

Spurrier on sparkling form

Steven Spurrier is well known to *Decanter* readers. But what many might not know is that he's now making English sparkling wine. John Livingstone-Learmonth explains how this particular vineyard adventure was third time lucky

DURING HIS 50-YEAR journey through wine, Steven Spurrier has adopted several roles and mantles: *marchand de vin* (his term), taster, educator, agent provocateur (the 1976 Judgement of Paris), consultant editor (*Decanter*), sage (member of many international judging panels), purchasing consultant (Singapore Airlines). The only one missing from this extensive and varied CV, however, has now been filled: after two brief failed French flirtations, he is now an English vineyard proprietor, together with his wife Bella.

The route to his Bride Valley vineyard in Dorset has therefore been anything but orthodox. The first time he dabbled in ownership came somewhat fleetingly in Vacqueyras in the southern Rhône, in 1973. The vineyard was a handsome one, the Clos de Caveau, tucked away on a slope near the Hotel de Montmirail.

'It wasn't a planned exercise,' Spurrier recalls. 'I had money in a mobile bottling company in Bordeaux which went bust. Its owner made up for this by transferring 49% of the vineyard to me. But it was never something I could really get into. I simply didn't have the time to devote to it.' Almost immediately the Clos de Caveau made a loss and was sold in 1975, allowing him to concentrate on his businesses in Paris.

Already, his profile was building thanks to a combination of cash, ideas and the ability to make things happen. The following year his fame really took off when he organised the now historic Judgement of Paris blind tasting. Sensationally, it resulted in California handing out a beating to the Bordelais. With California wanting to erect the 'Steven Spurrier Gate' at the entrance to Napa, and

some of the Bordelais and Burgundians wanting to hound him out of France, Spurrier had his hands full for the next few years. 'The idea of being involved in vineyards went out of my mind,' he recalls. 'I was too busy selling wine at my Paris shop, Les Caves de Madeleine, and running the Académie du Vin wine school.'

But those too, along with an ill-advised restaurant venture, ran into problems in the 1980s. 'It was a bad decade for me financially as the Caves lost customers. By 1987 my bank balance was in trouble and I had to sell up.'

From France to Dorset

He and Bella upped sticks to Dorset, while continuing to work in Paris. The house had a cellar (a must) and a garden but no land. 'But soon after we arrived, 85 hectares on the edge of Litton Cheney village came up for sale, and Bella bought it to farm sheep.

'Just walking around the land I was immediately struck by the chalk – it is just 30 minutes' drive west from Kimmeridge – and showed some rocks to French wine critic Michel Bettane at L'Académie du Vin in Paris. When I asked where he thought they were from, he replied, "Champagne, of course". Later, when Chablis producer Michel Laroche visited the Spurriers, he took soil samples back to Chablis for analysis. 'Michel told me it was perfect for Chardonnay and other white grapes. Possibly Pinot Noir too – if we had the climate to ripen it.'

Fortunately, Spurrier wasn't in a position to go ahead in the early 1990s. 'If I had planted vines then, I would have chosen Pinot Auxerrois from Alsace to make a still, fruity wine, which would have been another financial disaster!'



Photograph: Thomas Skovsen

Instead, he focused on two major career moves. He became a consultant wine buyer for Singapore Airlines and, with several books already under his belt, began writing for *Decanter*. So, by 1994, he was back on his feet and unable to resist a project in Bordeaux. His eye had fallen on a rundown but architecturally noble 18th-century château in Entre-deux-Mers – Château Gamage.

He bought a stake with his brother. 'We owned 30% of the vineyard and saw it as an investment.' Unfortunately, it too turned out badly and the pair lost a hefty sum. 'I'm still involved in litigation with the French partner and it's now known in the family as Château Dommage,' says Spurrier ruefully. 'It was then that I swore that if ever I were to go into vineyards again, it would be with someone I could trust absolutely. Namely my wife.'

Thereafter, all ideas fell dormant until the turn of the millennium. By this point Spurrier had noted the rapidly improving quality of the sparkling wine from pioneering English vineyards such as

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Nyetimber and Ridgeview. The irrepressible wine-producing itch began to grow, aided and abetted by a warming climate. 'When walking our dogs round the perfect south-southwest facing bowl of the farm, I couldn't stop imagining a vineyard there,' he says. 'The clincher was when the sheep farm began to cost us money.'

It was his third roll of the vineyard dice. 'I decided that this time we would spend what needed spending. So I suggested to Bella that we plant vines on her farmland. Fortunately, she agreed, but only if I paid for them.' ➤

Above: Steven Spurrier in his Bride Valley Vineyard. It was once his wife Bella's sheep farm 'but I couldn't stop imagining a vineyard there', he says

Left: 11,000 bottles of Bride Valley Brut Reserve were produced from the 2014 vintage



'He called them "the little children of God", and lo and behold we were harvesting them two

weeks later'

Steven Spurrier recalls how, on his 70th birthday in 2011, the Bride Valley vines were blessed by local vicar Bob Thorne (pictured left)



First harvest

In 2007, an initial joint venture with Duval-Leroy didn't work out. But a personal approach to the powerful Boisset family with its vast wine empire did. They duly sent their top sparkling wine man, Georges Legrand, to make detailed soil and climate analyses on 30ha of potential vineyards.

These revealed that the proposed vineyard lay on an ancient seabed. It also became clear that only 10ha or 12ha were perfect for the classic Champagne varieties. The rest was either too steep or too exposed.

