

# RED revolution

SELLING ENGLISH WINE  
TO UNCLE SAM

*All photography by Kitty Johnson*

## THE AMERICAN

Revolution famously started when an iconic British drink was thrown into Boston harbour for the ultimate tea party. Two centuries later, Americans still cannot stomach our warm beer and weak coffee. However, 250 years after the tea leaves were chucked in the choppy water off Boston's quayside, entrepreneur Red Johnson is kicking off another American Revolution by exporting English wine to the former colonies. And he is finding a growing thirst for English wines across the Atlantic: Uncle Sam seems to like Britannia's bubbles.

With a background in media and broadcasting, Red is a newcomer to the wine trade and has set up the British Bottle Company (BBC). He is fired with the enthusiasm of a convert to spread the word about English wine in foreign markets. After spending a month in autumn 2014 in the United States, he is more convinced than ever of the potential in the market for English wine.

Red says: "I spent most of September in the United States, visiting the wine trade, talking to the media. I visited buyers and wine professionals in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago."

It may come as a surprise to many, but Red came across a considerable knowledge of the English wine revolution in the US wine trade: "Many in the wine trade in the States have cottoned on to the UK wine industry. While many in the US have not tasted English wine, they do keep up with the media and know what is going on over here. Those who have come to the UK have tasted English wine," he says.

The United States is also home to some 780,000 Britons, a potential and large market for English wine that Red has identified.

## RED CAME ACROSS GOOD KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH WINE IN THE USA

### ON POINT

A peculiarity of the American market is the importance of wine rating schemes, something that English wine does not have a track record in to date. He says: "The Americans place great store on ratings. It will come in the future with English wine."

A wine score is the preferred way for an American wine critic to communicate an opinion about the quality of a wine as it is quick and straightforward. Wine scores often appear in printed and on-line media, sometimes even on wine bottles. The granddaddy is critic Robert Parker, often abbreviated to RP. His perfect wine is a 100 point wine, while his worse quality comes out at 50 points. Buyers will often stipulate they will only stock wines between 85 to 100 points.

### SHOCK OF THE NEW

Every start-up, as the BBC was in 2014, needs a degree of luck. Red's luck was choosing to export alcohol to the United States at a time when the previous three-tier liquor importation process was seen to be a gradual decline. He says: "Because of Federal law, it used to be that we would have had to sell to importers, who in turn sell to wholesalers, who in turn sell to retailers, a throw-back to Prohibition. Naturally, though taxes are relatively light, there were still three sets of margins. Now, the system is changing; we are now able to sell to importers who are also wholesalers, cutting out a tier."

He has also determined that American wine drinkers are increasingly interested in 'the new' in terms of wine and its

provenance. English wine is just such a new region of many wine drinkers and will pick up the dollars as they seek out the new vintages.



HITTING THE USA MARKET STRONG

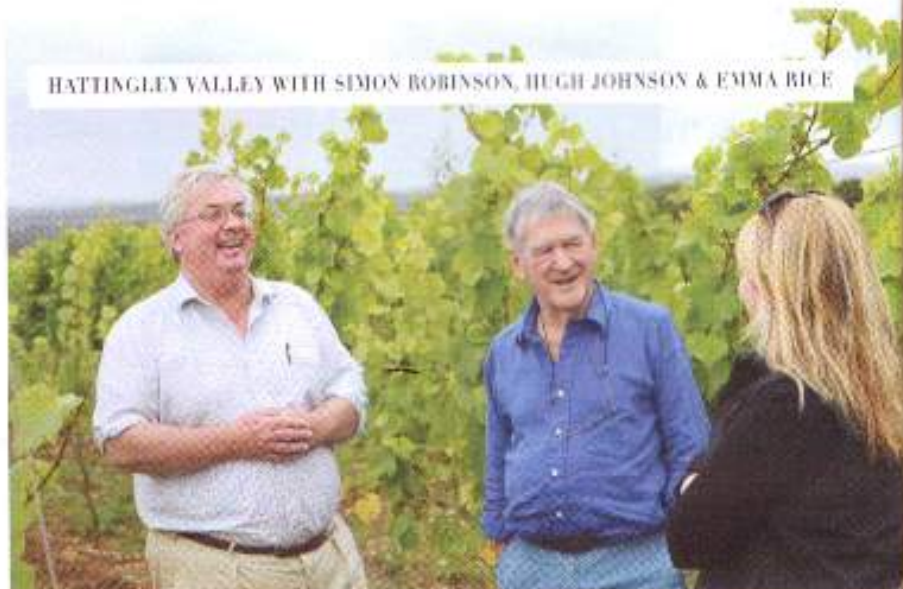
On his September trip, Red reveals he spent some time with the American Society of Wine Educators to further the cause of English wine.

In spring 2015, Red's Hampshire-based operation organised American export of wine from Hattingley Valley, Digby Fine English, Camel Valley and Hush Heath. He acquires the wine

from the UK producer and then sells on to the importer in the United States. They in turn organise the freighting of the wine across the Atlantic. This means that Red takes on the risks, such as currency exchange and sourcing the customer, of exporting English wine.

Red does not consider the vineyard as simply a source of wine. Instead, he is determined that any vineyard from which he sources wine, is more a "partner".

HATTINGLEY VALLEY WITH SIMON ROBINSON, HUGH JOHNSON & EMMA RICE



MIXING THE  
GRAPE AND  
THE GRAIN

Red and his team at BBC certainly had a busy end to 2014, with market visits to Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore as well as the three US states. The New Year started with product launches, a number of new suppliers and import

partners and several market trips already planned.

Proving an interest as much in the grain as the grape, the BBC launched Sussex's Chilgrove Dry Gin in Canada this spring, after a deal between the BBC and Société des



AT A TASTING IN NEW YORK WITH BARTHOLOMEW BROADBENT



A PORTFOLIO TASTING WITH HUGH JOHNSON & MIKE PAUL

*alcools du Québec (SAQ)*, Canada's largest drinks importer. In Europe, the BBC agreed a partnership with leading Scandinavian importer Concealed Wines to develop tenders for the three monopolies, as well as on-trade distribution in key cities.

Red is passionate that English wine has reached a tipping point in terms of market appreciation and drinker interest. It is his belief that in many markets, from the States to Asia, English wine is gaining an appreciation and thus creating a market for BBC.

That tea, thrown illegally into Boston Harbour, sparked the shot that rang around the world and created the country where Red is establishing a business. Red's Revolution in English wine is unlikely to meet the same fate of the tea leaves.

FULL STOP