

fine lees



Biodynamics

– a load of manure?

Fine Wine

An evolving world

English sparkling

– the next Champagne?

The unfiltered wine report

QUALITY IN WINES

IS MUCH EASIER TO RECOGNISE

THAN TO DEFINE

MAYNARD AMERINE

Issue 02

“Quality in wines is much easier to recognise than to define” – Maynard Amerine

This quote has constantly resonated with me during my time in the wine industry. It is very easy for people to give examples of ‘quality’ wines but less so to describe exactly what contributes to that perception of quality – and whether or not can it be replicated.

In this issue of Fine Lees we take an in-depth look at several categories and try to answer those difficult questions that we at Bibendum love to discuss. Is fine (wine) good enough? Is Biodynamics a load of bulls**t? Should we be comparing English sparkling wine to Champagne?

I’m not promising you the answers to these questions, only opinions – but some pretty credible opinions at that: Gergely Barsi Szabo, from our fine wine team, is poetic in describing what the term ‘fine wine’ means to him, on page 11; James Millton of Millton Vineyard in New Zealand gives a fittingly personal perspective on biodynamics on page 8; and we hear from top sommeliers who tell us why they are having to find more room for English sparkling on their wine lists (p16).

After all, it is the questions that drive us and that makes even the most experienced wine professional crack open the next bottle and answer your question with another one.... So get stuck in and let’s keep the conversation going!

Cheers,

Joseph Arthur



Joseph has long succumbed to the fact that a thirst for wine knowledge will never be totally quenched, so he decided that the fine wine team at Bibendum would be a sound place to be constantly refilling his cup. Prior to this, he spent a few years working in vineyards and wineries in England (most recently with Gusbourne) while completing a viticulture and oenology degree at Plumpton College, where he made a one-off wine for Marks & Spencer. WSET qualified during a good stint with Majestic, he now also judges with the IWSC.

BIO DYNA MICS

– JUST A LOAD OF

manure?

Whether you love
it or think it's just
clever marketing,
biodynamics is
here to stay.

Bibendum fine wine sales
and business development
executive, Gergely Barsi
Szabo, and New Zealand
biodynamic producer,
James Millton, debates this
complex topic.

You can't prove it – but that's okay

By Gergely Barsi Szabo

Biodynamism is here to stay. Most of us in the wine trade have thankfully passed the phase of ridiculing sane people for stirring shit in a cow horn with silica. If you take a look around the market, more and more key players are applying some or all of its principles, and more and more consumers are looking for biodynamic wine. The main problem is that the debate still feels a bit sectarian.

Most of our world is built upon scientific results – cross-referenced and footnoted, endnoted and cross-referenced again. Or at least that's what we like to think. Then all of a sudden a bunch of semi-hippies come into the picture raising questions about whether this whole world as we're running it makes us happy, and how the plants should be kept happy. Sure. The plants. Happy... And it's this kind of talk that starts to confuse people.

When biodynamism comes under fire, it is usually from the scientists. "Those tree (vine)-hugging hippies have no clue what they are talking about, how can you exist without regular chemical protection?" Etcetera. There's one problem with this viewpoint: the vineyards following biodynamic viticulture look pretty good, full of life and coping with pests and diseases in their own way, thank you very much. Do we understand how it works scientifically? No. Do vines care about scientific explanations? Well, last time I checked, they don't really.

Something had to change

In 1988 French microbiologist Claude Bourguignon declared Burgundy's vineyard soils completely dead on a microbial level, due to decades of synthetic fertiliser, pesticide and herbicide usage. Since biodynamic viticulturalists did not use any of these, microbial life was thriving in their vineyards compared to the microbial deserts of their neighbours. He did not claim to have a scientific explanation, but the differences were visible.

So should we consider the Burgundy producers who over fertilised, herbicised, and pesticised their land until nothing survived, as villains? Not quite. Maybe in their drive to make the best wine, they lost track of what practices really benefited the vineyard, and what didn't.

The same is true of the food industry. By now, most of us have totally lost control of what we eat. With science on our side, most of the population puts trust into conveniently-packaged, polystyrene trays in the supermarkets. But it's an inconvenient truth that we're going to have to change our convenience-addicted ways if we're going to get anywhere close to sustainability. Some people recognise the danger, while others look the other way, and try not to notice anything.

So what happens when a bunch of people start questioning the whole system? What happens when someone points out that we live in a rather destructive and unsustainable way? Some will pay attention, but without reliable evidence about these practices, most see these whistle-blowers as a bunch of (agro)-extremists.

