

Ep 106: The future, growth and focus of English wine with Fergus Elias, Head Winemaker of Balfour Winery



Janina Doyle 00:00:07 Welcome to Eat Sleep Wine Repeat, a podcast for all you wine lovers, who, if you're like me, just cannot get enough of the good stuff. I'm Janina Doyle, your host, Brand Ambassador, Wine Educator, and Sommelier. So, stick with me as we dive deeper into this ever evolving, wonderful world of wine and wherever you are listening to this, cheers to you!

Janina Doyle 00:00:32 Hello wine friends. And welcome back to the last episode of season two of Eat Sleep Wine Repeat. I'm just gonna be taking four weeks off and I shall be back again in September, but I am leaving you with an absolute goodie. Today, I'm chatting with my winemaker, the Head Winemaker of Balfour Winery. Now, this is an awesome episode if you are interested in the English wine industry. We're gonna talk about Pinot Noir and its future in England. Have you heard about Crouch Valley in England? My guess is in a few years, that is gonna be labelled a Grand Cru site. We're gonna be talking clones and root stocks, which is rather convenient seeing as the episode before was all on viticulture. And also we're gonna touch on how our business model works in Balfour, now working with the growers of England and how that is expanding. So, to give you some context of where we are in England and Wales, in terms of plantings, currently, we've got 3,800 hectares planted across England and Wales. That's up 70% in the last five years and has quadrupled since 2000. We have 800 vineyards and 195 wineries. Now this is the last time I'm going to be mentioning this as I'm in the running for The People's Choice Podcast Awards and voting is only for July. So, there's one week left. If you haven't voted yet, please do go across to www.podcastawards.com. Once you're on the nomination page, just go to the arts category. You'll find me there and just go to the bottom of the page and click save nominations. Right, let's finish off with a little bit of Balfour.

Janina Doyle 00:02:28 Fergus, how does it feel to be sat on the other side of the chair having me interview you?

Fergus Elias 00:02:35 Um, I mean I'm honored, incredibly proud, uh, excited.

Janina Doyle 00:02:42 These are great emotions.

Fergus Elias 00:02:43 Um, you know, it's, it's a big day for me. Um, I, I, I mean, I'd love to say that the anticipation has been building for weeks, but you only told me about this 20 minutes ago. So frankly, uh, I don't feel like I've, I've been able to have that real piquancy of excitement. Um, but you know, no, I'm, I'm delighted. I'm really excited as well. It's having been a long-time listener. This is, this is a, this is an exciting moment.

Janina Doyle 00:03:05 Well, how exciting that now we work together because our story goes back, back right to the beginning. When did you start as a cellar hand at Balfour?

Fergus Elias 00:03:15 Oh yeah. It was quite, it was quite a long time ago. It was so, I mean, I've, I've been full time since 2014, which I think is when we first met.

Janina Doyle 00:03:24 I do. Yeah. Mm-hmm

Fergus Elias 00:03:25 Way, way back, but I'm, there are actually pictures of me loading presses in 2010.

Janina Doyle 00:03:31 There's evidence. Okay. Okay.

Fergus Elias 00:03:33 Photographic evidence. And then I've sort, I've spent a few summers in the vineyard. I've spent some, spent some summers in the, in the winery while I was, this was while I was sort of still, you know, quite young and a student and just looking for some, looking for some part-time work when I came home, you know, every single holiday. Um, so I was either, you know, I was either, I was either to be found in the shop at Chapel Down, in the vineyard at Chapel Down, or the vineyard here at Balfour or the shop at Balfour or the winery here.

Janina Doyle 00:04:06 So you didn't travel far afield. When did you become Head Winemaker at Balfour?

Fergus Elias 00:04:09 I've been Head Winemaker since vintage 2019.

Janina Doyle 00:04:12 The reason I love the fact, the synergy and the connections of life that I'm now working for Balfour is that here you are as Head Winemaker now. But when we met, as you said, in 2014, we sat out, you did my personal tour because I think Balfour, this is how much, not only Balfour, but the English wine industry has changed. It wasn't, I don't think there were proper, proper tours were there? Back in 2014? Was it, it was ad hoc or...?

