

A glass of the green, anyone?

Bertie Eden's wine will be the world's most environmentally friendly. Will it taste better for it? Find out yourself...

WORDS BY COLK MORETON

High on a hillside in southern France, the ground has been cleared for a strange and remarkable building. It will resemble an ancient earthwork, as if the landscape of the Languedoc has somehow acquired a new but very old bump. The construction Bertie Eden is planning on his land could not, however, be more modern. It will be, he says, the world's first zero-carbon, self-sufficient, energy-producing, gravity-driven winery.

"There are people making wine in California who put solar panels on their roofs," he says. "Some in Australia have built wineries from straw, and others with an interesting water-collection system or way of treating sewage – but we are putting everything that has been done in one place, which is unique. It will be thermodynamic, which means the building will produce as much energy as it consumes. And we are building it from hemp."

Hemp, as in marijuana? "Hemp as in Cannabis sativa, used in construction since ancient times due to its rapid growth and no need for irrigation, fertiliser or pesticides. Its fibres are mixed in with the limestone in the floor and used as bricks in a wooden frame for the walls. Its carbon footprint will be zero, or better – something not yet achieved elsewhere."

This pioneering project will be the pride and joy of Château Maris, the vineyard where the 45-year-old Englishman makes award-winning wines using biodynamic principles. It will not be open to the general public, but members of the new wine club that the Independent on Sunday has started with Château Maris will be able to visit, taste the wines that have been made from grapes grown in the fields all around it, and enjoy Eden's energising company.

"If you order wine via the Independent on Sunday club," he says, "you can have a full explanatory tour, a tasting, a visit to the vineyards, you can see the horse we use to plough the fields in action, you get to see the biodynamic sprays we use on the vines and eat a typical lunch here at the winery."

The 200,000 bottles of wine Château Maris produces each year are among the finest of their kind, rich and full-bodied. Even for those who are not wine experts, there is something sensual and affecting about tasting them in the landscape of hills and terraces in which the grapes are grown.

When the winery opens next year, those grapes – harvested by hand, at first light – will be brought by ramp to the top of the building, where they will be poured, using gravity, not electrical pumps, into tanks and on into enormous egg-shaped vats for fermentation. On their way they will pass



bamboo beds reclaiming used water, and solar panels powering the offices.

Eden is a believer in biodynamics, which sees everything involved in the process of making a bottle as part of the same living system, from the bacteria that lives in the manure that is spread on the vineyard soil to the way the juice is treated. The winery will extend those principles into the parts of the process that have previously been mechanised, industrial and power-hungry.

The biggest challenge in building a winery, where grapes are fermented and the resulting juice turned to wine, is to keep the temperature and climate constant. Usually this means large air-conditioning systems. Not here. "The ceiling will be a metre thick, so it feels as if it's three metres



underground. The temperature will be constant. And there will be gentle lights."

Other wineries have had trouble with the materials used to construct their buildings. "For us, there is no pollution from any component that can affect the wine," says Château Maris' general manager, Benjamin Darnault. "In Bordeaux there was a huge problem in the 1990s, as they had been treating their wood with an insecticide. The wine takes everything in."

The construction process has also been designed to be as carbon-light as possible. Plus, says Eden: "The building itself is vegetable. It's neutral. If we change our minds in five years' time, we tear it down and give it all back," says Eden. "The wood can be used for firewood, the hemp bricks

mixed and put back on to the fields as compost. The roof will be insulated with hemp and specially cultivated, local, non-water-needing little low herbs and flowers."

As a biodynamic wine producer, Château Maris operates in harmony with the cycles of the planets and the moon. Eden is earthy enough to admit he doesn't know if the pull of the moon, for example, has any effect on the wine in his vats – "It's juice in a tank, not an ocean" – but he says biodynamics gives an intimacy with the land that was not there before.

That is why he asked donkeys to bring their sticks and inspect the proposed site for the winery before the plans were laid. They became excited at the entrance to an old stone building on the hillside that he calls "La Chapelle Visigoth". "Their sticks were moving, so we were on some sort of energy flow, and as we got into the centre of the building, the sticks flew back and hit them. That means we've got a big open connection. The building is right with the flow of the land."

Whether or not you believe all this, the question is whether his methods make any difference to the wine. Eden smiles. "If you live in an environment which is oppressive and aggressive, which has a lot of noise, the wrong form of light, you're a different sort of person than if you live somewhere else." And therefore? "If we produce our wine in an environment that is peaceful, airy, calm, in touch with the environment and creates its own energy, will the wine be better? The process certainly will be, in terms of our responsibility to the earth." He's a visionary. But he is also a wine-maker, who wins medals for his alcoholic art. So will it taste any better? "We'll see. But I believe so, yes." ☺

The Independent on Sunday/Château Maris Wine club

How to order

Bertie Eden says: "The Grenache is a dark-cherry colour with a soft plum bouquet. On the palate, fresh violets open into ripe cherry with a silky, satisfying robustness. A very complete wine matching a wide variety of foods."

Terry Durack, Independent on Sunday food writer, says: "There is something very likeable about this wine, it's relaxed and versatile with loads of character, a touch of pepper and a fresh hit of plums and ripe berries. I find it less tannic than the average Minervois, with a softness and naturalness. You could throw this at

everything from platters of cured hams, terrines and pâtés, and hard and semi-soft cheeses, right through to grilled lamb cutlets and warm roast-chicken salad."

Château Maris, 2007, Old Vine Grenache
The offer is 12 bottles minimum
order at £9.99 a bottle plus £6.95
delivery (total £126.83). UK
mainland and over-18s only.

Order by visiting
independent.co.uk/wineclub or by
telephoning 0800 980 4992. Wine
will be dispatched by Vintage
Roots Ltd – Specialist Independent
Merchant of the Year, Decanter
Wine Retailer Awards 2008.

Vintage Roots Ltd, Holdshott Farm,
Reading Road, Heckfield, Hook,
Hants RG27 0JZ, vintageroots.co.uk