You don't have to pick a side

Painfully often, biodynamism gets mentioned together with conspiracy theories, the chem-trail anti-vaccination movement, and the like. But if all the info that gets to the consumer comes from the Sunday supplements or social media, it is damn hard to filter the truth. All we have left is fanboys of either this or that side, beating each other up verbally over a glass of wine.

What I see in the biodynamics movement is a group of forward-thinking, peaceful people, with pretty great ideas about agriculture, meticulousness in what they do, and very convincing wines.

It is certain that the way we live is not sustainable, even for the near future. At least the biodynamic wine producers are actively seeking and testing an alternative that seems to have pretty good results.



In harmony with nature... naturally

By James Millton,
winegrower at The Millton
Vineyard Ltd in New
Zealand

When I was a very young man I lived in a remote area of the South Island of New Zealand. At the age of seven I enjoyed growing plants and by 14 I was interested in looking at the fermentation of fruits. I liked nature – the harmony and rhythm. I have always worked with wine and when, at 28, I was given the opportunity to grow and bottle wine under my own directions, biodynamics was central to it all. The rhythm of the four seasons and the enhancement of the five senses meant there was little need for makeup or disguise. It was the opportunity to work with my head, heart and hands.



The proof is in the bottle

At the end of the day, it's about what's in the bottle and the resulting wines have a special taste, a taste of 'somewhereness' – of our place. These wines appear to have a shine or reflection when poured into a glass. We call this luminosity, a measurement of light intensity. Sweet, sour (acidity), salt (umami) and astringency (tannin) appear to be in harmony, with not one flavour too outspoken or piercingly obvious. We call this vinosity, reflecting the earth, water, air and light of, again, the place where they were grown.

It could be argued that within all of this, the phenolics – the substances that vines have produced naturally to maintain their defences and sense of place – have natural antioxidant potential, thereby lessening the need for chemical preservation. There's also no need for added proteins, used to soften harsher flavours of bitterness on the tongue, meaning the wines don't contain added animal products in the form of fish, casein or gelatine, and can therefore be enjoyed by a wider array of consumers.

So, while all wine can travel thousands of miles from the producer to the consumer, we think that the final few feet from the glass to your mouth are the most important.

We believe that before a wine can be great, it must first be true.



IS FINE GOOD ENOUGH?

Gergely Barsi Szabo, Bibendum fine wine sales and business development executive, reflects on the evolving and captivating world of fine wine.

Fine wine works best as a point of comparison. In the world of wine, these are your reference points.

You refer to them when you describe a certain bottle to your equally wine-headed mates. You remember them forever. Fine wine is your guiding light – you are what you have tasted. While the world of fine wine changed an awful lot in the past years, the joy of the chase remains.

I guess we all join the trade in the hopes of seeing them, and tasting them... the Holy Grail. Those few sips of the best – or allegedly best – juice in the world that makes commis sommeliers toil endless hours, polish millions of glasses, and withstand all the pain that the beginning brings. The tasting samples left on the somm station at the end of a night's service. Those 25 to 30mm of wine from the most famous and best areas of the world compensate for everything one suffers through until becoming a true wine professional.

Of time and place

Every bottle of wine holds a bit of luxury. A non-vital consumer good that smuggles a bit of glamour into your everyday, or your special times. Even someone popping a £4.99 Prosecco they picked up from a supermarket is connecting with Dom Perignon drinking stars. (He did not actually drink stars, and maybe he's as real as Santa Claus, but that's a different story for another day). Nevertheless, in every glass of wine there's a little bit of shared DNA with the greatest ones.

Fine wine per definition usually extends as far as the vineyard borders of Bordeaux and Burgundy. Despite the fact that these two regions represent a huge chunk of the cake – almost a third each – we cannot look at them as the exclusives of the category. The final third consists of a very colourful collection of wines, from Umbria and Ljutomer Ormoz (in Slovenia), to the remote vineyards of Robertson in South Africa.

So what makes these all fine wine? I've been trying very hard over the past decade to come up with a definition – and for me there's one word that says it all:

Unrepeatability

Why people matter

It may be the best quality fruit and the most ideal vintage, but if it falls into the wrong hands, you won't get much joy from it. The person behind the label – whether that's the owner, viticulturist or cellar master – really makes a difference. That is the reason why certain producers' bog standard Bourgogne Blanc sells for the price of a less prestigious house's Grand Cru. I am looking at you Coche Dury!

Each and every bottle of wine is meant to be drunk. And no matter how expensive, it is being drunk.

Unlike art, each year there's less and less bottles to buy of the same vintage of fine wine, making it even rarer and dearer. Unrepeatable origin – unrepeatable time, and the right people's care. Add to all of these the rarity in volume and its price has a guaranteed exponential growth. Oh, and it kind of helps if it tastes bloody good.

