

# How cheeky is that? A Midlands red to rival a full-bodied Aussie shiraz

Russell Jenkins

Wolverhampton, once the blood and guts of English manufacturing, may not be quite so well known for producing fine wines as the Wrattobully region in South Australia. But a small, family-run vineyard close by on the Staffordshire-Shropshire border has astonished the domestic wine industry by producing a well-balanced red as full-bodied as any Australian Shiraz.

The Rondo, produced on the gentle, south-facing slopes of the Halfpenny Green Vineyard from last year's harvest, boasts 15 per cent alcohol, which marks it out as the "biggest" English red wine.

With climate change, wine-producing country has been moving northwards over the years into the Midlands, and beyond to Lancashire and York-



shire but remains associated with much lighter reds, whites and sparkling wines. They struggle to hold their own against a full-blooded roast, curry or barbecue. Not so the Rondo, named after the grape that produced it, which has left industry insiders stunned by its intensity. It opens up the prospect of being able to pick up a domestic red wine from the supermarket shelf instead of a rival from hotter climes.

Clive Vickers, who works the 30-acre vineyard with his father Martin, said: "The incredible September sunshine we experienced in the Midlands last year continued to ripen the grapes late into the season. This gave the grapes their intensity and higher sugar, which resulted in the 15 per cent alcohol."

"It is a big, bold red, which rivals southern hemisphere wines like an Australian Shiraz."

The limited run of 7,000 bottles goes on sale this weekend at £14.95. A number will be held back for entry into this year's Italian competition, the Challenge Euposia Bollicine dal Mondo, and Decanter World Wine Awards.

Mr Vickers said that last summer was not the biggest yield so far. There



Rondo grapes at Halfpenny Green Vineyard, left. Below: Clive Vickers' wife, Lisa, with the "bold, plummy" finished article

## Big and strong, but is it great?

Jane MacQuitty  
Commentary

TIMES  
WINE CRITIC



**S**outh Staffordshire's freak 15 per cent alcohol red, made from the hardy, disease-resistant rondo grape, has set tongues wagging in the English wine industry.

England remains, despite the longed-for heat of global warming and the greenhouse effect, a cool, northern, marginal grape-growing climate. So when the father and son winemaking team of Clive and Martin Vickers of Halfpenny Green Vineyard harvested rondo grapes in late September last year, registering a potential alcohol content of 17.4 per cent, they could not quite believe it. Nor could other English rondo grape growers situated much farther south.

Fortunately, the Vickers' yeast gave up converting sugar into alcohol in the fermenting vats and what Halfpenny Green Vineyard ended up with was, it seems, a whopping 15 per cent alcohol, burly rondo red, the sort of alcohol level that is usual in warm

vintages in the Rhône valley and commonplace every year in hot New World wine countries.

Halfpenny Green's south facing, sloping, sheltered, light sandy soil vineyards and tiny 1.5 to 2 tonnes per acre rondo crop, half the usual yield, explain in part its alcohol content. South Staffordshire's dry, sugar-concentrating weather in August, September and October last year apparently did the rest.

The wine consultant Stephen Skelton is not at all surprised. "Rondo is the earliest red wine grape to ripen and there were some strange and very high sugars reached on the early English varieties in 2011," he said.

The rest of us are likely to be as "flabbergasted" at this English wine oddity as Julia Trustram Eve, from the English Wine Producers' Association. But it's as well to remember that a high alcohol content alone in an English wine is not a sign of greatness. For that you need equally high levels of balancing fruit, acidity, sugar, tannin and flavour.



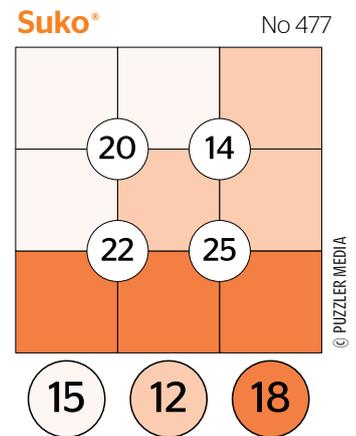
were fewer bunches of grapes per vine but the magic was in the unexpected way that the season progressed.

