

The future for UK wines looks rosé

Wine-making is not something the UK is known for, but pioneering research at a Sussex college is changing that



Plumpton's wine-making graduates have top jobs in vineyards across the globe. Photograph: Plumpton College

At his vineyard near St Emilion, Martin Krajewski makes some of France's best-known rosé [wine](#). But, in an increasingly competitive market, he's anxious to improve it. Yet while the University of Bordeaux, 20 miles or so down the road, is a leading centre for wine studies, it's to Plumpton College, in the South Downs of Sussex, that Krajewski has turned for help.

Moreover, he's given the college £75,000 to help fund [research](#) programmes. And Krajewski, a lifelong wine enthusiast who made his first batch of elderberry aged 12, isn't the only donor. Aspiring wine-maker Mark Driver, intent on becoming England's leading producer of champagne-style fizz, has invested £100,000. The college now hopes to double its money through gift aid and the government's matched funding scheme, which aims to increase voluntary contributions to [higher education](#) providers by matching donations, pound for pound.

Both men prospered in the City of London before dedicating themselves to wine production. Krajewski had increased his investment at Château de Sours over several years before taking over entirely. Last October, Driver, a former hedge-fund manager, sank £3.5m into buying Rathfinny Farm, near Lewes, which he plans to cultivate with 400 acres of vines.

Plumpton College was an unknown quantity to Krajewski until his daughter Charlotte, who inherited his passion for wine-making, chose to study there. At first he had doubts. "I said 'Are you sure'? But I read up about it and thought it sounded interesting. I'm amazed by what it's achieved in quite difficult circumstances. It compares well with any other college or university around the world."

What impressed Krajewski was that graduates of Plumpton's wine-making degree course – unique in the country – hold senior positions in vineyards across the globe. "Plumpton is small; it's really hands-on. If you go to university in Bordeaux, you stay there. You're assigned to one particular chateau where all your practical experience is done."

About half of the Château de Sours production is rosé, described by the late Auberon Waugh as probably the best of its kind in the world. "We've invested in processes and equipment," says Krajewski. "But although we do our own research, we're a small business and don't have a lot of time."

"We believe Plumpton can improve our wine. They'll be doing research on the *terroir* [land in which vines are planted] and taking samples for analysis. They'll have different approaches. Hopefully, the benefits will be mutual. But the donation I've made isn't just to research rosé. I believe what the college is doing is exciting for the next generation of student wine-makers."

Krajewski says the English wine industry is "very important, but not recognised". Driver, who is enrolled as a student at Plumpton, agrees. He was impressed by seeing college alumni working around the world and at English sparkling producers Nyetimber and Ridgeview. "I think it [investing] is one of the best things we can do for the future of English wines," he says.

"Research is really important, but none has been done in the UK apart from bits and pieces. No one's pulled it all together and written definitively – for instance, about successful clones that will produce the right results in the right environment. There are no journals to compare with those in America and Australia."

"What we need in England to take wine on to the next level is a top-quality research institution that will provide information for wine-makers and vineyard owners. It will raise skill levels."

Driver finds himself in the odd position of being a first-year student making business decisions normally taken by an experienced graduate. He is employing consultants to help. Rathfinny's first harvest is due in 2014, and his first sparkling wines, after maturing and secondary fermentation, should be ready by 2017.

The donations have allowed Plumpton to retain Dr Belinda Kemp as wine lecturer and department research co-ordinator. Kemp graduated from Plumpton with a first-class degree in viticulture and oenology, then completed a PhD at Lincoln University, New Zealand, researching the effects of vine-leaf removal on fruit ripening.

Climate change cuts across several of Plumpton's research projects. But although warmer temperatures are welcomed by England's vineyard owners, they come as a mixed blessing.

"It isn't as easy as just saying we can now grow grapes for champagne," says Kemp. "Everything is complicated." For instance, last year some English vineyards suffered their first infestations of light-brown apple moth, whose grubs damage leaves and fruit. "We're looking at ways of combating it without using pesticides. It's the sort of project we'll see more of. We're such a new

industry – we have everything to learn. There's a range of projects under the climate-change umbrella."

Plumpton is also studying the chemistry of wine and innovations that could be used in the UK. England is on the northern rim of wine production and one problem is excess acidity in the grapes. Meanwhile, the college will continue its existing research into three different ways of making rosé and work on refining the methods used by Krajewski at Château de Sours.

There will be further studies into champagne-style wines, which look to offer the best chances of commercial success for the English industry. Plumpton can now afford a collaboration with Professor Richard Marchal from the University of Reims to investigate, among other things, how juice changes in quality immediately after grapes have been pressed.

"Richard Marchal is an expert on production of champagne and sparkling wine, and his coming to Plumpton is recognition of the possibilities in the UK," said Krajewski.

Soon Plumpton will be home to Britain's first purpose-built wine research centre, currently under construction, and costing about £500,000. Kemp will establish new research links with the University of Brighton, of which Plumpton is a part. Industry collaborations are planned with UK and international companies, and the college hopes further private funding will allow sponsorship of MSc and PhD research students.

Wine studies at Plumpton have come a long way since Chris Foss, who heads the department, set up the first part-time course in 1988. There are now 500 students, including 140 undergraduates. The donations make a tremendous difference," he says. "They allow us to go beyond teaching into proper research, which is fundamental for a university.

"More important, the wine industry now has a dedicated problem-solving tool, which it can use to support its developments. It will be a case of 'We have this problem ... Plumpton can sort it out'."