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IN THE KNOW

Sandy Booth, founder of Beaulieu 58

Asparagus techniques

inspire innovative new wine brand

Soft fruit and asparagus grower Sandy Booth is using novel techniques to grow non-traditional grape varieties for his new wine brand. **Sarah Kidby** reports.

Sandy Booth, of New Forest Fruit, is growing grape varieties not usually seen in the UK at his new 3ha vineyard in Hampshire, using pioneering techniques taken from his asparagus and strawberry business. Within the last six months, the B58 winery also opened on-site and the Beaulieu 58 wine brand officially launched in February with three still wines.

well as more Shiraz, Merlot and Gewürztraminer, and Barolo will be planted this year.

Q. What varieties are you growing?
A: Back in 2021 we planted the first vines in the tunnel, with 165 vines each of Shiraz, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Jura, and Pinot, plus 660 vines of Gewürztraminer. We also planted Chardonnay, Bacchus, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Noir outside, but Chardonnay is not easy to grow, especially in the soil conditions we have here – so I'm abandoning Chardonnay and putting more Bacchus in.

Last year we planted the first Tempranillo, Grenache, Albarino and Floreal in the tunnels, as

As a result, depending on the variety, we pick around 0.5–1kg per vine in the second year and somewhere between 3–4kg in the third – so we gain 1–2 years.

Despite how bad the weather was for the wine industry last year, our Bacchus, which we grow outside, did really well which I think is because at the base of the bed we have a black ground cover that acts like a solar panel, absorbing heat into the coir. We're gaining what I call growing degree hours.

Q. How do you mitigate wet winters?
A: 2023 was one of the wettest winters we ever had; there was something like 1,200mm rain in six months. Into the early doors of November, the alcohol level was still just 10.5–11% for the Shiraz and Merlot, so we brought the grapes in on trays, 4kg a tray, and dried them back with the appassimento technique, by 20% using the cold stores for the strawberry business, which gave us 12.5%. But when we pressed the grapes, we actually had 15% and 15.5%.

We've found a method that means it doesn't matter what the weather throws at us – we may lose volume, but we will consistently make a good wine of 12–13%.

Q. What's up next?
A: The past two years we've picked 5–7 tonnes of grapes, and if all the fruit this year comes off, we'll be picking 25–30 tonnes because of the new plantation last year, which saw 6,000 vines go in.

We're trying to make Bacchus orange, so we will have our first bottles of that in November. If we can get a name out there for a good orange wine, we might get to 10,000 bottles going forward.

Another aim is to be using no chemicals on the vines at all within 2–3 years. We're up to spraying every three weeks at the moment – and we think we can improve on that with different methods – whereas some people are spraying every week or every 10–14 days. A French company exhibiting at Vinitech, Bordeaux in November, has robots that apply UV-C light to vines as an alternative to sprays, which can be used during the day, and only need to be used every 2–3 weeks as it acts like a shot of Yakult, boosting the plant's immune system. We're hoping to get one of their machines to try out of interest.

Q. What methods are you using to grow the vines?
A: When we buy the vines, we put them into a nursery for year one in a tunnel environment, in a 10-litre polybag with 10 litres of waste coir from the strawberry business – to get them to root and fill up the bag. It also makes the first wood in the first year, rather than taking two years.

In year two we plant it into our bed system, which came about from experimentation with the asparagus, with a table 50cm off the ground and 50cm wide for the vines. The roots still go into the soil, but the coir gives us a buffer zone to get the natural balance of bacteria and fungi right. We have irrigation for the vines to balance the nutrition. We do sap analysis to highlight deficiencies so we can tweak the irrigation or nutritional spray accordingly.

▲ Beaulieu 58 launched its inaugural wine collection in February

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