The weird and wonderful

I remember the first real cellar I walked into a decade ago. It was my first sommm job in London in a very, very French, luxury brasserie. The room was tiny, no larger than four standard London phone boxes, but it had everything I held dear at the time. All the wines I had read about. All the labels I saw at the bottom of the pages of my weathered World Atlas of Wine copy. Top Bordeaux: anything from the 1855 league up to Margaux, Mouton, Lafite, Latour, and “Ho Bryan”.

Rare Burgundy: LeMoine, Coche Dury, JN Gagnard and the gang. Super Tuscans: Tig, Sass, Mass. Grange. Special imports of Catena Zapatas from Mendoza – you name it!

In my last hospitality job nine years later at one of Hackney's legendary wine establishments, it surprisingly came with an equally claustrophobic cellar (some things never change). But the shelves were full of rarities from the weirdest, quirkiest and wackiest small producers, many from the peripheries of the marginal side of our wine world. Cru Beaujolais like Lardy and his mates. Etna. Unknown villages of Jura and the Loire. Slovenia, Utah and Southern Chile with the Garage community.

Would I call these fine wine in the very classic, penguin suited, sommelier sense? Not quite. But were they unrepeatable anywhere else? Sure thing. Did they pack a punch with originality? They did. With tiny allocations, most of them were even harder to get than the most highly regarded Bordeaux or Burgundy estates. These bottles were fine wine by all means: unrepeatable, unique, and more often than not, quite costly.

Changing ways

Along with the penguin suit, the way fine wine is being presented has changed a lot. Most of us these days are more into fixed gear bikes than gueridons, so let's put it this way: service elements have been simplified. The quality of the kit is unquestionable, but decanting a bottle of wine looks a lot less like the royal ballet in action and a lot more like a busy bartender serving his customers. The focus is simply on the content, not the packaging. If I am interested in the best crus, I want to pay for fine wine, not for the crystal chandelier and four extra service people in the dining room, right?

One thing that rocked the world of fine wine forever, and in fact pretty much redefined wine service as we know it, was Coravin.

Earlier on, if you only wanted a glass of superb wine from the higher price echelon, you had two choices: you paid for the entire bottle, or went to a place that had a high-end by the glass selection. Neither of these options are budget friendly. The problem with fine wine was that no one dared to pop the top bottles. Losing half a bottle because you couldn't sell it in time was too big a risk for most restaurants.

I started experimenting with one of the first Coravins in London. While I was super sceptical at first, I noticed that I had to keep re-ordering bottles that were previously just gathering dust in the cellar. How does it work? You simply stick the needle through any cork,

and the argon gas that substitutes the drained wine protects the remaining juice, meaning bottles can last for several months. If all your heart's desire is to taste a 1947 Cheval Blanc, you can do so now. It's still a few hundred quid for 25mm, but that's a lot cheaper than having to pay £10K+ for the bottle. In addition to making fine wine sales financially safer for somms, Coravin is also making fine wine more accessible for customers.

Our secret stash

Isn't it the rarity we're all after? The joy of the chase that ties a somm and his or her most loyal customers together. We all have secret stashes in the cellar saved for that special guest. And at Bibendum, we have an exciting and ever-evolving fine wine list - you never know what gem you might find in that excel file... While the rest of the world may not understand that adrenaline rush of just reading through a great fine wine offer, you're not alone: we're all hooked on the unrepeatable good juice.

Take a look at our fine wine list



Originally a sommelier – and a journalist in a previous life – **Gergely** joined Bibendum after years spent at Gordon Ramsay group and a year detour at Sager and Wilde. He is now part of the Bibendum Fine Wine Sales team and a Business Development Executive. As a side project G makes wine in his native Hungary, a dry Furmint from Tokaj to be precise. Follow him [@gergelywine](#).

PI IN CALA

RIOJA
DENOMINACIÓN DE ORIGEN CALIFICADA

Red RIOJA wine

Viñedos en Elvillar de Álava
DAVID SAMPEDRO GIL Viñicultor

Is English sparkling wine the next Champagne?

By Elona Hesseling, Bibendum Marketing

“English sparkling wine is a rising star!” says Tamas Toth, Bibendum business development manager for luxury hotels. With increased investment from producers, the quality of English sparkling wine continues to sky-rocket – while sales are growing at double-digit figures. But is this just a flash in the pan, or the rise of a style that can rival Champagne?

