



Contract-only winery helps growers define their own style

Last year a contract-only winery, **Defined Wine**, opened its doors just outside Canterbury, Kent, providing English wine producers with a full range of contract winemaking and storage solutions, writes **Victoria M Rose**.

Based at Highland Court Farm, Bridge, the winery and temperature-controlled bonded store, which was established in 2018 by Henry Sugden, offers everything from a full 'crate to case' winemaking service, to on-lees ageing, storage, riddling, disgorging, bottling and labelling for fellow winemakers.

While the core services on offer are as expected, Defined Wine is not your average contract winemaking facility. Unlike others in the UK, Defined Wine does not have its own vineyards, nor its own brand; it remains, at present, the only contract-only winery in the country.

"Doing things differently seems to be in my DNA and I enjoy supporting others, so we have no plans for our own brand," said Henry Sugden, founder of Defined Wine.

"Before we set the business up, I spent a lot of time talking to producers about what was important to them. Having a good relationship with the winemaker and quality equipment was clearly key, but one of the overriding messages which cropped up was that growers often felt their wines were second string for contract winemakers. I wanted to take a different approach."

"In almost every other sector people outsource, to reduce costs or utilise expertise. I have limited marketing experience, so having no brands allows us to focus solely on winemaking, leaving others to do what they do best – whether that is growing grapes or marketing. It also helps growers to reduce the capital investment they need to spend on a winery; or if they plan a winery, not to need bottling, disgorging and other capital expensive equipment that will have limited use in the year."

PRODUCERS REMAIN CONNECTED TO THEIR WINES

Not being tied to a vineyard has ultimately allowed Henry to choose the most practical, easily accessible and conveniently located site. Situated just off the A2, the unit at Highland Court farm benefits from

good access for HGVs and operations can run unrestricted 24/7 if required during the busy harvest period. During the 2019 season, to ensure that fruit was never left unpressed overnight, the team worked split shifts, taking in deliveries and running the presses for 18 to 20 hours per day during the peak period.

Located on an old fruit farm, the site also gives Henry access to ample temperature-controlled storage which is now being used by numerous producers who have full warehouses and limited room for expansion on their own estates.

"Because the cold stores are redundant top fruit stores, we have the ability set each bay at different temperatures for different clients," said Henry. "Quite a few people have come to us after having problems with other cold storage facilities where the temperatures were fixed. A lot have experienced problems where wines have not gone through the secondary fermentation process because of this."

With a better understanding of the wine industry's storage needs, Henry is able to work closely with clients, offering a much more tailored service than other storage providers. Producers are not only able to dictate what temperature their wine is stored at, they are given full access to their wines, enabling them to take samples as and when required and they can also ask the Defined Wine team to send photographs of pressure

gauges on sample bottles. The service has been developed so that producers can remain connected to and confident about what is happening to their wines throughout the storage process.

Aside from convenience and access, when Henry was looking for the ideal site he also took into consideration where future planting may happen and had several conversations with Dr Alastair Nesbitt of Vinescapes, who has produced maps and resources outlining the most suitable viticulture sites in the UK.

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"Geographically, our clients are mainly located in Kent, but we are also working with some growers in East and West Sussex, and have also taken in grapes from Essex," said Henry. "We have a large range of clients, including producers with their own winemaking facilities, who just need storage and finishing services; established brands who need extra winemaking capacity while their winery is expanded; small growers with as little as a tonne of fruit; farmers who are growing under-contract for others and want to start their own small brand; and London-based entrepreneurs who simply want an own-label wine."

ADDING VALUE AND SUPPORTING CLIENTS

With a real mixture of clients, some of whom only took their first commercial harvest in 2019, Henry is keen to ensure that Defined Wine adds value to people's businesses beyond turning around a product. With this in mind, Henry has started hosting viticulture training days and is striving to help his clients meet key contacts and other people in the UK wine industry.

"While we are just making the wine, I am very aware that we need to provide support on the other two aspects of successful wine production; viticulture and marketing," said Henry. "We have already hosted several viticulture days for growers where clients could speak to experts. By kind permission of Charles and Ruth Simpson, Darryl Kemp from Simpsons Wine Estate did a great pruning session in one of their vineyards. More recently Peter Hayes and Rob Saunders from Hutchinsons gave a presentation on pre-season work and spraying, with the site visit being changed to Zoom courtesy of Covid-19. It is about improving skillsets and providing people with best practice reminders and updates. I want to help people grow better grapes, because that will allow us to produce even better quality wine. It's a win-win situation."

