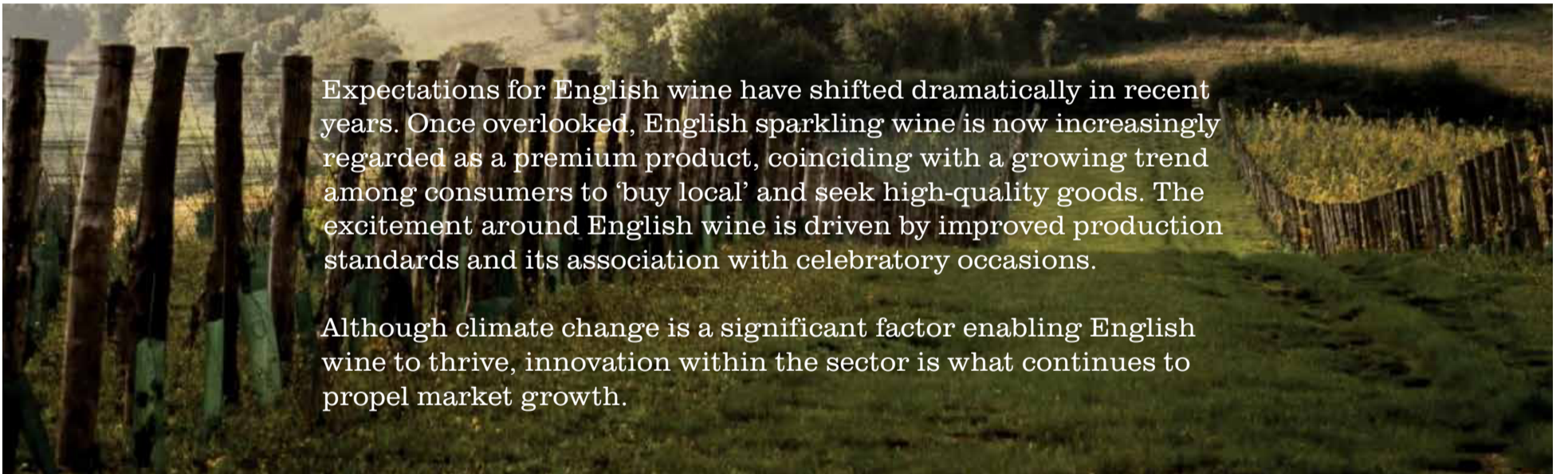




Silverhand Estate



Expectations for English wine have shifted dramatically in recent years. Once overlooked, English sparkling wine is now increasingly regarded as a premium product, coinciding with a growing trend among consumers to 'buy local' and seek high-quality goods. The excitement around English wine is driven by improved production standards and its association with celebratory occasions.

Although climate change is a significant factor enabling English wine to thrive, innovation within the sector is what continues to propel market growth.



William Moreno (L) and Cristina Alves —
Farm and Conservation Team

GARY SMITH – SILVERHAND ESTATE

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SILVERHAND ESTATE

Silverhand Estate is a prominent vineyard in Luddesdown, Kent, focused on producing high-quality English wines. The estate spans 1,600 acres, with 800 acres dedicated to vines. Since its establishment, the vineyard has expanded from 25 to over 160 staff in just six years.

CEO Gary Smith explained, “The vineyard is based in Gravesham due to the unique opportunities the region presents. The estate was originally an organic farm, purchased in 2018. The area’s clay-rich Kimmeridge soil, which stretches from Dorset to Kent, provides an excellent foundation for growing vines, complemented by increasingly favourable temperatures for wine production in the UK.”

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

With changes in shopping habits, social behaviours, and climate, coupled with rising awareness of English wine as a premium product, Silverhand identified a compelling business opportunity.

The market for English wine is on an upward trajectory, with increasing consumer demand reflected in strong sales in major retailers like Marks & Spencer and Waitrose. Waitrose now sells 40% of English wine. Gary added, “Silverhand is capitalising on this growing interest, expanding production and focusing on building a strong brand presence.”

English wine producers are competing against large European producers. The UK wine industry produces around 8 million bottles annually, compared to Europe’s 200 million UK market sparkling sales. Gary sees this as an opportunity rather than a limitation, stating they are “seeking to take a larger slice of the existing pie.”

CHALLENGES

Warmer temperatures have made English wine production more feasible, but significant challenges remain. Increased rainfall, for instance, brings problems such as mildew, which requires careful management, especially for organic vineyards like Silverhand. Because of sustainability concerns, the industry is adopting more sustainable practices to reduce carbon footprints.

The biggest risk for Silverhand is lower yields due to changing weather patterns and disease pressures. To mitigate this, the estate focuses heavily on conservation and biodiversity enhancement, believing that “a healthier ecosystem will ultimately lead to better vines and higher-quality wine.” This approach involves significant investment in technology and data gathering to monitor environmental impact and improve overall efficiency.

ORGANIC INNOVATION

Innovation at Silverhand centres around organic farming and technological advancements. For example, they are testing robotic solutions like the “Vitibot” for under-vine cultivation, which helps reduce competition from weeds without resorting to herbicides.

Another innovation being trialled is virtual fencing to manage sheep grazing between the vines, though connectivity issues, such as limited Wi-Fi, present challenges in monitoring.

While robotics and automation are set to transform vineyard operations over the next decade, there is also value in returning to traditional methods, which can be seen as innovative in today’s context.

TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Silverhand’s unique selling point (USP) lies in its large-scale organic wine production, with a strong focus on sustainability and regenerative farming. Gary explains, “Intensive farming practices degrade soil quality. Our organic approach is part of a broader commitment to biodiversity and sustainability.” He believes this approach “sets us apart in a competitive market.”

William Moreno and Cristina Alves, from the Farm and Conservation Team, are proud of the company’s commitment to maintaining a working ecosystem on the estate. “The conservation team, consisting of five people, focuses on efforts such as meadows and pasture management” says William. Cristina continued how the estate uses sheep grazing to manage undergrowth between the vines while exploring innovative solutions like virtual fencing to reduce the need for physical barriers.

STEERING A COURSE

Gary Smith, an experienced leader within the food and beverage industry, has led Silverhand Estate for the past five years. His transition into the wine industry has been a steep learning curve, but his focus on organic farming and sustainable practices aims to carve out a niche for the vineyard. In addition to providing strategic leadership to deliver growth, Gary is determined to challenge consumer indifference towards organic products.

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— Gary Smith, CEO, Silverhand Estate

THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, Gary anticipates that “robotics will play a much larger role in vineyard operations, from growing and harvesting to distribution.” Advances in technology are expected to make vineyards more efficient and sustainable, reducing both labour costs and environmental impact. The UK wine industry is set to grow, with domestic consumption projected to reach 30 million bottles. When asked about the potential for exports to France, Gary smiles and avoids the question, instead outlining “exciting export opportunities to markets like Scandinavia and the US.”

Silverhand’s focus on biodiversity, along with its investment in a dedicated conservation team, places it at the forefront of the new industrial era that is unfolding. Their business model, grounded in sustainability and regenerative farming, has the potential to yield dividends in many forms, beyond return on financial investment. ■

www.silverhandestate.com

