

CHEERS TO CHATEAU TOOTING

Vines are flourishing all over London, and the seriously trendy know that Château Tooting is the only wine to have on your dinner table, darling. Let's raise a glass...

LONDONERS are a self-sufficient bunch. We grow tomatoes in window boxes, runner beans up drainpipes and courgettes in fruit crates.

Now we're growing grapes and turning them into wine. The man who is making the miracle happen is writer Richard Sharp, who saw the light when gazing up at the bountiful bunches of grapes dripping from the pergola in his Tooting garden three summers ago.

A short time after, The Urban Wine Co was conceived: a collective that helps Londoners plant, cultivate and crop their own vines, then gathers in the harvest. Next thing you know, you're knocking back a reasonable rosé that tastes all the better for knowing that your own grapes contributed.

How can one man turn everybody's grapes into wine? "We have access to an all-singing, all-dancing winery in East Sussex," says Sharp. "The idea is that people pool their grapes and they are all processed in a given slot."

Currently, all manner of garden grapes are accepted, providing they are sweet and ripe enough, which means that red and white are thrown in together, producing a pink wine – sorry, rosé – with the joyful name of Château Tooting, because that is where most of the grapes have been grown.

Now, however, the word is spreading, so that The Urban Wine Company's vines are flourishing across London in

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Pattie Barron



allotments, hospitals, schools and gardens.

If you live north of the river, you can request a label for your bottles that is more appropriate to the region: Kensal Rise Rosé, for example. Of course, Londoners have always grown grapes with the hopes of eventually producing a good vintage; after all, our inner-city warmth gives us the growing edge. Sharp himself is persevering with Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon vines on his own patch, and there's a chap in Kingston, he says, who has high



GAP PHOTOS/JERRY HARPLUR

hopes of the 30 Pinot Noir vines in his back garden.

Black grape Dornfelder and Marechal Joffre and white grape Phonix and Bacchus are all available vines that produce suitable wine-making grapes. However, the varieties that Sharp sends out are limited to Rondo (red) and Solaris (white) because these are the two that he has been advised are the best for our urban conditions.

They are tough, tolerant and produce good-quality, sweet wine grapes. His dream is that eventually there will be

Richard Sharp (above left) founded the Urban Wine Co so London can have its own pressing; black grapes (above) ready for harvesting

enough of Solaris or Rondo grown right across the capital to make a single pressing of each, rather than the pick 'n' mix of the past two years.

You can be even more exclusive, though, and hand over your own grapes for individual bottling, and thus have your personal and unique wine. It will cost a lot more and you need to produce a ton of fruit to make the processing viable. The Urban Wine Company's vines are container-grown, so can be planted at any time.

What are you waiting for?



GAP PHOTOS/NEIL HOLMES

HOW TO GROW YOUR OWN WINE IN LONDON

- **Join The Urban Wine Company.** A producer membership costs £65 and includes six free bottles and £5 a subsequent bottle; a developer membership costs £45 and includes a Solaris or Rondo vine plus instructions. For more information, visit www.urbanwineco.com.
- **Plant your vine in a sheltered spot,** ideally facing south and with space for

it to climb. A wall with vine eyes and wires or pergola is ideal.

- **The soil must have good drainage,** so if you garden on clay, you will need to dig in plenty of grit.
- **Unless your soil is poor, don't give vines fertiliser** as they need to seek out water beneath the soil.
- **Protect grapes from birds** with the help of netting.

Grapevines grow well (far left and right) when trained vertically across wires or posts, in the sunniest part of the garden



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The extra small Tonto lantern (left) is on special offer to H&P readers; the RHS gives you gardening tips direct with a new garden guide for your Nintendo DS (right)

