The number of these that are formed is important as hopefully many of them will become a ripe bunch of grapes. However, the yield and quality of the grapes in the growing season is strongly influenced by the processes of flowering and fruit set. Firstly, within around 8 weeks of bud burst, the inflorescences burst into flower and shortly after this the flowers self-pollinate and hopefully become a very small green grape. Not all flowers successfully pollinate and typically only around 30% become grapes. Hopefully the weather during this period will be helpful and not include rainy, cloudy and windy conditions. In particular, strong winds, can heavily damage flowers and interrupt fruit set.

Grape development then proceeds. Water flows into the hard green grapes and they start to grow in size. Acids, tannins and aroma compounds start to accumulate. Mild water stress is important at this stage of the process. Too much water slows this stage as it may encourage too much continued shoot growth.

Then around August time we move into the lovely period of 'Veraison' where the berry growth phase changes to a ripening phase. White grapes start to look more translucent and black varieties start to become red in colour. At this point ripening starts, sugars start to accumulate, acid levels fall and tannins and aroma compounds develop.

2.4.3.2 Summer Vineyard Management

Vineyard management tasks during this period will include 'tucking in' where shoots have become long enough. This process continues until the vines reach the top of the canopy. Shoot trimming will also occur once shoots have grown above the top wire. This typically occurs at the end of flowering. Side growth and top growth may require further cutting as the season goes on. Finally, the first de-leafing will be carried out again just after flowering to avoid too much shade followed by a second de-leafing just after veraison.

2.4.4 Autumn (Sep – Nov)

2.4.4.1 The Vine in Autumn

The final furlong and the run up to the exciting time of harvest is also a nervous time. During this period the grapes will hopefully complete the ripening process and be harvested to be made into delicious wine. The grapes will be tested regularly during

this period and once the perfect balance of sugar and acidity is reached the harvest will be called. At Welcombe Hills the harvest typically occurs in the first half of October and grapes are harvested by hand by small teams of volunteers. Due to the number of different grape varieties the harvest may be spread across 3 or 4 days. Grapes will be picked in the morning and are transported to the winery as quickly as possible.

2.4.4.2 Autumn Vineyard Management

Up until harvest management of pests and unwanted visitors will become more of a focus. As the grapes become ripe other 'locals' including deer, badgers and especially birds will look to supplement their diets with grapes. For instance ripe grapes may be protected with netting to deter birds. After harvest the vines are given a final spray to provide them with nutrients before they go into hibernation.

2.5 Winemaking & production

Welcombe Hills wines are made at Halfpenny Green winery in Staffordshire. Halfpenny green own approx. 40 acres of their own vineyards but are also a 'contract winemaker' for a large number of other English vineyards.

2.5.1 Sparkling Wines

The white sparkling wine is generally made from a blend of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Auxerrois. The Rose Sparkling is made from Pinot Noir. The grapes are gently whole bunch pressed to extract a clear juice that is made into a dry wine base that is left to rest in tanks until it's ready for bottling and secondary fermentation. Secondary fermentation follows the method used in Champagne where a mix of yeast, sugar and nutrients ('liqueur de tirage') is added to achieve a second fermentation. The bottles are sealed with crown caps and laid down for a variable period depending on style during which the second fermentation completes, the yeasts die and settle into a sediment and start to break up in a process called 'autolysis'. This process adds texture and that all important 'biscuity' complexity'. The longer the wines are kept in contact with the yeast cells the more pronounced is the yeasty character. Welcombe Hills sparkling wines (Ophelia Brut and Rose) are aged for between 2 and 5 years depending on the style objective. When the wines are ready for release they are 'disgorged' with the yeast sediment removed via a process called 'riddling'. This process is conducted by a machine called a 'gyropalette' that encourages the yeast into the neck of the bottles over a 3 or 4 day period.

2.5.2 White Wines

Welcombe Hills white wines are mainly made with Bacchus (Tempest) sometimes blended with a small proportion of Sauvignon Blanc (Twelfth Night). The grapes are destemmed and pressed with no skin contact. They are then fermented in stainless steel tanks at cool temperature to maintain primary character before stainless steel maturation for 6-8 months before bottling.