The ball then transferred to Pepinières Guillaume, France's top vine nursery supplier, whose famous clients include Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, Domaine Leflaive, Bollinger, Roederer and many more. Planting began in 2009 and finished in 2013. Now the completed vineyard is composed of 55% Chardonnay, 25% Pinot Noir and 20% Pinot Meunier.

As ever, it wasn't plain sailing. For instance, the Meunier didn't flourish at first. 'It's a bit of a wimp with the weather,' says Bella. And it only got going in 2014, when its vines groaned with fruit.' Thankfully, the Chardonnay got off to a much better start. Especially those vines on a beautifully exposed west-facing block whose grapes invariably go into the racy Blanc de Blancs.

When Spurrier celebrated his 70th birthday in October 2011 with friends from around the world,



'Mentally and emotionally I am 100% on this part of the operation' **Steven Spurrier on his involvement with winemaker Ian Edwards on the blend and dosage of his wine**

the vines were blessed by local vicar Bob Thorne. 'He called them "the little children of God", and lo and behold, we were harvesting them two weeks later,' Spurrier recalls, 'That crop made the first 490 bottles of Bride Valley sparkling wine.'

Then as now, the wine is expertly vinified by Ian Edwards at Furleigh Estate just 8km away as the crow flies. In 2012, vineyard manager Graham Fisher joined the team from Nyetimber. But it wasn't an easy or auspicious start. He arrived just in time for a complete washout of the harvest after six weeks of midsummer rain.

The 2013 vintage was much better, but still only yielded just over 200 cases. 'To be honest, 2014 was our first proper harvest,' says Fisher. 'We produced 3,000 bottles of Bride Valley Rosé, 6,000 of Blanc de Blancs and 11,000 of the Brut Reserve.'

In many ways Bella is more actively involved than her husband. 'She's in the vineyard every day and does the pruning and picking. She's very much *la vigneronne*,' he points out.

It hasn't always been easy for Bella, who has experienced mixed emotions since she exchanged her sheep for vines. 'I sometimes met nice people who were about to retire, and they would tell me "Oh, we thought we'd plant a vineyard...". At which point I would practically shout "For goodness sake,

don't – it will take all your money and time and probably kill you before your time. Go on a nice cruise instead, please!" And then, of course, 2014 comes along, with its 31 tonnes of crop, and you forget all that.'

Elegant style

So now the good ship Spurrier has been well and truly launched. More importantly, it's already steering an ambitious course. 'Having taken the best advice and bought vines from the world's leading nursery, that permits an aspiration,' says Spurrier. 'The best machinery and label design are also part of the piece.'

But what of the style? A clue lies in the two sparkling wine producers he would most like to emulate: in Champagne, Pol Roger; and in England, Ridgeview. Given his preference for lightness and elegance, he regards Bride Valley very much as an aperitif wine.

As a result, he favours a dosage of nine grams per litre. 'For now, 8g/l is too green, but as the vines mature that may be possible.' Spurrier is most hands-on with the assemblage and the dosage. 'Mentally and emotionally I am 100% on this part of the operation.'

He says the Brut Reserve 2014 is likely to end >

Above: dawn breaks over young Chardonnay vines on Bride Valley Vineyard, which look down over the village of Litton Cheney in Dorset

Photographs: Thomas Skovsø (2); Mick Rock/Cephas



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up as one third each of Pinot Noir, Meunier and Chardonnay and will be blended in June. 'The Pinot Noir provides weight, while the Meunier gives it spice and vitality. I also think it will allow the blend to mature a little earlier.'

Edwards is delighted to have someone as precise, knowledgeable and expert as Spurrier to work for. His leaning is definitely towards a drier style, and he points out that the Bride Chardonnay differs quite significantly from his own Furleigh Estate Chardonnay. 'Steven's has much lower acidity and starts with a chalky character that diminishes over two years. At Bride, the chalk has very little topsoil above it, whereas we are on green sand over clay.'

Bride Valley is still in its infancy, but the Spurriers are confident of breaking even by 2018. 'We need to achieve a production level of 25,000 bottles each vintage to do that,' says Spurrier. 'From our current plantings, we can average 35,000 bottles per harvest, which will take us into profit.'

Of course, success is equally contingent on quality and market reaction. 'So far, the professionals and amateurs I've shown it to have been impressed,' says Spurrier. 'I am aware that Bride Valley benefits from my being well-known in the wine world,' he adds. 'But I'm thrilled that people want to try it. That experts like [World's Best Sommelier 2010] Gerard Basset have commented on its lightness, vivacity and elegance is a source of much personal pleasure.'

For now, Spurrier is preparing sales around the world, buoyed in part by the arrival in Dorset of his daughter Kate, who helps with the marketing. Liberty Wines will distribute Bride Valley in the UK and Boisset will be the major importer into France,

Above: soil analysis revealed that 10ha to 12ha of the Bride Valley land was suitable for the classic Champagne varieties

Right: Bella Spurrier, with labrador Maud, harvesting Chardonnay grapes in October 2014



Photographs: Mick Rock/Cephas

the US 'and whatever other markets they want it for'.

'There is no formal business relationship with Boisset,' says Spurrier. 'It was and still is very much a "hands across the Channel" feeling. But without their help, input and encouragement, we might well not have started on this adventure.'

It's also a very long way from those earlier stumbles in Vacqueyras and Bordeaux. As Spurrier observes, 'I can't imagine a better or more satisfying culmination to my career in wine than this.' **D**

John Livingstone-Learmonth is an awarded wine writer, author, speaker and judge, and a close family friend of the Spurrier family