England's grove of wine academe

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'Plumpton' has a nice, cosy ring to it, doesn't it? But could it join the list of the world's pre-eminent centres of wine academe: Bordeaux, Montpellier and Dijon in France, Davis and Fresno in California, Adelaide in Australia, Geisenheim in Germany, Brock in Canada and so on? A new, £1.5 million Wine Centre has just been opened there, presumably with that hope in mind.

Plumpton College, a rural adjunct to the University of Brighton at the foot of the South Downs in some of southern England's most beautiful countryside, is basically an agricultural college designed to provide vocational training for hundreds of teenagers. On the 2,000-acre campus are 300 head of dairy cattle as well as ewes and sows aplenty, cereal crops and hundreds of live educational aids from birds of prey to wallabies. However 15 acres of their Sussex slopes are devoted to vines, specifically grown to provide practice for Plumpton's 80 fulltime and hundreds of part-time much more mature wine students.

Looking at the new Wine Centre's winery gleaming with stainless steel and even a few oak barrels, Mary Kelly, an Irishwoman who teaches wine chemistry at Montpellier and has her own winery in the Coteaux du Languedoc in southern France, observed, "I'm really jealous of the set-up here. We don't have anything like this at Montpellier."

Christine Parkinson, the highly respected and resourceful wine buyer of Alan Yau's Hakkasan group of restaurants in London, was alsio at the opening – not least because she sends her team on a bespoke 12-week wine course at Plumpton. "We're massive fans of the college", she assured me.

Thanks to donations from the likes of the South East Economic Development Agency and the Vintners Company, Plumpton's wine department is at last housed in an attractive, specially-designed, ecologically sound, wavy-roofed new building with tiered lecture room, two labs and a light, airy Vintners Room for wine-related events. For the moment it looks straight out on to its predecessor, a brick shed (soon to be pulled down) that is more than a little reminiscent of a prisoner of war camp. Indeed most of Plumpton's architecture has a certain Heath Robinson make do and mend feel to it.

Perhaps it is this ethos that has imbued so many Plumpton graduates with such obvious affection for the place and a spirit of camaraderie that contrasts with the earnestness that can so easily blight wine students. Or perhaps it is the resolutely cheery, ruddy-faced Head of Wine Studies Chris Foss who was hired in 1988 to start this improbable enterprise.

He was chosen because he was Anglo-French, had made wine in Bordeaux and had some experience - not directly relevant, it has to be said - in tertiary education. The then Principal John Wilson's initial decision to try to start a wine department was seen as both risky and foolhardy, but Foss has clearly inspired great loyalty as well as knowledge in the hundreds of Plumpton graduates who are now helping to run the wine business around the world. Plumpton graduates now make wine in California, Chile, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, Burgundy, Languedoc-Roussillon and of course England. Emma Rice went from editor of *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book* to enologist [US spelling] at Cuvaison winery in the Napa Valley and says "I would never have got this job without Plumpton, and thanks to the course in production, which I would thoroughly recommend, I now have a network of friends all over the world".

Foss is inordinately proud of what has been achieved since the wine department started out as two rows of vines and two glass demijohns quietly fermenting away in his office. The department now offers three fulltime wine courses including a BSc in vine-growing and winemaking, at least seven part-time courses plus those of the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, seven full time members of staff who teach vine-growing, wine-making and a newer wine business course. He is also keen to develop the research side with all fulltime students expected to play their part in, for example, adapting a milk analyser for wine analysis or investigating the importance of exactly when bentonite fining is added to a wine.

The Wine & Spirit Education Trust is based in London and has become the pre-eminent global force in theoretical wine education but Plumpton students are expected to get their hands and everything else dirty. Professor Richard Selley of Imperial College, London, invited by Foss to celebrate the opening with an apposite lecture on climate change, told me that Plumpton's is the only library he knows with a notice telling students to take their rubber boots off before entering. [opt cut to **I met two girls from Manchester who came to Plumpton every week on a part-time course and loved being thrown on to a tractor and being expected to make their very own wine.

Winemaking one day a week sounds implausible, or at least difficult, but there seems to be no shortage of energy and gusto within the ranks of students and staff which includes winemaker and Plumpton graduate Peter Morgan who once worked at Nyetimber, producer of some of England's finest wine. (One of his bottles of half-made fizz in a nearby bottle stack exploded halfway though the Principal's speech at the opening ceremony.) The sparkling Plumpton Estate Pinot-Chardonnay Reserve seems to this palate to be the most successful of the college's own wine range so far.**]

Practical wine courses are of course on offer all over the world, but Foss is keen to stress Plumpton's unique selling proposition: "We're the only place delivering fulltime courses in wine production and business in Europe in English."

Iindeed it is the English language that may well hold the key to Plumpton's success. Many of the students come from overseas. There are currently students from France and Portugal who have deliberately turned their backs on more obvious alternatives in their native countries because they want to combine their wine studies with learning English. Demand from South Korea in particular is especially healthy apparently, and I met an unforgettably confident girl from Belarus who has just finished the first of her three years of wine business studies. Tatiana Malochka intends to return to Minsk to "create a wine culture" in her native country by becoming a wine journalist or setting up her own company. Who introduced her to wine, I wondered? "Myself," she answered proudly and I do not doubt her.

Some wines from Plumpton alumni

Camel Valley, Cornwall Pinot Noir Rosé 2004 England

Trophy-winning sparkling pink – the 2005 is £22.95 www.camelvalley.com/wines

Cuvaison 2006 Napa Valley

Noel Young

Mudhouse Sauvignon Blanc 2006 Marlborough

A classic Kiwi combo of grape and place - from $10 in the US, £9 Four Walls Wine

Dom de la Pertuisane 2004 Vin de Pays des Côtes Catalanes

Full bodied red from the Agly valley - about $30 in the US

Dom de la Sauvageonne, Les Ruffes 2005 Coteaux du Languedoc

Mountain red, a blend of Syrah, Grenache and Carignan - £4.99 www.booths-wine.co.uk