A wine-producing country at the northern

latitudinal limits for producing wine, English growers are no strangers to struggling in the name of creating something special. Frost is a big concern during flowering and ripening, and producers often have to go to extremes to protect their vines and crop. Unpredictable rain can cause further headaches, while the generally-cooler temperatures can hamper ripening of certain grapes as well as lead to lower yields and raised acidity levels.



Once considered
extreme, climate
change has
nudged England
to become a
prime location for
sparkling wine
growers from all
over the world
– most notably
Champagne

Tamas explains, “It has been proven that the weather conditions in Champagne are not great: temperatures are rising and this is not good. As a result, we can see more and more Champagne Houses buying land in the UK as the climate is better for great quality sparkling wine production. Colder and more stable, the grapes ripen to perfection to produce one of the best sparkling wines in the world.”

In addition to England’s increasingly suitable climate, the soils are ideally chalky – in fact, there’s little difference between the chalk soil found in Champagne and that of England’s Downs. Unsurprisingly, traditional-method bottle-fermented sparkling wines – the best of which are based on traditional Champagne grapes – remain England’s strongest suit.

Sparkling success

Considered an oddity not that long ago, the quality of English sparkling wine keeps improving. Producers are regularly winning prestigious awards and gaining international acclaim, even standing up to Champagne in blind tastings. In April 2016, a team from Britain’s WSTA travelled across the Channel to challenge some of France’s most influential figures in the food and wine industry to a blind tasting. The panel concluded that the English sparkling wine was better in two out of three categories, drawing equal with Champagne in a third.

According to the WSTA’s Rebekah Kendrick, this is only the beginning. “There’s a huge amount of potential still to come from the English wine industry: more planting of vines, more investment, more innovation, more awards, and more ambition. The total area under vine has more than doubled since 2009 and we are on track to produce over 10 million bottles by 2020.”

Sales are equally impressive. During the last year, we nearly doubled our value and volume sales of English sparkling wine at Bibendum, while selling to an increased number of customers. And we’re not alone. CGA reported that value sales of English and Welsh sparkling wine increased by 63% year on year, while volume sales rose by 77%.

Times are a-changing

So can English sparkling wine take on Champagne? Considering the WSET handbook doesn't even mention English sparkling wine, or list England as a producing country, it's fair to say the category remains rather niche on the world scene. This is the case even locally – and despite the recent improvements – as English wine constitutes less than 1% of wine sold in the UK.

But Tamas believes that more and more people are openminded to try English sparkling instead of Champagne or Cava.

“Champagne is becoming an extremely expensive joy and consumers have identified this already. English sparkling is a great, traditional-method sparkling wine extremely similar to Champagne. And it's made locally, making it a win-win situation!” says Tamas.

“I have to say, the market is ready for a change. Commercially speaking, English sparkling wine is a better value option, with the same characteristics as an expensive Champagne. Premium, top-end markets have already started to put a big focus on listing top-quality English sparkling wines: amazing producers with passion and spectacular winegrowing ability.”

The real deal: Ridgeview

Now run by winemaker Simon Roberts and his sister Tamara (Ridgeview's CEO), their journey started in 1995 when their parents, Mike and Chris Roberts, found a piece of land in England's South Downs and planted some Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier vines.

A stone (and a half's) throw from Brighton, their vineyards benefit from the best of British terroir: clay-loam top soil with a deep limestone ridge to bring crispness and freshness to the wines. Their philosophy is simple: minimal intervention in order to allow the fruit to speak for itself.

In just 20 years their wines have become a beacon in the English wine industry and they've been awarded over 250 medals and 27 trophies in both international and national competitions, including the prestigious English Wine of the Year title no fewer than four times.

We visited Ridgeview just before harvest last year – take a look at our video below.





Ridgeview's Simon Roberts

WHAT OUR CUSTOMERS SAY

How have attitudes towards English sparkling wine changed in recent years?

“I think people have started to look at English sparkling wine in a different way. Before it was always sceptical, but after certain events like the tasting in Paris, for example, people enjoy English sparkling wine a lot more and the attitudes towards them are much better, much more positive.”

Zareh Mesrobian, Sommelier at Ormer Mayfair, Flemings Hotel Mayfair

How would you recommend selling English sparkling wine?

“It’s a very easy comparison to make with Champagne, which is something people can grasp. We have a lot of international visitors at our restaurant who have never tried English sparkling wine and so if you can draw comparisons with Champagne, something they are familiar with, it makes them feel more comfortable, makes them understand what the product is.”

Ben Humberstone, Sommelier at Simpson’s on the Strand, The Savoy Hotel

Why do you think people should drink more English sparkling wine?

“I think people need to taste what this land has to offer. It’s very important; just like when you’re in Champagne, you drink Champagne. But this is England – so drink some English sparkling wine.”

