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VINEYARD

MAY 2020

EDITOR'S VISIT

Montgomery
Vineyard

MATTHEW JUKES

WINE REVIEW

Looking North

IN CONVERSATION

Beth Kelly
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DEFINING MOMENTS

Kent contract winemaker
is on a roll

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Defy and define

Contract wine makers Defined Wine continue to release products with high praise. We go behind the scenes to find out how they do it.

Henry Sugden and his team have taken the focus away from the wine. That might sound like a very strange thing to say about Kent-based contract wine makers Defined Wine, and who knows if Henry will ever forgive me for it, but there's something else at the heart of everything they do.

Because the company doesn't have any brands or style of its own, its focus is producing wine to the highest standard and making sure they have the consistency to repeat that in every single bottle. The one thing that is central to what they do is quality, and fortunately a byproduct of that is fantastic wine.

I joke with him about his very honest newsletters, and he confesses that friends have told him to be slightly less honest, but it's things

like this that cut to the core of Defined Wine in my opinion. A very honest approach. There is no bravado, in fact they work quietly behind the scenes for a number of different vineyards.

Henry started the business two years ago, having identified a need for more contract winemaking he decided early on to only make wine for others, rather than have his own vines and brands. "How many beef farmers do you know who design and sell handbags on Bond Street? I wanted to focus on one element of the process and do it really well," Henry tells me with some of that honesty from the start.

Henry has a small but carefully selected



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team, who he credits as his best investment. Head winemaker Rob has over 25 years worth of expertise, mainly in Australia, where he has worked for Accolade (Hardy's) and other major brands. From the start Henry has called on the experience of consultant winemaker Owen Elias, recently described by Matthew Jukes as the 'Gandalf of the English wine scene'. Poppy Seeley, the assistant winemaker is another great example of the international experience the team bring. She has an MSc from Plumpton in Viticulture and Oenology but has completed harvests in Australia, New Zealand, California, South Africa and UK. Meanwhile, production manager Pete has a background in bottling craft beer but wanted to move into wine and now applies his technical expertise to running the bottling, disgorging and labelling lines. Their cellar hand, another Pete, has a background in wine sales but wanted to get into the production side and even office manager Carole started her working life marketing wine for independent wine merchant Yapp Brothers in the west country. >>



> Henry Sugden in front of the OenoFlow XL Pall cross flow filter for filtration



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> Checking sulphur aspiration



> OenoFoss machine



> Poppy Seeley, assistant winemaker

« “Most of our clients are small or medium-sized growers. We will visit them to understand their site, their grapes and their aspirations. Sometimes they’ll say ‘I really like this Pinot Gris from a certain vineyard, can you make me something like that?’ Others may have their own winemaker who will specify pressing cycles, yeasts and additions. We are happy to work with either approach or anything in between. We have one client who has been making his own wine for the last 10 years but looked at all the rain at the end of last year, thought this is going to be really hard work and came to us. Our great advantage is that we are not distracted by balancing their requirements with making our own wine at the same time

- everything we do is about supporting the people we make for”.

“As a contract winemaker we need to be consistent in what we do and deliver the best for people” Henry tells me. “Rob has a very modern and rigorous approach and he’s instilled that culture in all of us. We realised that we needed technology to support this approach and ensure product quality, which is what will make our clients want to stay with us.”

They have therefore invested heavily in technology and equipment, although because of the lockdown, he’s only able to show me around the winery via his phone screen.

“We are very lucky in that both Rob and

Poppy have a lot of lab experience and Rob convinced me that we needed to invest in the lab. We therefore bought an OenoFoss machine last year,” he said, “although as Rob keeps reminding me, it will take several years to properly calibrate.

“But it allows us to run a lot of numbers quickly, to see how far wines are going through MLF etc. In addition we use wet chemistry and have a dissolved oxygen and CO₂ meter; a spectrophotometer; heat bath, and soon cold conductivity testing; centrifuge; can run sulphurs by aspiration; and a portable density meter, all of which help track exactly how the wines are doing and inform winemaking decisions, whilst still relying heavily on the >>



> Peter Robinson, cellar hand



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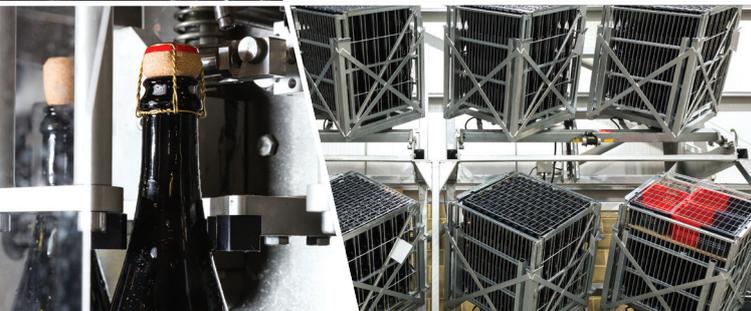
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> Lauren Mattei, cellar hand



<< experience and palate of the team”.