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On the marketing and sales front, Henry has also been helping to get people better connected, for instance if there are clients with surplus fruit he is working closely with London-based companies looking for own-label products and for those with made-wine he trying to put them in touch with key wine buyers looking for new English wines.

"The first thing I ask new vineyards is what their objective is," said Henry. "Understanding what they want to achieve and building a relationship with our clients is key because this allows me to identify opportunities for them and I can then connect people, putting our clients in touch with those who can help to grow their business. Many of them have other careers or are starting up, so benefit from contacts that are often easier for us to access. My priority is to support and thereby retain existing clients rather than recruit new ones."

A SKILLED TEAM

Up and running in time for harvest 2019, Defined Wine processed 17 different grape varieties, producing over 40 different wines. While many often choose their contract winemaker based on the wines they make under their own-label, Defined Wine does not have a house style and so clients have greater freedom to 'define' their individual approach to English wine – hence the company's name.

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"Customers can dictate what they want and we can work with them on the winemaking decisions to help them take their wines in their own personal direction," said Henry. "Our head winemaker, Rob Merrick, has enormous experience with Hardy's (now Accolade) and Robert Oatley in Australia and brought many new world techniques with him. We have been applying these to ensure we move away from what has historically been considered a cottage industry and take our wine production to the next level."

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Mixing global expertise with English wine experience, Defined Wine is also proud to have Owen Elias on the team as a consultant winemaker. Owen makes weekly visits to the site in Canterbury and played an integral part in helping Henry to design and secure the right equipment for the new project.

While Rob continues to provide advice on a remote basis, Defined Wine is currently looking for a new head winemaker to join the busy team. Day to day, Henry, who leads on all client facing aspects, is joined by assistant winemaker Poppy Seeley who has an MSc in oenology and viticulture from Plumpton College and has completed vintages in Australia, California, New Zealand, South Africa, and Hush Heath in the UK.

Running the bottling and disgorging lines and all other final production is Peter Brissenden who has spent over ten years in the brewing industry, running production processes, quality control and logistics. Cellar hands include Lauren Mattei and Peter Robinson, who is doing his WSET diploma, and the office is headed up by Carole Cook, who previously worked for Yapp Brothers, a Wiltshire based independent wine merchant before moving to Kent.

TECHNOLOGY ENSURES QUALITY AND CONSISTENCY

Alongside a skilled team, taking the most professional approach possible, Henry has also invested in state-of-the-art technology and was fortunate to be supported by EU grant funding, with an RDPE LEADER grant being used to secure much of the equipment including presses, tanks, the bottling and disgorging line.

"Our winemaking approach is still very much focused on taste but we are very conscious as a contract winery that we need to have substantial data and lab work to back this up," said Henry.

"Everything is monitored, tracked and recorded via a cloud-based winery management software called Vintrace and we have recently been investing heavily in the laboratory including a FOSS wine analyser, which allows us to rapidly test for a wider parameter of samples but will take time to fully calibrate. We also use a heat bath, centrifuge, test for sulphurs by aspiration and will be able to test for dissolved CO2 and Oxygen by the time our bottling line arrives around Easter."

In the winery there is also a crossflow filter, for gentle management of the wines and reducing losses, and a mobile chiller unit to complement the temperature controlled tanks. Defined Wine is one of just three UK companies to have a disgorging line with a jetting unit and a fill height detector which checks four different parameters, including cork integrity, the closure and wire cap, as well as the fill height.

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"Rather than doing a 5% visual check, the line is checking 100% of bottles," said Henry. "This ensures quality and consistency throughout. In fact, everything in the winery and laboratory has been carefully selected so that we can provide a really professional and reliable service and for our clients, however big or small they are."



Defined

CONTRACT WINEMAKING SERVICES

No vineyards or brands, just contract services for others:

- Pressing
- Filtering
- Bottling
- Riddling
- Disgorging
- Labelling
- Stringing

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