British Wine

JAMIE PRIESTLEY, correspondent London.

If simple products need good marketing, complex ones need it even more. No marketing idea has done more for a wine region than the notorious Paris tasting of 1976.

Soon after launching his English-speaking wine shop and wine school in Paris, the Englishman Steven Spurrier dreamed up a brilliant idea: an event to compare top French and Californian wines. France's nine best wine experts were to blind-taste the best from two countries: red California vs red Bordeaux and white California vs white Burgundy. The final ingredient: a journalist in the room. Had the experts known what they were drinking, the outcome would have been predictable. But, with only their palates as information, it was a very different story. At one point the chef of Le Grand Véfour restaurant was seen carefully studying one of the anonymous whites. He smelled it, sipped it and then sighed, "Aah…back to (UK Wine Producers, formed in September this year) must grapple with the challenge that all wine regions face: how to reconcile the variety of its products with the need to develop a clear brand. If it fails to build a simple and consistent idea, it won't cut through the deafening noise already being made by the global wine market.

But this is a difficult balancing act, and the UK should learn what it can from other regions where a strong brand competes with variety. The French government helps to promote the whole Bordeaux region, yet many consumers only know its 300 crus classés – the top 5% of Bordeaux's 6000 châteaux. When they're priced high, as in 2005 for example, all of Bordeaux is assumed to be too expensive. Some consumers see past the excitement that swirls around the sents 66% of British production and twice as much is grown today compared to 5 years ago. Vineyards in the south of England share the same geology as Epernay and Reims and grow the same grapes. Indeed the champagne house Taittinger has planted vines here and will sell its first bottles of English sparkling wine in 2023. But longer term this will all change, according to a climate expert from London University who has drawn a British wine map for the year 2100. If temperatures rise by 2.2˚C, white wines will move north, and the south may produce large quantities of red (10% of British production is already red and rosé). Glasgow once made ships. Maybe it has a new future in chardonnay.

Most of all, though, British wine makers are praying for continuity, and not just in terms of the

France." Only it was a Californian chardonnay. To everyone's surprise, to the dismay of many French, to the delight of all Californians, the wine with the best overall score in each category was American (Stag's Leap 1973 cabernet sauvignon and Chateau Montelana 1973 chardonnay, both from Napa Valley). This was not only a huge day for California. France reflected on its own standards like never before, and the door was opened to serious wine makers across the world. Wine was globalised on 24 May 1976.

The latest beneficiary of the Paris tasting is Great Britain. Vines arrived here with the Romans. Finally, after 2000 unreliable years, British wine is now on the rise. The Domesday Book (a survey of Britain carried out in 1085–6) records 42 vineyards. Today there are 700 vineyards and 130 wineries. The surface area of planted vines has tripled since 2004 and will grow a further 50% by 2020, although this is still ridiculously small compared to Europe's major wine areas. We have 2000 hectares of vines compared to 115000 in Bordeaux.

Individual brands are starting to make their mark. In 2010 the Ridgeview Blanc de Blancs from Sussex was chosen as the Decanter 'Best Sparkling Wine in the World'. It beat 700 rivals and was the first wine outside Champagne to win the award. This story is not in the same league as Paris 1976, but Ridgeview now sells in Europe, Scandinavia and the USA, and plans to double its output by 2020. Meanwhile, marketing British wine as a whole is at an early stage. Its new marketing body

top 5%: China, Germany, Holland, Belgium and the French drink large amounts of Bordeaux priced at 5–15€. But in the US and UK, the world's two biggest wine importers, Bordeaux = great growths. One can see elsewhere how hard it is to change a wine reputation once it's confirmed in the minds of consumers. Argentina has built a global brand based on the malbec grape, New Zealand based on sauvignon blanc. Both countries have much more to offer, but the smart money is on brands that are already strong: four times more space is given to sauvignon blanc in New Zealand than pinot noir, and it's still growing faster. It takes a patient investor to sell a new wine idea.

What brand for British wine? The simplest current proposition is sparkling white. It represents

weather. Our harmonised, zero-rated tariff system with Europe began 44 years ago. The Wine & Spirits Trade Association and its counterparts in Europe are trying hard to persuade the negotiators to keep it. Wine *imports* were a big part of the argument for Brexit (in 2016 they were worth $4.1 billion, second only to the USA). Vote Leave talked much less about what we sell to Europe: financial services, nuclear equipment, jet engines, cars, wine. Brexiteers are still sure that the EU will be desperate to maintain good trading terms with us – a view sustained by dewy-eyed optimism or nostalgia or both. We'll see. And if we're wrong we'll tell you Europeans to go to hell, and just eat and drink our own stuff like we did in 1939–45. Cuvée Boris, anyone? It goes so well with trifle.

by Jamie Priestley