Fergus Elias 00:04:41 Oh, I think it was pretty ad hoc. Yeah, it was, it was small. I mean, you know, those days there were three of us in the winery.

Janina Doyle 00:04:51 We sat on picnic furniture.

Fergus Elias 00:04:53 Oh God. Yeah. Oh, picnic furniture was a luxury. But you know, the full-time team in the winery was three people. And then, and then you had one in the office and then a part-timer maybe two in the office. So yeah, it was a very small team in those days.

Janina Doyle 00:05:08 And now, and I say, we, because I am so included in this, what? 30, maybe 35. Dunno.

Fergus Elias 00:05:13 Yeah. Probably probably pushing 35. I mean, if you, if you include all the part-timers, it's, it's even more than that.

Janina Doyle 00:05:19 And if we include the dog, Harley.

Fergus Elias 00:05:21 Yeah. Well, there's yeah Harley, then Richard's two dalmatians as well, of course. Yeah. No, I mean, it's...

Janina Doyle 00:05:27 The team continues to grow.

Fergus Elias 00:05:29 It's it's incredible how, and to watch that grow, I mean, I've been incredibly lucky. Yeah. I came here in '14. My, my plan then was I'll do a year and then I'll go off and do something else. I, I didn't want to be a Winemaker.

Janina Doyle 00:05:43 Didn't you wanna be a fighter pilot or maybe just a pilot?

Fergus Elias 00:05:46 I wanted to fly helicopters.

Janina Doyle 00:05:47 I just added in the fighter bit. Cos it's cooler.

Fergus Elias 00:05:49 Well, I mean, I mean, helicopters get guns and stuff. That's pretty cool.

Janina Doyle 00:05:54 Well, I am pleased. I'm pleased you chose to be a winemaker because you are doing a phenomenal job. I can say that because if you weren't, I wouldn't be working as the brand ambassador. So, I'm so pleased that we're gonna go into the nitty gritty, but I wanna come and bring, well, it's true. But I wanna come back to, you know, your everyday working life now. Not only do we have your skills and ideas, but we also have your dad, Owen Elias, which he's been around for nearly 30 years and started with Chapel Down and made wines for Nutbourne and Kingscote, yet because he's so humble and quiet, no one seems to know quite as much as what he's done. So it's amazing. We have both of you at the helm. So, I wanna ask what is it like working with your dad?

Fergus Elias 00:06:41 What is it? Um...

Janina Doyle 00:06:42 Can you be truthful or...

Fergus Elias 00:06:43 Yeah, that is, I can be very open and frank about working with dad. It's actually, I, I genuinely enjoy it. It's a genuine pleasure. He is, I mean, you you've very briefly touched on his CV. His CV for English wine is hilarious. If you go back, he's made wine for just about everyone. So yeah, there's, he's still at Nutbourne now. He was director of wine at Chapel Down, uh, for 20 odd years. Um, he made the wine at Kingscote. He made the wines at Ambriel, briefly when, before, when they were...

Janina Doyle 00:07:15 Ah, at the beginning?

Fergus Elias 00:07:16 Yeah at the beginning. They were, they started out life together with Nutbourne. So he was making their wines. Uh, he makes the wines, there's still wines and some of the sparklings, at Artelium who, uh, doing very well at the moment. He set up Divine Wine. He was the consultant winemaker there and they're now, you know, they're now going, going great guns. And, and obviously they have their own team and stuff like that. But you know, the old man has done pretty well. And then, you know, obviously did some bits at Balfour. You know, he, he does some bits. He comes in.

Janina Doyle 00:07:46 He dabbles. Well, he's been dabbling since the beginning and uh, we're still waiting for him to un-dabble, but that hasn't happened.

Fergus Elias 00:07:51 Yeah. He doesn't stop dabbling um, but no, no, he's, he's, it's, it's, it's quite a daunting prospect. And you know, this was after quite a successful career as a record producer.

Janina Doyle 00:08:02 A Record Producer?