Ryan Linton, Chef de Rang at Kaspar’s Restaurant, The Savoy Hotel



Read our English Harvest Report for 2017

Thrilla in Manzanilla

Douglas Blyde attended our series of Sherry Masterclasses in November last year. They were hosted by Ignacio Lopez de Carrizosa, brand ambassador for Manzanilla producer, La Guita, and Christina Schneider, Bibendum channel development manager and top former London bartender, at three very different London venues. The aim was to show versatility of sherry, from pairing it with food to serving it in cocktails. Here are Douglas' musings on all things Manzanilla...

"Dynamic drinks consultant and communicator Christina Schneider is fascinated by the ozone-scented, mineral Titan that is Manzanilla. The saltier and arguably infinitely more complex sibling of Fino comes exclusively from the historic town of Sanlucar de Barrameda: the starting point for the exploration of America, turned aristocrat's summer escape, and today, centre of beach horse racing, Flamenco and blotter-dry Manzanilla.

Located some 16 miles east of Jerez, wines are matured moments from the Atlantic. Here, a notably-deep, protective cap of naturally-occurring, protective yeast called 'flor' appears in the barrels, leading to a particularly lucid, tight swathe of flavours which are, says Christina, 'so awesome' that the drink punches well above its price tag to become 'probably the best value wine in the world'.





Douglas Blyde is a drinks consultant, party planner and presenter to brands, banks and a media mogul, as well as columnist for ES magazine. He has been recognised by The Spear's 500 as one of the most influential wine personalities in the UK. Follow him @douglasblyde

'Manzanilla' in an English accent

With confidence and flair, Christina whisked the incisive wines from Sanlúcar's blazing white, salt-licked, Grand Cru-grade vineyards – and indeed the Feria of Seville where, a fortnight after May's Semana Santa, La Guita slakes visitors' thirsts over more than two thirds of the 2,000 gazebos – to wintry London 1,400 miles north.

The first instalment of her curriculum to inform, educate and entertain enterprising, key members of the drinks trade occurred in late November last year at Soho's decadent-seeming and deeply-upholstered Mandrake Hotel, replete with the glitzy taxidermy confusion of a kangaroo-peacock flying above the bar. Here, velvet-suited mixologist, Andrea Benvegna's 'El Tomate de Sanlúcar' outrageously collaged Manzanilla with Mezcal, clarified tomato water and orange blossom salt, finished with a tasty, briny olive. The chic result seemed as clean as angels' tears, yet as smoky as Satan's aftershave, with a thick, umami lag weaved within the indefatigable aftertaste.

Bitterness and brine

The next day, at Fulham's Michelin-starred, game-centric, Harwood Arms pub, Christina's own 'La Alcachofa' – briefly stirred under the gaze of slender deer and big, combed water buffalo heads – saw Primrose Hill tonic water charge spritz and sweetness to the Manzanilla and, for too long forgotten, brilliantly bitter Cynar, an artichoke liqueur the hue of classic car oil. The result was so effortlessly drinkable it could quite easily have slaked sunbathers in a Hockney-esque poolside scene, their highballs illuminated by glinting ripples.

Finally, at East London's Satan's Whiskers towards the end of a considered Manzanilla-spiked week, La Guita's Manzanilla was stirred with patina rich, mature vermouth with chocolate and orange bitters in Geoff Robinson's festive, bittersweet 'Bronsolino', pepped by a soundtrack of not Flamenco, but hip hop.

As well as the core Manzanilla, Christina shared sips of the rare 'en rama'. This is a longer-matured, unfiltered selection by winemaker Eduardo Ojeda, of just three or four barrels bottled each autumn in half bottles only to preserve the distinctive tang of the style. An umami-rich experience, it came as no surprise that Japan has become one of its most important markets.

Manzanilla, Christina proves, is one of the world's most versatile wines, and belongs in everyone's glass, so long as that glass isn't the restrictive, prescriptive, antiquated and irrelevant sherry schooner..."

STOCK UP WHILE EVERYONE'S ASLEEP

#cellarsweep

Our next Cellar Sweep will take place in two months' time, at midnight on 22 March. Look out for the emails, and get ready for our fantastic after-hours fine wine sale.

If you're interested in our weekly fine wine offer, please sign up at FineWineTrading@bibendum-wine.co.uk

We look forward hearing from you!

The Bibendum Fine Wine Team: Omar, Joe, Robert and Gergely

Bibendum Wine

109a Regents Park Road, London, NW1 8UR

0845 263 6924 | tradesales@bibendum-wine.co.uk | www.bibendum-wine.co.uk

