



Alex checks his latest crop of grapes

SPARKLING *idea*

With an award-winning producer on the doorstep, **Emma Andrews** explores how wine ends up in the shops as she is given a taste of the whole process, from grape to bottle, at an English vineyard

Authentic award-winning producers of English still and sparkling wines can provide a fascinating insight into how they get from grape to bottle. The whole process from planting to harvesting, fermenting to bottling, and riddling and disgorging, can be sampled at the Carr Taylor family estate, near Hastings.

There is little downtime for our winemaker, though he feels much deserved relief at harvest time, simply because there is a decent yield! After all his hard work throughout the year and meticulous planning, an educated guess has paid off as he approaches peak production time.

In spring there's the worry about frosts and whether bud-burst is too early. As summer progresses, he is continually checking the forecasts to see when and for how long rain is likely.

"We need warm dry weather for the grapes to ripen, but our humid climate means mildew is prevalent," says winemaker Alex Carr Taylor.

"We spray as minimally as we can, but need long enough dry spells to be able to protect the vines against the wet."

As summer moves to the cusp of autumn, Alex

has to weigh up ripeness versus disease to assess the optimum time for picking – too early and there's not enough sugar which affects flavour, alcohol levels and other quality measures; too late and the crop can be reduced or even lost.

Sometime in mid to late September there is a buzz around the vineyard as pickers arrive and the race is on to get the grapes picked (all by hand), crushed and fermented.

It is an exciting time, with a great camaraderie between the pickers, who don't mind the rain or the back-breaking search for those last bunches hiding under the leaf canopy. The winemaker works around

the clock so that grapes picked during the day are pressed the same evening to ensure their quality.

The next challenge is whether that year's still wines can be blended, bottled and labelled and got to shops before the previous vintage sells out.

"Our sparkling wines require much more time and attention, with a second bottle fermentation, time on the lees, followed by riddling (turning the

bottles slowly onto the necks to get the sediment to the bottom), and disgorging (getting rid of the sediment) so for example now in 2010 we are enjoying the 2006 vintage of sparkling wines," explains Alex.

"Bottling usually goes on into February and March which is when the vineyard is being pruned. It ends up looking almost empty, without the green hue of leaves and vines, but nonetheless

satisfyingly tended and tidy. However, it's not long before spring sunshine brings out the first buds."

Passionate about their craft, the estate allows anyone to see how a vineyard runs. In addition,

there is a café serving a variety of refreshments and a shop selling the full range of wines.

With English wine becoming more appreciated this is a lovely opportunity to learn more about going from grape to bottle, all on your doorstep.

■ Call Carr Taylor Vineyard on 01424 752501 for details or log on to www.carr-taylor.co.uk

Spring sun brings out the first buds