Fergus Elias 00:08:03 Yeah, yeah. He had his own record label, uh, called disco freak. His biggest, the biggest band was a band called the Bhundu Boys who were in Zimbabwe, and a rock group. They were, they were proper cool, John Peel really liked them. And John Peel actually called my father a genius, live on air. Um, and they're, they're amazing band and you, they, I think they did two albums. It was at the time where they sort of created the genre of world music as this sort of catch all genre for all African music. Dad always rallied against that. It was this, it was pop music just because they're from Africa didn't mean, you know, didn't mean that they couldn't be um, so, but they were they're really cool. They're well worth a listen. They're very, it's really happy, lovely music. And, and most of them are now gone. You know, one of 'em got aids, the other one's on the run. And I think one of them died. Yeah, it's hilarious. And they, you know, they opened for Madonna and I was like, cool. So did you get to meet her at the after party? And dad was like, no, I was too drunk. I don't remember the after-party. I'm like...

Janina Doyle 00:09:02 What a waste. OK, So I want to get that music played when I'm down at the winery tomorrow. Like to have a listen.

Fergus Elias 00:09:09 We'll put, we'll play it over the speakers. It'd be great.

Janina Doyle 00:09:11 Perfect. Let's do it. So, what is the best thing, if you, is there one thing you could say that you've learned from Owen, from your dad?

Fergus Elias 00:09:20 Uh, I've learned a lot. Um, the best thing I, you know, sometimes I think probably wine making by neglect can work. That was quite a useful day. Sometimes, sometimes just letting a wine sit for a little while longer because you're not quite sure what you want to do with it.

Janina Doyle 00:09:37 So patience.

Fergus Elias 00:09:38 Isn't a bad thing. So yeah. Patience, I suppose, is, is a more generous way of describing it. Um, it's incredible. I mean, the man's been making, he's made, he must be north of 10 million bottles in his career, at least it's, it's ridiculous. Um, I've, I've learned pretty much everything from him.

Janina Doyle 00:09:56 Oh, well now that's interesting. You say that. This is the, the, the better question. What do you think that he, has learned from you?

Fergus Elias 00:10:07 Uh, what the line there: the apprentice becomes the master. Um, I think probably that one thing that's been quite interesting since, since I became Head Winemaker. So that was 2019 is we said is I've obviously as a result, wanted to stamp more of my style onto our wine making. And, and one of the, one of the things that you're seeing more and more in the Balfour wine portfolio is malolactic fermentation. So, I think the one thing I've taught my father who famously is quoted as saying, you don't need malolactic if you've got ripe fruit. Um, he, he was always very anti Malo in all instances. Um, and I can understand why, but in, in recent years, you know, the bacteria have come along so far. We, we use packet bacteria, um, to, to get our malolactic ferments through um, that's so much less intrusive. You don't get that buttery flavored profile. You don't that doesn't, doesn't come through as strongly these days. And so you actually get more purity of fruit. Um, so I would say the thing that my father has learned from me, is that malolactic can be your friend.

Janina Doyle 00:11:16 And Malo is not just for Christmas.

Fergus Elias 00:11:20 It's not just for Christmas. And you know, it is great because the wine's like, you know, Chardonnay, I, winemakers love Chardonnay, non Malo Chardonnay in tank. It tastes phenomenal, but you put that in a bottle and it's, you know, a TA of, of 10, or nine and a half. And actually, that's pretty full on. Um, whereas if you can get it down to eight or seven and a half, then that's, that's perfect.

Janina Doyle 00:11:42 And sorry, just because for people listening TA is Titratable Acidity. Right? Am I correct?

Fergus Elias 00:11:47 Yeah. Uh titratable yeah, expressed as tartaric acid.

Janina Doyle 00:11:50 Perfect. And we don't want it to be super, super high. Can we go back to the malo, cos I find that really, really interesting? You said that now you can use packaged bacteria to help the process along. Obviously malolactic fermentation is something that is natural. As long as you have the right temperatures, it can just happen. Is..

Fergus Elias 00:12:11 Um, it can, it's very hard to do it that way though.