"We did not have any rain," he said. "We got the ripest grapes we have ever had. It is the biggest red wine in our 30-year history. I don't think necessarily it will become the norm in my lifetime. It could happen once in a while rather than every year."

Jane Travis, a partner in the English Wine Project, has tasted the Rondo. She said: "If you had your eyes shut, and did not know, you would probably be thinking you were drinking a southern hemisphere wine. I would say an Australian Shiraz. It has that plummy, fruit-driven note, which you don't usually associate with English reds. They are usually much lighter."

It is hardly surprising, given that viticulturalists are contemplating harvesting in the rain this season, that 2012 is unlikely to be a vintage year. However, domestic producers have become adept at planting varieties that will survive inclement weather, producing quality if not quantity.

Mr Vickers is praying for sunshine this weekend but is not dismayed by the downpours of recent days. "We are long in the tooth here," he said. "We plant some older varieties of grape almost guaranteed to do well in an English summer, Huxelrebe, Reichensteiner and Madeleine Angevine. We start the harvest on Monday."



Place the numbers 1 to 9 in the spaces so that the number in each circle is equal to the sum of the four surrounding spaces, and each colour total is correct

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## Blossom in autumn

Apple trees that were fooled into thinking the cold wet summer was actually winter have burst into blossom in the autumn (Simon de Bruxelles writes). Visitors to Barrington Court, near Ilminster, in Somerset, were greeted this week by the bizarre sight of apples and blossom on the trees at the same time. The blossom will die off when winter arrives, meaning there will be nothing for the bees to pollinate next spring. Rachel Brewer, the Barrington Court pommelier, said: "It is affecting a sizeable number of the earlier varieties of apple trees we have here."

## Supercomet on its way

Astronomers have discovered a supercomet that could be 15 times brighter than the full moon by November 2013. Comet ISON is very faint but it will steadily brighten until it passes less than two million kilometres from the Sun on November 28. Scientists say the comet might break up as it moves that close to the Sun.

## School run drug deals

A headteacher has appealed to parents not to do drug deals or smoke cannabis on the school run. Amanda Casey, from Longview Primary School in Huyton, near Liverpool, used the newsletter to ask them to stop. Knowsley Council said: "The school received reports of alleged drug activity taking place close to the school."

## Not such a bright move

A police officer who appealed for back-up after spotting a suspicious bright light has become the butt of jokes after the light turned out to be the Moon. The constable, from West Mercia Police, radioed for assistance when he was in Clent Hills, Worcestershire. A spokesman said: "He has been teased mercilessly."

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# Vineyard revolution as the robot turns to drink

Adam Sage Paris

It has two arms, four wheels, six cameras, a sat-nav and a tireless capacity for work. And it does not disappear at midday for a long lunch.

Vin, the first robot to be employed in French vineyards, was hailed yesterday as the future of the wine industry.

"If I have a choice between the robot and an employee, I'll take the robot,"

said Patricia Chabrol, owner of Château Gerbaud in the Saint Emilion area of Bordeaux. "It's less expensive and it causes fewer problems."

But not all wine-makers agree. Some denounce it as a soulless creature and an attack on ancestral tradition.

Vin — which stands for Viticulture Intelligente Naturelle — was developed by an inventor from Burgundy whose wine-making friends kept com-



The Vin vineyard robot can do almost everything except pick the grapes

plaining that they could not find people to work on their lands.

Christophe Millot, who developed the robot with Guy Julien, an engineer, said it could prune vines, strip them of unwanted leaves and buds and attach them to trellising. His supporters say it will not be long before Vin is picking the grapes, as well.

Vin's creators say it is a snip at €25,000 (£20,00).