

Waitrose plant their own vines

6 Mar 2008 by JR

Britain's most upmarket supermarket chain Waitrose announced today that next year it will plant vines in England, the first UK multiple retailer to do so (although they are some years behind Laitthwaites who have a sparkling wine vineyard at Theale). Waitrose, the comestible bit of John Lewis department stores, already own a 4,000- acre farm, The Leckford Estate on the river Test in Hampshire (sounds beautiful). Waitrose's very own English sparkling wine is expected on the supermarket's shelves in 2014, allowing for three years during which the vines establish themselves and then a further couple of years' bottle maturation.

Last year Waitrose sold 90% more English wine than in the previous year and claim a 40% share of English wine sales in UK multiple retailers. (Their overall share of all wine sales among retailers is just 6%.) This planting venture comes as Waitrose claim, "there is simply not enough English wine to meet customer demand - sales growth is outstripping not only supply, but the historical growth of vineyard planting."

Justin Howard- Sneyd, MW who buys English wine for Waitrose said: "Our customers are really enthusiastic about English wines and we have seen some fantastic quality from Nyetimber, Ridgeview, Chapel Down, Camel Valley and Denbies. We are all incredibly excited about being involved with the planting and growing of our first vineyard. In addition to the Estate sparkling wine, the vineyard also provides an opportunity to connect our Wine Specialists to the production cycle of the vineyard, and to enhance their education about how wine is made."

Waitrose claim to have found suitably sheltered, south facing sites (even with climate change, English vines need all the help they can get) with chalk and clay loam soils, part of much the same geological strata as are found in Chablis and Champagne.

Another sign that English fizz is increasingly regarded as legit is that Stephen Clark who has for years been one of the more visible Champagne Charlies, representing Laurent Perrier with indefatigable service in Britain's best restaurants and bars, has moved over to sell Nyetimber sparkling wines of Sussex.

See my [tasting notes](#) on a blind comparison of England's best sparkling wines with several notable champagnes.