Janina Doyle 00:12:15 Why? That's really interesting. Why?

Fergus Elias 00:12:18 Um, well, especially in, in England, in particular, it's, it's very hard because we tend to have very low PHs. And for malolactic fermentation to go through, you want a nice high pH because that's what makes the, because it's a bacterial, uh, fermentation. Bacteria, like funnily enough, um, higher PHs. That's why, that's why, you know, sushi is stable because the pH is like 2.1 or something ridiculous. That's how they, that's how they stop microbial growth on, on sushi. Um, and so if you sort of, if you think of the sushi analogy and you go, okay, I want, I want these bacteria to grow and you've given them a wine that's at 2.97. Um, yeah. They're not...

Janina Doyle 00:13:11 it's not gonna happen. Okay.

Fergus Elias 00:13:12 Um, they, they, they will go through naturally sometimes but not always fully as well. It might, you might get a partial malolactic. Um, and so, yeah, it's, it's very common, especially in these cooler climates to use packet bacteria. So, it comes as a culture that you can add to a tank and then you build that culture up and then you use that super culture to seed your other tanks.

Janina Doyle 00:13:29 Okay. That's so interesting. And so presumably though, just like yeast and yeast strains, you can choose many different bacteria strains to use for your malolactic fermentation?

Fergus Elias 00:13:40 There are a few options. It's not quite as exciting as the world of yeast. The world of yeast is phenomenal. There, your options are infinite. Um, malolactic is slightly less inspiring. You've probably got four or five main strains from the, from the big guys, but then you could, yes. In theory, you could go to every small producer of wine making ads and they'll all have their own strains that they use. Um, so, yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:14:06 So now just to quickly finalize on this fabulous conversation that I'm personally, having on malo, you said that by using your kind of packaged bacteria, it's not so creamy and, but you're still getting, and buttery is what you were saying. So, you're going away from that, but you're still adding quite a lot of texture, right. Because you are, the whole process is softening the acidity, the sharp acids.

Fergus Elias 00:14:06 Absolutely.

Janina Doyle 00:14:06 So you are, so I actually said to you, when we did a tasting, when I first started at Balfour, I was like, are you a texture junkie? And you were like, no, but I was like, I felt that every wine and I think this is exactly why, has that beautiful texture to acidity balance. And quite clearly that is what you're trying to do with all your wines. Right?

Fergus Elias 00:14:49 Yeah, no, absolutely. I mean, I think I was probably lying through my teeth, when I said I wasn't a texture junky, I, I love building texture into wines is one of my favorite things and it's, it is certainly a calling card in my, of my whites is I, I like to use, um, bâtonnage, which, you know, the stirring of the lees within the tank, um, to build body and volume within my wines. And it also gives it this incredible sort of creamy yogurty note, which I really like, um, and look for a lot, especially in Chardonnay, I think it's a really interesting quirk. Um, but yeah, I'd, I'd say that texture is, is so crucial, especially in English wine.

Janina Doyle 00:15:26 Well, the acidity in our wines in England, we're abundant in acidity aren't we.

Fergus Elias 00:15:32 Absolutely we've got plenty of that, but it's yeah. I think, I think that would be fair and, and yeah, malolactic certainly helps to towards that, but then yeah, it's all about building in and, and wine making, it's not, you know, it's, it's about lots of layers of flavor, so it's, it's malolactic and then it's lees stirring and then it's yeast strain choices and, and, and all of that, you know, coming together with, with different fermentation temperatures and different clonal choices, all of these things sort of come together. So, there we make, you know, it's the best job in the world because you make thousands and thousands of decisions. And luckily I, I like making decisions. It's just...

Janina Doyle 00:16:12 And for anyone, when you do come down to Balfour, we have the full setup, we have the presses, we have the botting lines, the disgorgement, we have everything. So, there is a, and a lot of how many wines do we make? How many wines?

Fergus Elias 00:16:26 I think it's 27 SKUs now. So yeah, it's a lot.

Janina Doyle 00:16:30 Um, so exactly you can't be disorganized in the job. You must be good at Excel documents, right?

