Biddenden Gamay 2009 England

27 Apr 2010 by Jancis Robinson

From £7.85

Find this wine http://www.biddendenvineyards.com

Still red wines are not exactly English wine's strongest suit. They can be strangely unvinous, made from red-fleshed crossings and hybrids such as Rondo and Triomphe d'Alsace. But Biddenden Vineyards' 2009 Gamay is a delightful exception - and testimony to the unusual quality of the 2009 vintage in southern England.

Biddenden is the oldest commercial wine operation in Kent, the first vines having been planted way back in 1969 by the father of the current incumbent, Julian Barnes (no relation of the synonymous connoisseur novelist). As you can see from my amateur picture of their standard label (on their white Bacchus in this case), there is something rather traditional and even Burgundian about the image they present to the world.

These Gamay vines are about 25 years old and their produce usually finds its way into Biddenden's red blends, but in really hot years such as 2003 and 2009, they do actually manage to ripen the grapes sufficiently to produce a varietal version that can stand on its own two feet.

At last Friday's English Wine Producers tasting, traditionally held on St George's Day, this light red wine stood out for how sweetly it sang the song of Gamay. Julian Barnes told me that the vines benefited particularly from the fine weather at the end of September, so they were able to pick ripe grapes in the first week of November. Put this together with its alcoholic strength of 10.5% and you will see just what a struggle it can be to get grapes to full ripeness in the British Isles…

However, the delicately delicious result of six days' carbonic maceration really does smell like a fresh, light young Beaujolais - super juicy and refreshing. Nothing like some of the full-throttle, ageworthy 2009s I expect to see in the coming months from the Beaujolais region itself, but then nor is the price, to judge from what some of the UK merchants planning to make offers of these wines later this year are saying. The approximate retail price of the **Biddenden Vineyards Gamay 2009 England** suggested on the EWP tasting sheet was just £7.85, whereas I suspect we will see prices up in the teens of pounds for some of the 2009 Beaujolais.

We all know what hoops winemakers in hot climates have to jump through to produce the sort of lower alcohol wines sought by some wine drinkers today. Here's an example whose alcohol level needed no artificial reduction. I think it would make the most delightful summer aperitif, or a light wine for a picnic - especially for any Brit planning to entertain visitors from overseas who may be curious about what's going on in our vineyards - however atypical this particular wine is.

I'd suggest drinking this English Vineyards Quality Wine (which means that it has passed muster with the official tasting panel) this summer ideally, and ordering it via www.biddendenvineyards.com - even though this specific wine doesn't yet feature on the online ordering section of the site so you will have to send them an email. A total of 300 cases were made.