2.5.3 Rose Wines

Welcombe Hills Rose (A Rose by any other name) is made with a fairly equal blend of Dornfelder and Pinot Noir Precoce. The grapes are crushed and fermented on their skins but only for a short period of approximately 24 to 48 hours. The wine is then drained and the resulting pale pink and partially fermented must completes it's fermentation in stainless steel tanks. It is then matured for a similar length of time to the white wines.

2.5.4 Red Wines

In good vintages Welcombe Hills is able to make a light and elegant style of red wine (Othello) It is generally made with Pinot Noir that is sometimes blended with Pinot Noir Precoce. The grapes are de-stemmed and crushed before being given a roughly 10 day fermentation in stainless steel tanks. Once complete the wine is pressed off the skins and put into stainless steel tanks to settle before being transferred to French oak barrels for between 6 and 12 months. Due to the relative delicacy of the wine the oak barrels used are generally 'second use' which means they have a subtle impact on the texture and flavour of the wine.

2.6 Markets

Welcombe Hills vineyard is developing the channels through which its wines are sold. 'Cellar Door' (or sales direct to visiting customers) remains the dominant route to market but online sales are growing well as is sales to Hospitality and Trade customers

2.6.1 Cellar Door (70%)

Sales to customers who visit during tour season and to winter events accounts for approximately 70% of sales.

2.6.2 Online Sales (15%)

Online sales have grown to 15% and peak during the Christmas period.

2.6.3 Hospitality (10%)

A number of local hotels and pubs now offer Welcombe Hills wines on their drinks menus. Further details of these businesses can be found in the staff section of the website.

2.6.4 Retail (5%)

Sales to wine and other retailers is also an important category. A growing number of mainly local businesses stock Welcombe Hills wine and a full list is available on the staff section of the website.

3 The English Wine Industry

3.1 Growth

The English wine industry has grown considerably over the last 20 years. Encouraged by the success of early pioneers like Nyetimber and a growing appreciation for the geology of the South East of England many new players have emerged and existing businesses have grown (England's largest producer is Chapel Down who produce around 2 million bottles pa). The climate in the home counties of Sussex, Kent and Hampshire and other counties like Essex is becoming more and more conducive to viticulture. Successful viticulture is also spreading to other parts of England, Wales and even Scotland. Amazing wines are made in Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Glamorgan and of course lets not forget Warwickshire!! In the year 2000 there were approximately 200 vineyards but as of 2022 this has increased to near 900. There are now around 200 wineries. Vineyard planting is also proceeding at pace. The number of vines planted in 2017 was around 1 million but as of 2021 it was already estimated to be 4.6m. Around 62% of England's vineyards are located in the South East with 12% in Wessex and 10% in East Anglia with the rest spread across a number of other counties.

Some of the growth of English wine has been facilitated by outside investment and in particular from French Champagne houses. Both Taittinger and Vranken Pommery have bought land and established vineyards in the south of England. Taittinger established 'Domaine Evremond' and planted it's first vines in 2017. The first wine is due for release in 2024. Pommery have been marketing the 'Louis Pommery England' brand since 2014 which is made via a collaboration with local Hampshire wine makers.

3.2 Grape Varieties

Plantings of grape varieties in the UK is dominated by the Champagne grapes. Pinot Noir (33%) , Chardonnay (32%) and Meunier (13%). The next most important grape is Bacchus (c10%) followed by a number of other grapes including Seyval Blanc.

3.3 Wine Styles

The success of English wine has been spearheaded by sparkling wine which accounts for approx 70% of production. Still White and Rose then makes up around 25% and red only approx 5% depending on the vintage. English sparkling wines have to be made using the traditional method in order to be labelled 'English Sparkling Wine'. A few sparkling wines are made using the 'Charmat', or 'tank', method used to produce Prosecco. Most English Sparkling wine is 'Brut' in style where the wines are finished with approximately 8-12g per litre of residual sugar.

3.4 Production and sales

Production of English wine has reached circa 10 million bottles p.a. and is expected to grow to around 40 million bottles by 2040. Sales have only just caught up with production. Due to the rapid expansion of vineyard plantings there is expected to be a period where production may exceed sales. Exports of English wine are very small at approx 4%.