Fergus Elias 00:16:36 I'm pretty good at pretty good at Excel. Um, also I carry a lot in my head. I've always been one of those people who's who knows everything that they're doing, um, at once.

Janina Doyle 00:16:46 Alright, Show off.

Fergus Elias 00:16:48 Well, I, I always used to be, but the problem is we're getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And now all of a sudden, I'm discovering there is a limit to how much I can store in my head. So, I now keep a diary, which I never used to do. And it's like, dear diary, today, we did this. I think I'll do this next week. um, but it just, it just helps keep, keep on top of, keep on top of the wine making world and that, but yeah, no, I'm very good at Excel. I love it. Love a nice Excel with a circular reference that doesn't work. Um, yeah. That's always fun.

Janina Doyle 00:17:18 Let's not go, I hate Excel documents, but what I would like is in a few years for you to publish your dear diaries, I think it could be fantastic. A could make a great read.

Fergus Elias 00:17:26 Now you don't wanna see the section on your first day at Balfour.

Janina Doyle 00:17:30 Oh, I do, but I don't think I'll be showing it to anybody else. Now I want to, we you've mentioned whites. Now, Balfour has a pretty good reputation for some of the best reds coming out of England, which I'm very proud about. So, I wanna talk about the Winemakers Collection, the latest release, the Gatehouse Pinot Noir. So, tell me what happened on Friday, cos many people won't know.

Fergus Elias 00:17:57 Oh yes. Friday, Friday was fun. Um, so we picked up, uh, well we entered the Wine GB award, so that's sort of the...

Janina Doyle 00:18:06 Yeah, go back a little bit before Friday. Yeah.

Fergus Elias 00:18:08 A bit of context, otherwise it's just a bit weird. um, so we entered the Wine GB awards, uh, this year, which we haven't, we haven't done for a couple of years. It's for no particular reason. It, life's just been busy and, and we've gone in other directions, but it's important to support, you know, our, our own country's awards scheme so we, so we, we entered a few wines and one of those was the Gatehouse Pinot Noir and we found out a few weeks later that we'd actually managed to pick up a gold medal for that, which was very exciting. And it was a very exciting moment. We were all very pleased. Um, and then, uh, if you get a gold medal, your wines get entered into the sort of the next tranche so the next tranche is, is, um, the trophy. So you might, you, you stand a chance of winning a trophy. Upsettingly, if you want to find out if you won a trophy, um, straight away as it were, you have to go to the lunch and wine tasting, um, in London. So it was awful.

Janina Doyle 00:19:05 Don't act like that was a horrible thing to do this Friday.

Fergus Elias 00:19:08 It was really tough, Janina, I had a really hard day. I drank a lot of English Fizz. Most of it was made by Dermot, so the acids were through the roof. No, No I jest, it was actually, it was fantastic. And yes, luckily fabulously, um, and unbelievably, we managed to secure the best English Red Trophy, which we've shared with Gusbourne, Um, but let's not talk about that. We're focusing on us here.

Janina Doyle 00:19:38 Moving on.

Fergus Elias 00:19:40 And we're no, we, it was, it was, it was really exciting. It was, it was so lovely because you know, a lot of the wine making team managed to, to head up to London for this event. Um, and it's the first time we we've sort of done trophy since well, since I became a head winemaker, actually, it was beginning to become a bit of a monkey on my back that I hadn't picked up a trophy. Um, so yeah, it was, it was a really lovely day and we got this really nice day out. Um, and, and to, to win an award was really fabulous. Sadly, we didn't win best English Still Wine. Um, which means that we didn't get entered into the final trophy competition, which of course is Supreme Champion. Which, I mean, frankly, that sounds a bit ostentatious. I wouldn't want to be Supreme Champion.

Janina Doyle 00:20:22 I don't know. No, I think we would. We're gonna have to try again. We're gonna try harder next time.

Fergus Elias 00:20:28 We're, we're, we're modest and meek here.

Janina Doyle 00:20:32 Okay. We're happy with that. We're happy with our best red aren't we.

