

Rent-a-vine, Sedlescombe Organic Vineyard

Summary

Rentavine is a farmer led marketing scheme. In exchange for a membership fee, club members are entitled to discounts on organic wines, juices, liqueurs, fruit wines and ciders. They have priority access to wines produced in small quantities. They may visit the vineyard for leisure, wine tasting or to help with the work.

History

Established in 1979, Sedlescombe Vineyard is England's oldest organic vineyard, selling for wholesale and through a farm shop. Sedlescombe Vineyard grew out of one man's dream of self-sufficiency. In 1974, Roy Cook was presented with an opportunity to drop out of the rat-race when he inherited ten acres of land near Sedlescombe, East Sussex. He began his new existence in modest style in a simple caravan, and set out to grow sufficient organic food to provide a basic diet and a surplus that could be turned into cash to meet his other needs. As with many dreams of this kind, this lifestyle proved very hard. Necessity being the mother of invention, Roy set out to utilise his land in other ways:

"I thought about planting tomatoes, but then I discovered I had all the right conditions for growing vines. I was in the South East where the revival in English wines was beginning and the land I owned was on a south-facing slope, exposed to the sun. I was not at the bottom of a valley where you get frost and was not at the top where you get high winds. It was ideal."

So began Britain's first organic vineyard. Roy started with 2,000 plants on one and a half acres in 1979. Today the vineyard has expanded to 17 acres which includes the vineyard at Bodiam Castle converted to organics in 1994. Further plantings of two acres of red vines were carried out in spring 2000, with additional acreage planted in 2001 and 2002.

In 1987, with the help of Constructive Individuals Ltd of Southampton and the advert: "Learn to build a house in three weeks in an organic vineyard in Sussex," Irma and Roy Cook built the low-energy wood-frame house that is now the centre of the vineyard.

Now the Cooks produce approximately 15,000 bottles of organic English wine a year.

Although there are a total of around 400 vineyards in Britain, Sedlescombe is one of only four known to have adopted organic methods. It is open to visitors and part of the Soil Association's demonstration farm network.

The CSA began when Roy Cook wanted to improve cash flow and raise revenue for planting the new vines. He was introduced to the concept of wine club schemes in France and knew of a similar scheme in Sussex 10 years ago (since closed) which had 11,000 members paying a £15 membership. He also knew about community supported agriculture in the USA. Applying these ideas, the rent-a-vine scheme was initiated in 2001.

Organisation

The vineyard and the Rentavine scheme is run as a private business, controlled by the grower.

Finances

Membership rates vary according to type of wine

One Year: 75 white; 95 red; 145 sparkling

5 years: 299 white; 399 red; 599 sparkling

Life: 499 white; 599 red; 799 sparkling

Up to 50% of the annual production from Sedlescombe Organic Vineyards vines is offered to club members. Each spring, after bottling, the quantity of wine available to members for each of the

different wine types is made known via e-mail. Members may purchase wine at a discount price of 30% off normal vineyard shop price. For example a bottle of Sedlescombe Organic Dry White wine costing £7.95 (incl. VAT) would be available to members at £5.56 (incl. VAT). This means that members who purchase 36 bottles or more per year would recoup the cost of their membership fee in savings made on wine purchase. There is no obligation to purchase any wine. Wines of types different from their membership type as well as any of the vineyards other products (e.g fruit juices, ciders, liqueurs) can be bought at 10% discount from the farm shop price. Members can collect their wine, or pay £5 per case for delivery.

Members may come and work on the vineyard and take their remuneration for work done in the form of payment towards their subscription fee. Work is remunerated at a rate equivalent to £25 per day. There are 32 members so far, of which two are life members.

The advantage of this system is that the set up costs were low and the members have not bought great quantities of discounted wine so the scheme has been a benefit to farm finances. One of the downsides, on a practical level, is that it has been difficult to find time to write the newsletters.

Activities

Besides the wine discounts, club members have access to the open vineyard and woodland nature trail for walks, picnics and parties and can attend wine tasting sessions with a guest. Sedlescombe vineyard is located in an affluent area in attractive Sussex countryside on two sites. Only one is open to visitors and the other is next to Bodiam Castle. The rental agreement with the landowner on that site does not permit visitor access but there are fine views of the vineyard from the turret of the castle! Members who want to be involved in the grape harvest or other vineyard work may come and join in. Overnight caravan accommodation is available for members offering to help for longer than one day. In practice, members have taken up opportunities to come to the vineyards occasionally.

Members are offered priority purchase options, before release to the general public, on speciality wines (such as the 2001 Noble Late Harvest Chardonnay) which are only made in small quantities. Wine can be wrapped and delivered with a greetings card. Wine is delivered overnight and can be sent overseas by arrangement. Most of the existing members are individuals who do not live locally and their memberships were gifts. Businesses may also join and can have wine with personalised labels to use as corporate gifts or sales incentives. Members hold a certificate of membership and membership card, a row of vines is labelled with their name, and they may have a photo of themselves at the vineyard posted on the website.

The scheme hopes to provide a point of connection between producers and the customers based on partnership and mutual commitment. Members seeking to extend their knowledge and experience of the vine, its fruit, and wine making processes are sent a monthly electronic newsletter detailing farm work in progress. It also includes harvest forecasts and details of some of the problems encountered as the grower's year unfolds. The wine-maker describes the stage of development of the various wines along with bottling information and photos are posted on the website showing the current condition of the grapes. Eventually the vineyard hopes to set up a webcam for a live visual display of the vines.

A bulletin board on the website allowing members to communicate with each other is currently in the pipe-line.

Future

The scheme works well for the vineyard and future plans are based on seeking new members through better publicity including a brochure and advertising on bottles.

It had been hoped that there would be more members by now. Some problems have been encountered with printing out the colour brochure using a LaserJet printer. Once these have been overcome brochures will be displayed at all the farmers markets.

The website is listed on all bottle labels. An extra label on each bottle promoting the scheme is being considered.

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