

Farming Connect Management Exchange

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France

Viticulture

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1 Background

I chose to visit the Loire region in France as I wanted to visit mainly smaller wine producers.

My wife and I purchased a 12 acre small holding in 1993 and added a further 5 acres in 2008. White Castle Vineyard was planted in 2009. We were totally new to viticulture and our main employment was outside agriculture. Agriculture has always been part of my life and was my employment for the early part of my life.

The vineyard has over 4,500 vines of the following varieties: -

- Red: Pinot Noir, Regent & Rondo
- White: Phoenix, Seyval Blanc & Siegerrebe

These grapes are used to produce PDO/ PGI designated white, red and sparkling award-winning wines.

The main objectives for the exchange were to:

1. Learn what the small producers do in the vineyards to maintain and increase the quality of their grapes and wines.
2. Establish how small wineries operate as an individual business or within a co-operative as an alternative business model.
3. Secure ambitions and planned business progression of White Castle vineyard.

The exchange would provide the opportunity to learn about the wider considerations of not just first-class viticulture, but winemaking and blending on a small scale within a specific geographical region. The exchange partners would provide business models that would enable me to progress my business in a profitable and sustainable way that is driven by quality. This knowledge transfer

is critical to not only the progression of my business but also for the long-term sustainability of the Welsh Wine industry.

Following my exchange, I will be able to plan the growth and progression of White Castle Vineyard as both a grape grower and wine producer. It will also help me understand the wine making process and its complex cost management considerations. Additionally, it will create important contact points within the EU that will be useful as we grow and develop the viticulture and wine industry in Wales.

2 Itinerary

The exchange was split into 2 visits, the first visit in February was to the Loire Wine show. A 2 day event, this is for Trade and Press and it has in excess of 300 exhibitors showcasing their wines and their businesses. I used the list of vineyards attending to choose the vineyards and wineries to visit. I also had some recommendations from a wine journalist and a former wine buyer. I believe that visiting the show demonstrated to the Vineyard owners my requests to spend a day with each of them in April was a genuine commitment to learn.

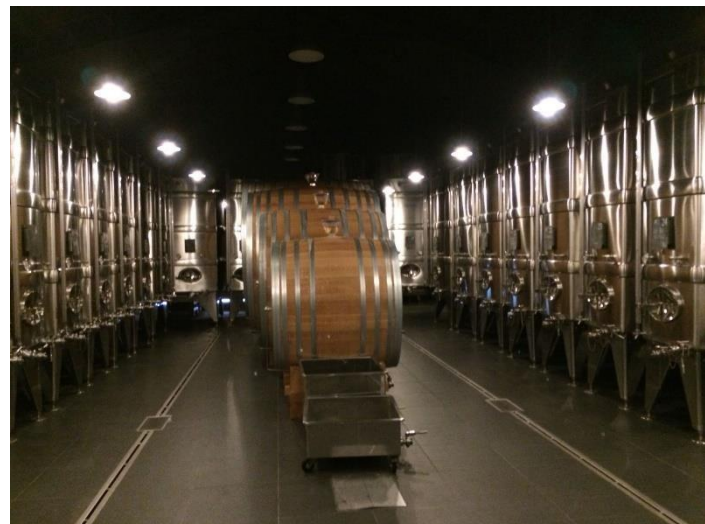
My plan was to visit small producers with 2-4 hectares, however very few of these exist in the commercial grape growing business of the Loire region, therefore I visited a varied cross section of vineyards ranging from 10-250 hectares, and each day was split between visiting the vineyard and then the winery.



The key learning points in the vineyards was the planting of the vines, the distance between the vines in the row was determined by the growing vigour of the variety. Distances ranged from 600mm to 1.2m and the use of single guyot pruning. This style of planting and growing is allowing each vine to produce a smaller volume of grapes that are easier to ripen with higher sugar volumes at harvest.

A visit to one vineyard in particular was very interesting as I got to see how they used heat seeking technology to target the use of glyphosate to the weed and not just broadly spraying the herbicide.

Learning points from the winery operations were varied. The use of Oak barriques is an important part of the red wine making process and wineries are changing from the traditional 225ltr model to 440ltr as these still impart the flavours however they are not so overpowering on the lighter textured wine. The use of a laboratory in Sancerre is key as harvest time approaches, analysis is performed on grapes to ensure optimum ripeness and tannings of the juice, skins and pips very important in Red wine making. Also, wherever possible, wineries use gravity to move juice from press to tanks, treating the wine as gently as possible.



3 Next Steps

1. Discuss the use of the Oak barriques. We presently use 225ltr and the option to trial the 440ltr sizes.
2. With a new planting planned review the varieties and the planting plan, number of vines per acre.
3. Research the grape analysis process used at harvest and then see if we have that facility available in Wales.

4 Key Messages to the industry

1. We all face the same challenges
2. Before planting, research the varieties you have chosen to plant for both vigour and volume as this will dictate planting distances and then crop size.
3. Soil balance / health is high priority
4. The use of Oak is key in Red wine production.
5. Co-operative models do work and individual producers can maintain their own brand
6. Quality in both the vineyard and the winery is the most important factor