Fergus Elias 00:20:35 We're delighted with our best red.

Janina Doyle 00:20:37 Brilliant. So, tell me though, with the Winemakers Collection, obviously every year, you and Owen you're like, okay, these clones are great. Or we wanna play around with yeast or we wanna do something bit more experimental with oak, etcetera, etcetera. How did this Pinot come about? So, this is the 2020 vintage everyone that, uh, we are talking about, 2020 Gatehouse Pinot Noir. Why did you decide to do this wine?

Fergus Elias 00:21:03 Uh, because it tasted really nice. Is that, am I allowed to say that? There's more to it though. Luckily there's more to it. Um, so, so we, we make, when we make our wine to it and what's, what's really fab about the way we work here and it's, it's, it's my biggest point of pride is, you know, we make 400,000 bottles a year, so we're, we're a medium producer in England, elsewhere, we're a small producer, but for England that's, that's, that's quite big. And as we know, we make that across 27 SKUs. Usually if you're making that sort of volume, you probably have quite big one or two fairly big presses and your blends would be bigger. Um, but the way in which we work is that we've got for the number for the, for the volume of liters that we have, we have a disproportionate number of tanks by which, I mean, we've got lots of small tanks and not very many really big buggers and that's, it's a really important part of how we go about our wine making, because by doing this, we force ourselves to make things, um, to make smaller batches. So, we, our, our fruit is picked on a clone by clone basis. Um, so, you know, we can have batches of fruit that range from, you know, 200, 300 kilos all the way up to, um, 10 tons, but we can break that down into clonal selection and, and, and we can really, we can really hone in on the bits that we're really interested in. And, and this is a prime example. The Gatehouse is a prime example. This was, um, a few blocks that came out of Springfield and it's 92% Springfield.

Janina Doyle 00:22:50 Which is a very sunny site.

Fergus Elias 00:22:52 With a little bit coming from Old Bramley. It's very good site. Um, the clonal selection's quite interesting there because it's, um, you've got some sort of classic burgundy clones in there. So, you've got PN 828, which is my personal favorite and that makes up 86% of the blend. So that's really exciting. Um, then you've got some 777 and you've got some 459. And....

Janina Doyle 00:23:17 Why did you throw in a little bit? Oh, you throw in a few others.

Fergus Elias 00:23:20 Yeah, just, just, just a couple of little bits

Janina Doyle 00:23:22 So tell me, tell me why 828 is your favorite?

Fergus Elias 00:23:26 Okay. Alright. So, so 20 years ago in England, when, when you planted a vineyard, you, you, you planted a variety, you went, okay. I want a big block of Chardonnay or, well, it was 20 years ago. Yeah, no, they would've been planting Chardonnay by then. Um, but yeah, no, I want a big block of Chardonnay and you wouldn't really know anything more than that. Your variety of Chardonnay it's come from this nursery and here's your block of vines. That's never been the case here. My father is notorious for being a bit of a clone bore.

Janina Doyle 00:24:01 Yes. He is.

Fergus Elias 00:24:03 Um, and I've spent many years, um, ribbing him for this and now found myself becoming one as well. Um, so, so there is a humongous difference in clonal variation. So, so Pinot Noir, which originates from different parts of the world, tastes different. And so, we have become incredibly anal about which clones we use for making red wine and which clones we plant, um, with a view

towards (a), what we want to do with that vineyard. You know, maybe it's not particularly, maybe it's a good site, but not fantastic. And so maybe you do want that to be champagne clone Pinot Noir, um, which tend to be higher cropping. You're gonna use it for sparkling base. So, you don't necessarily need the sort of complexity and intensity that you get from Burgundy clone, which are, which of course are my favorite clones because they're the most delicious. Um, so with that in mind, everything's planted based on these things and we use, um, a variety at Hush Heath but my favorite is 828. I think it's a really powerful burgundy clone. It's what I, it is, it is one of those clones that you taste and you go, this is what Pinot Noir tastes like. It's archetypal, Pinot Noir. Um, and sometimes, you know, and it it's, it's, you can, you get so many different clones out, out here in England, but you know, sometimes you taste other people's Pinots and, and, and you know, the clones that they've used and they tend to be German clone stuff, especially if it's come from out east and you can taste it, it tastes different. So I, I was tasting one, it was delicious, phenomenal, uh, the really amazing, um, Lyme Bay Pinot Noir really delicious, really good wine I'm in no way slighting it. But for me it was, it was, it had almost like the pepperiness of a Syrah. It was like black pepper. It was really weird. Like just that strange little note on the flavor profile. And I was like, that's, for me, that's not Pinot Noir, but I mean, it, that's not detracting from what was a fantastic wine, but that's, that's down to their clonal selection more than anything.

