

Chateau Tooting

A wine made from grapes grown in south London back gardens? Yes says **Jonathan Goodall**, why not?

"That's one of my grapes, right there," said Ann Warner, urban wine grower, pointing to an indistinct spot halfway up my glass. I studied the rosé with due diligence. "You must be very proud," I replied, and she evidently was.

We had gathered for a celebratory tasting of Chateau Tooting, a wine made from grapes grown in gardens, allotments, terraces and balconies in greater London and the southeast.

Chateau Tooting is the creation of the Urban Wine Company (UWC), a growers' collective that would make Wolfie Smith proud. The idea came to Richard Sharp in the summer of 2006 as he sat in his Tooting garden watching grateful birds gorging on his grapes. On holiday he'd seen French villagers working together to bring in the grape harvest, and he noted the camaraderie and common purpose bringing them all together. So he posted an advert on a local community website looking for like-minded individuals and received his first reply within two hours, from only two streets away.

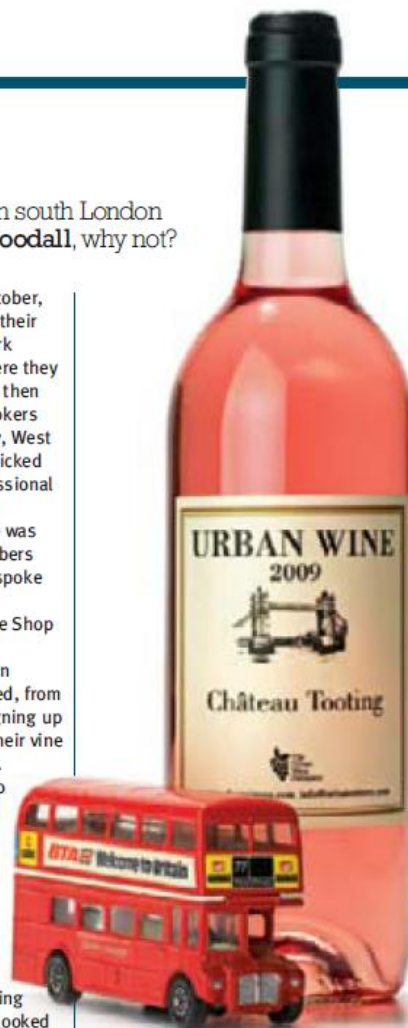
The idea spread rapidly on the grapevine (sorry), producing enough fruit for 30 bottles of wine in the first vintage, 2007. Today, the Urban Wine Company has roughly 100 members, with the current vintage, 2009, producing some 1,000 bottles.

One day last October, members brought their grapes to a car park in Tooting Bec where they were weighed and then transported to Bookers Vineyard in Bolney, West Sussex, to be magicked into wine by professional winemakers. Then in March, the wine was delivered for members to collect, with bespoke labels of course, from Thorolds Wine Shop in Tooting.

For Colin and Ann Warner, both retired, from Grays in Essex, signing up to the UWC gave their vine a new lease of life. Their son gave it to them as a present in 2005 but they expected it to die within a year. It persevered, on a south-facing summerhouse, and in 2008 the Warners tried making their own wine. It looked like mud, apparently, and remains untasted.

"But since joining the Urban Wine Company we check on our vine every day, watching the grapes getting bigger and better," says Ann. They now have six bottles of clean, crisp Chateau Warner, and they're looking forward to the next harvest.

Some might think Sharp an appropriate name for an English winemaker, but Richard points out that wine grapes, particularly hybrids, reach sufficient ripeness if grown south of a line drawn across the



country from Bristol to the Wash. North of this line, grapes need to be cultivated under glass. He also points out that large urban areas tend to be two to five degrees warmer than surrounding rural areas, due to heat

being stored in concrete. And, as an ex-south Londoner myself, I can't resist pointing out that south of the river is nearer the Equator: a viticultural paradise compared with north London.

At the tasting I expected aromas of traffic fumes and diesel, only to be blown away by bright, clean scents of raspberry and strawberry with a crisp, dry, elegant palate.

"When we go out I often drink Mateus rosé," said Colin Warner, "and this isn't far off."

The idea spread rapidly and this year the 100 members made 1,000 bottles

"We're not creating earth-shattering wine, but it's drinkable and from London," says Sharp. "The great thing about the project is that it brings people together, and there's a nice glass of wine at the end of it."

Chateau Tooting Furzedown Blush 2009 (to give it its full name) may be only 11.5 per cent alcohol, but the remaining 88.5 per cent is pure love and London pride. ■

GROW TOGETHER

If you have a mature vine producing grapes you can join the Urban Wine Company as a "producer member" for £85. You'll receive six bottles of wine, with the option to buy further bottles at £7.99 a pop. Alternatively, if you do not own a vine, you can join as a "developer member" for £55, which includes a Solaris (white) or Rondo (red) vine. Via newsletters and its lively website, the UWC advises budding vignerons on all grape-related matters, from cultivation through to cropping. www.urbanwinco.com