In the winery, Defined Wine has jumped ahead of its size to meet the standard it aspires to achieve, having just installed a Pall Oneo CrossFlow filter. “Rob was insistent that we should be using a crossflow, as it is gentle on the wine and reduces losses. Having spoken to Tom Barnes at Biddenden who raved about theirs, we therefore took the plunge and have been really pleased with the results.” Similarly, in addition to their cooling system, they have a mobile Kreyer heat exchanger unit, which has to come into its own when cold stabilising small volumes.

On their disgorging line, they have installed a jetting unit, which reduces oxygen pick up pre corking and a machine that checks the fill height of every bottle as well as that the cork and wire hood are properly fitted and ensures the integrity of the cork. “Rather than manually checking small random samples, we are able to check 100% of bottles, which again is about ensuring a really consistent high quality product, especially important since we have already disgorged over 70,000 bottles for several clients since installing the line in March, much of which has gone straight out to supermarkets” says Henry. They are particularly proud of their riddling, disgorging, labelling and packaging, especially since, with a joint venture partner, they are able to store a significant quantity of wine in temperature controlled, secure, bonded storage at a number of sites, providing a complete on-les ageing service.

During the lockdown, their office manager has worked from home but the rest of the team have been able to keep apart in the winery and production has continued. The only exception has been head winemaker Rob Merrick who is stranded in Australia and will now be staying there.

I ask Henry just how many bottles of wine does the business produce a year?

He laughs: “That is the thing about being a contract facility, it is very tricky to say exactly. We’re just going through the audit process for the WineGB sustainable wine scheme and have had exactly the same question.

>>

> Poppy Seeley, assistant winemaker and Owen Elias, consultant winemaker





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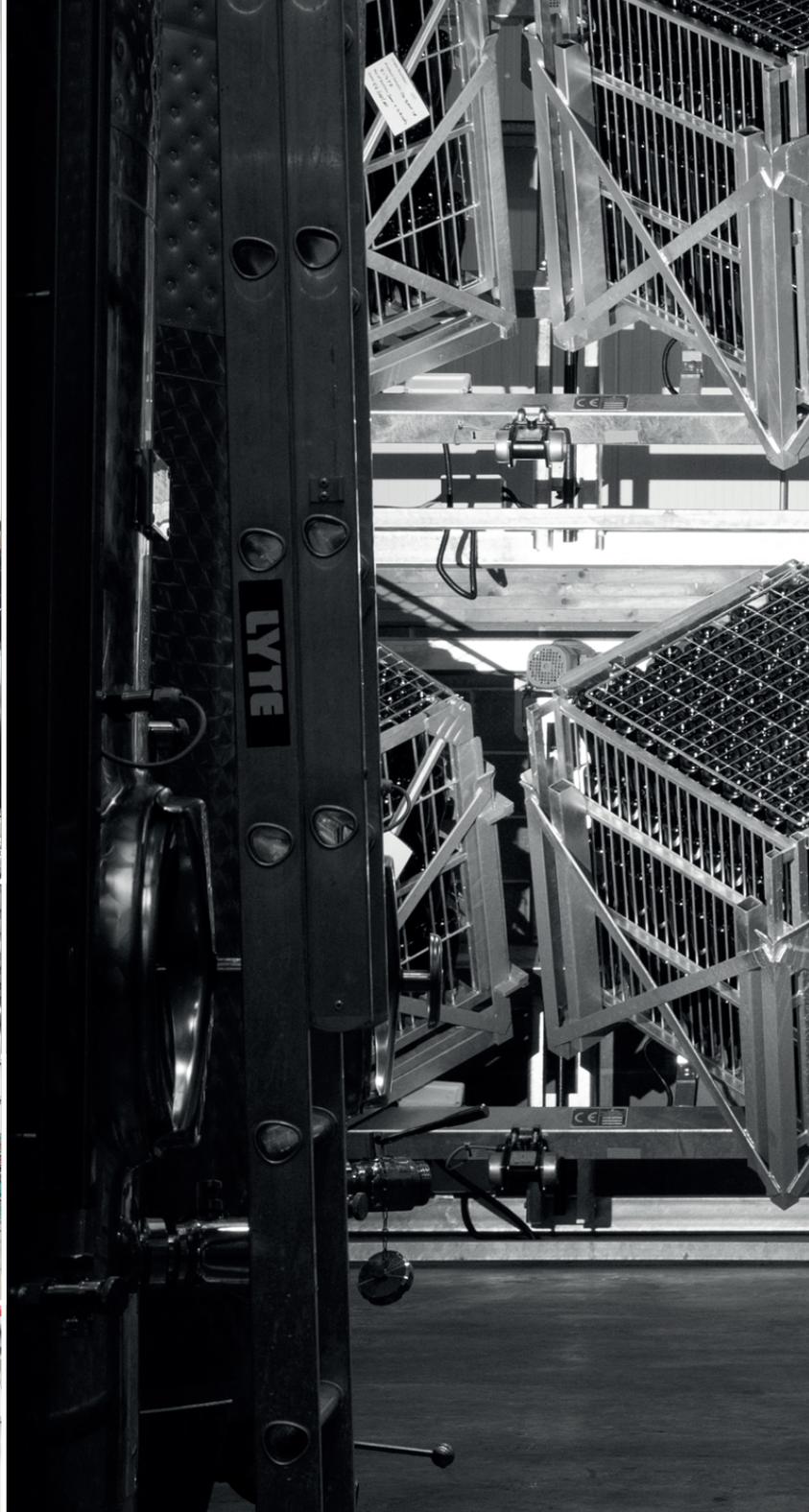
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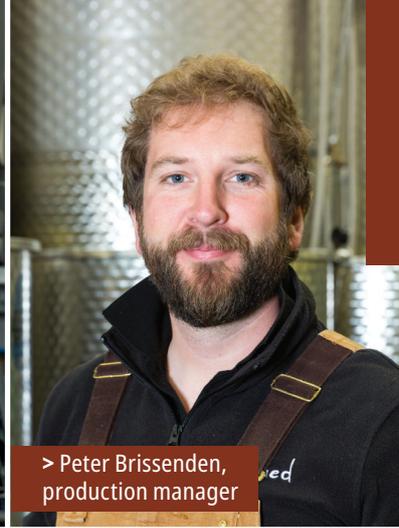
« "It's difficult because last year we took some grapes in, pressed them and sent them out as juice; we had other juice in, fermented it and sent it out in IBCs; some grapes we pressed, fermented, put through MLF and the wine we will leave in tanker; whilst for others we will take their grapes all the way through to bottling and packaging, or storage and later disgorging for the sparklings; oh and we also fermented some cider. There's so much variation."