Janina Doyle 00:26:17 Okay. And they're using typically German clones.

Fergus Elias 00:26:20 A lot of German clones. Yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:26:21 And they're higher yielding though. Aren't they, than Burgundy clones.

Fergus Elias 00:26:24 They can be. Yes. They, they tend to be higher yielding. They tend to be a dream to grow. They're less disease grown. They crop higher. They ripen earlier, um, you get better color extraction. The cluster is more open, so you get better spray penetration. So, you probably don't need to spray as much. I mean, they're, they're a dream from a viticultural perspective, but...

Janina Doyle 00:26:48 But, flavor-wise...

Fergus Elias 00:26:50 For me, for me. Yeah. From a, from a Winemaker's perspective, it's, they're not what I perceive as being Pinot Noir. Yeah. Um, and that's, that's not to say that the Lyme Bay Pinot Noir doesn't taste like Pinot Noir. It does. And it's a phenomenal wine I'm in no way trying to say mine is better, but mine is better.

Janina Doyle 00:27:08 You're allowed to, if you don't make wine, you like, then you have a problem don't you?

Fergus Elias 00:27:15 Amen.

Janina Doyle 00:27:16 Exactly, No. You talk about these, these clones and for people just to understand, one of the things that I found was the most impressive about why is Balfour wines very high in quality? Well, on our a hundred acre home vineyard site, there are 136 different combinations of clones and rootstocks.

Fergus Elias 00:27:33 Oh yeah. I haven't even started on those.

Janina Doyle 00:27:34 Oh God. Well, I'm looking at the time. And I'm thinking that everybody is gonna be on another episode, but it's impressive. You know, because for anyone to understand what

you and Owen explained to me is that clones obviously give you complexity, diversity. Obviously, they're gonna also help you with consistency because you can choose what you want, depending on the year and the vintage, but the root stocks, they can change ripening. So, by maybe a day, two days, three days. So, if we have issues with frost or rain, it allows us to hedge our bets a little bit. So, with all of these different combinations, actually, you can get so geeky, it's fascinating. I can only imagine every time something, a new little batch comes in in the winery, once it's being picked and you are tasting it, it's fascinating just to taste those slight differences in flavor profile.

Fergus Elias 00:28:19 Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And, and you're right. And, and very briefly I won't go too far. It's worth saying, it's you're right. It's the real, the real charm of, of rootstocks is things like, you know, especially in this day and age with climate change and things like that, what we're finding more and more is the yes. On the whole, it's good for growing grapes in England as a rule, but the frost window, which used to be March, April, and that would be it. And you'd want, you'd get to the last week in April and you'd be able to be fairly comfortable that your vines, which had just burst. So they're at, they're very, they're most vulnerable when just after bud burst, you have these very small leaves, very green, very easily killed off by a frost. The frost window used to finish then. Uh, but now, you know, we've had frosts well into the middle of May, um, in the last two years. And if you've got a root stock, which means that your vine goes through bud burst one or two days later, that one or two days could make the world of difference to whether or not you have a crop, because if the bud hasn't burst, then it it's to an extent protected from frost.

Janina Doyle 00:29:22 Yeah. Yeah. It's fascinating.

Fergus Elias 00:29:23 And, and it's, it's such a marginal climate that that day or two really does make a big difference.

