



CHATEAU TOOTING

South-west London may not be famed as a wine-producing region, but a group of vine-owning locals is attempting to change all that. Simon Parkes raises a glass

UNSURE WHICH WINE to buy for dinner this evening? Should it be a Bordeaux, a Burgundy or – if you’re tightening your belt – a Bulgarian? Well, over the next few years, you might want to try something a little more... home grown. How about Chateau Tooting? Normally famed as the heartland of net-curtain twitching, and home to TV revolutionary Citizen Smith, this south-west London suburb is gearing up to become the centre of a new wine-making terroir.

It’s all the brainchild of Richard Sharp, founder of the Urban Wine Company, who explains its origins: ‘I once spent a month in Limoux in southern France,’ he recalls, ‘and watched the whole community working together during the *vendange* [grape harvest]. Then, back home in London, I realised we had loads of grapes in our garden, as did our neighbours. So we decided to do something about it.’

Last year the company attracted just under 100 members, who got together to donate their grapes. One of them, Tooting resident Jane Reed, shows me her vine. Planted as a 9-inch

seedling 20 years ago merely for foliage, it’s now rampaging up a huge south-facing red-brick wall. ‘We were told it wouldn’t fruit,’ she tells me. ‘But as you can see, that’s hardly the case. The roots must thrive on the Victorian drains. It produces so much fruit that we’re actually bored with making grape juice and grape jelly. So the idea of the Urban Wine Company is perfect.’

And it’s not just large houses with herbaceous borders that have contributed. In his quest for SW17’s finest grapes, Sharp found himself on allotments, council flat balconies, even on strips of wasteland. Eventually, last October, he ended up with 1.25 tonnes that were duly sent off to be pressed.

Records show that London has grown grapes since the 11th century. And it’s not the only city to do so. Montmartre in Paris produces a very covetable vintage each year. And Master of Wine Stephen Skelton thinks Tooting may have an added advantage over popular growing areas like Sussex or Kent. ‘London’s got more heat,’ he says. ‘Some of the Tooting grapes may be table varieties

– which aren’t so good – but in the hands of a skilled winemaker, this can be corrected.’

Eventually, last month, the 2009 vintage of Chateau Tooting – Furzedown Blush was declared, Richard Sharp pours me a glass of the chilled rosé. ‘There’s an element of raspberries and strawberries,’ he rhapsodises, swirling the glass. I can taste pear-drops, but nonetheless, Chateau Tooting is on its way. According to Sharp, ‘we all have a tactile need to produce food and wine together in communities. And if there’s something decent to drink at the end of it, then so much the better.’

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