It seems my next question is another difficult one, as I hear a hint of resignation from Henry when I ask something he clearly hears a lot.

"People often ask, what's the right size to have your wine made by someone else? And it's one of those really impossible questions - there is no right size," he says. "You can have half an acre of vineyard and you can make your own wine in your garden shed and that can be perfect, or you can be producing 10-50,000 bottles a year and it makes sense to have it made elsewhere. It really depends on what you want, where you want to put your capital and where your expertise lies."



> Poppy Seeley,
assistant winemaker



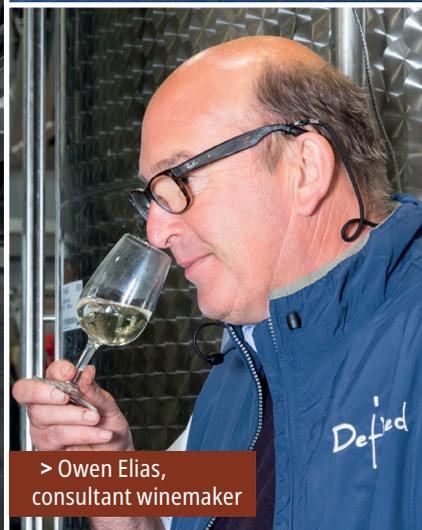
> Peter Brissenden,
production manager



> Peter Robinson, cellar hand



> Lauren Mattei, cellar hand



> Owen Elias,
consultant winemaker



> Henry Sugden, CEO

"It's not always about the funding, it's have you got the right size of land, is the winery in the right place, what is the access, can you get planning permission, what are the water restrictions, what hours can you operate? That's before you've got experienced people and thought about tanks and equipment. The great thing is that there are so many different models that people can do whatever works best for them, which makes for such a varied and vibrant UK scene. What we want to do is provide an option, which will work for some.

"We've grown up very differently in our approach to winemaking in the UK than on the continent. Many people will have their own winery but will use mobile facilities that are often locally based. Here we are more geographically dispersed and there haven't been so many options, but every other industry uses outsourcing and winemaking should be no different.

"We always try and add value to our clients though. If producing wine is about three processes: growing grapes, making wine and selling wine, we're focused on the middle stage only but I'm very conscious of the

elements either side, they are all interlinked. The great thing about being a contract facility is that we can leverage support that small growers would find difficult or time consuming to organise on their own.

"We therefore run viticulture sessions for our growers, using Peter Hayes who is an internationally renowned Australian viticulturalist and Rob Saunders from Hutchinsons who writes for Vineyard. Because they can't be in the vineyard now, we have run the last two sessions over Zoom, with Peter and Rob providing advice and answering questions, all of which should help our growers grow better grapes, in turn making better wine. I also try to provide contacts to people to help them sell their wines, as there's no point making wine for people if they can't sell it."

Maybe my first statement was a bit brash, it is all about the wine at Defined Wine. It's about the quality when the grapes arrive and when the wine leaves – whatever stage the customers might choose that to be in. The team is dedicated to focusing on its production from every angle and we can't wait to see what they make next.