



## Behind the scenes at Chapel Down, the UK's leading winery

JOSH DONAGHAY-SPIRE / MAY 5, 2017 / FOOD & DRINK

**Josh Donaghay-Spire, head winemaker at Chapel Down winery, describes the creative process behind England's most expensive sparkling wine**

I started working with Chapel Down at the beginning of 2010 and we've come a long way since then. It's a really exciting time for English wine, particularly sparkling, as the climate in England now is similar to how it was in Champagne in the 1970s. A combination of the warmer weather, the equipment we're using, and increased investment in the land is making it viable to create high quality English wines.

We are in a marginal climate – which is what makes it interesting and exciting, and gives vibrancy to the wine – but we do need to be careful and plant vines in the best place. We think those spots are on the North Downs in Kent. We've currently planted about 200 acres up there – including the Kit's Coty vineyard – and we've got approximately a further 120 acres to plant.



Kit's Coty is a single vineyard owned by Chapel Down and planted in 2007. It is on the southern slopes of the North Downs where the microclimate is very warm, and the soil is lovely, beautiful chalk; all these elements create an exceptional site. Post-harvest we spend a week or so blind-tasting every style of wine, from all of our vineyards. The fruit from Kit's Coty has consistently been the best – the ripest, the highest in sugar and the cleanest, with the best flavours.

Chalky soil works really well for sparkling wine. In particular for Chardonnay, which, grown on clay, tends to be broader in style, whereas grown in chalk it is more linear, and more focused. It's a very pure expression, which is what inspired us to create the Kit's Coty Collection of premium wines. There are three wines in the collection – a Coeur de Cuvee 2013, a Blanc de Blancs 2013 and a Chardonnay 2014.



The flagship wine is the Coeur de Cuvee. It is 100 per cent Chardonnay, from the very best block of the vineyard, which we've lavished attention on. The decisions start before pruning – restricting the yield is essential to achieve balance across the vines – and continue all the way through to harvest. We're constantly monitoring and making decisions such as whether to only pick the top or bottom half of a row, depending on which grapes have slightly higher sugar, acidity, or better flavour.

All the grapes are picked by hand, into shallow crates, and then whole bunch pressed at the Chapel Down winery in Tenterden. The pressing cycle is one of the key features of the Coeur de Cuvee. Traditionally the best juice (the Cuvee) comes from a grape pressed under the lowest pressure – the first 510 litres per ton. We use that Cuvee to make sparkling wine. With the Coeur de Cuvee we've taken the very best 150–200 litres per ton out of that initial press – so not just the best fraction, of the best block, of the best vineyard we've got, but trying to get even better.



The very first 50 litres of juice that comes out is a little bit cloudy and turbid, so we discard that, but then the juice starts to run really clear, the pH drops and it becomes very pure in taste. That's what we're looking to capture – the very purest essence of that block. From there on, it's really minimal handling, because if you've put in all the

hard work at the vineyard and the pressing stage, you've got the very best juice, so you should interfere with it as little as possible. There is minimal use of sulphites, no use of enzymes and minimal clarification.

The juice is then run to barrel for a wild fermentation, using the natural yeasts in the winery. This means there are lots of different yeast populations working at the same time, which achieves greater complexity. It stays in barrel seven months, with no batonnage, then we take it out and bottle it.

The Coeur de Cuvee is all about purity. There is a subtle influence of oak, because it's all been aged in barrel, so there's richness and power on the palette, but it's very focused at the same time. It is characterised by classic Blanc de Blancs aromas – apple, brioche, light yeastiness, a fine mousse, but just very pure. It is us saying, 'this is as good as English sparkling wine can possibly get'. We only made a few barrels, so there's not much of it to go around, but that's fine because we're really just trying to get the very best we can.

The Kit's Coty Blanc de Blancs is the Coeur de Cuvee's baby brother. It's partially fermented in barrel, partly in tank, so you get a bit of impact from the oak, but also the purity from the tank, which gives a slightly lighter and less complex rendition. Again, it's that fruit-driven style and purity that we were looking for with this. A kind of aromatic delicacy you get from English wine that you don't find in other regions. I think that comes because we have an extended ripening period. It will continue to develop into more nutty, hazelnut flavours as it stays in bottle.





The Kit's Coty Chardonnay undergoes a wild fermentation in barrel. It's quite rich for English wine but it's still got the purity, acidity and freshness. I love white burgundy and with the Kit's Coty vineyard, I thought there's no reason we couldn't create something similar to Premier Cru or Grand Cru Chablis. Nobody has done it before, and I think we've got close. I'd happily put all three of these wines within their competitive set internationally, they will hold their own. This is not about making English wine, this is about making the best wine possible. I would love to see the Kit's Coty Chardonnay go up against Chablis. I'd love to see the Blanc de Blancs and the Coeur de Cuvee go up against Champagne of a similar price bracket and style. I think they'd do very well.

The small volume, hands-on wines, where we expend lots of energy and time, are a great project to be part of. The English wine industry is in its infancy, so we're learning our terroir as we go. Each year that we pick grapes we learn a bit more about the countryside. We are in an enviable position where we don't have a rulebook, like there is in wine-making regions with centuries of traditions that have to be preserved. To have the flexibility to do what you want is great, we have to grasp that opportunity and push – take the risk and make wines that are right at the top end. And learn from that, because the lessons we learn at the top end will gradually

percolate down to all of our products, so everything gets better. We just want to make a really interesting product from the land, so there's a lot of innovation taking place at the Chapel Down winery and it's very exciting to be pushing the boundaries of what English wine can achieve.

*Kit's Coty Cœur de Cuvée 2013, £99.99; Kit's Coty Blanc de Blancs 2013, £39.99; Kit's Coty Chardonnay 2014, £29.99; [chapeldown.com](http://chapeldown.com)*

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