Janina Doyle 00:29:28 No, you tell me about, obviously we are doing really good Pinot Noir. And I think from my conclusion with all the clones and certain root stocks as well, that is probably one of the reasons, would I be right? I think you guys said many years ago, nobody knew if they even had champagne, Pinot Noir clones, or maybe German clones, or perhaps they did have some Dijon. The fact that the reputation for England is, oh, we don't make very good Pinot Noir. We don't make very good reds. Do you think go that going forward that is going to disappear as more and more people figure out what clones they have and plant the right clones.

Fergus Elias 00:30:01 Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. It's gonna be really irritating. All of a sudden, we'll have real competition from everywhere. I think everyone is, is, is now very cognizant of their clonal choices. It's not helped by people like me continually asking people what clones they're using. And, and that's interesting, uh, really, we should have shut up and not told anyone that that's where we focus, but I don't think, I'm sure everyone will have worked it out themselves anyway, by now. But no, I think you look at the quality of the output of English still wines in general, but red wines, especially it's the curve of improvement is exponential. Um, and there are some really phenomenal wines out there. You know, you've got Danbury Ridge, you've got Lyme Bay, you've got us, um, all making phenomenal red wines, Gusbourne. Um, I probably should give a nod to them seeing as apparently they make just as good, a red wine as me. Uh Gusbourne they, I've loved their red wine, their Pinot Noirs for years, they're really well made really well thought through. Um, and, and yeah, people, I think, I think, you know, it has real future, real scope.

Janina Doyle 00:31:10 Yeah. And we've obviously, so for everyone to know, we have a hundred acres on our home vineyard. We have planted a hundred acres across different sites in Kent as well. But what is very exciting is you've just planted in Essex as well haven't you? Can we touch on that very quickly?

Fergus Elias 00:31:25 Yes, we can. We absolutely can. So, Essex is, uh, it's not quite the hottest county in England, but it's certainly the driest. No, no, Kent is the hottest, but it, but Essex is by far and away the driest county. One of our sites saw 170 mm of rainfall in the entirety of 2021, which was actually quite a wet year.

Janina Doyle 00:31:50 That's ridiculous, Yes.

Fergus Elias 00:31:51 Um, and you know, phenomenally dry sites, um, really interesting sort of topography, um, and some really exciting wine to have been coming out Essex for the last few years. And, and actually, well, to be honest, we first used Essex fruit at Balfour in 2015.

Janina Doyle 00:32:08 Ahead of the curve?

Fergus Elias 00:32:09 We bought Pinot Noir from Clay Hill. Oh no, I don't think we, I don't think we can claim that. I mean, Clay Hill have been growing fruit for 20 years, at least now. Um, and they're fantastic vineyard, um, irritatingly, they sell all their fruit to other people and none to us at the moment, at the moment.

Janina Doyle 00:32:26 You say Clay Hill. Yeah. Now everyone's talking about Crouch Valley and for anyone, I think that probably is gonna get this big stamp of Grand Cru site, uh, very soon. But Clay Hill, is that what you're saying?

Fergus Elias 00:32:37 Clay Hill, Clay Hill is on, is on the Crouch Valley.

Janina Doyle 00:32:40 Right. There we go.

Fergus Elias 00:32:41 It's in the Crouch Valley, very good site. Um, but we have one site in the Crouch Valley and then one site, a little further north. Um, but they're both really interesting sites, really dry and we've, we've specifically targeted them for a still wine production. So the clonal, clonal map, there is a lot of burgundy clone, Pinot Noir, uh, a lot of Chardonnay. Um, and we've also put some Bacchus in as well.

Janina Doyle 00:33:08 Um, okay, good. I like my Bacchus.

Fergus Elias 00:33:09 We could, we could use, we could all use a little more Bacchus in our life.

Janina Doyle 00:33:12 I think so. I think so. And once all the plantings are finished, that's gonna account for about 50 acres. Am I right?

Fergus Elias 00:33:20 Ah, 50 acres? Maybe it depend, it depends how much more we can convince them to grow. So, the way, the way our model operates these days is if, if it's not a home site, ie. if it's not on the Hush Heath Estate, it's grown on our behalf. Uh, so we give these growers 15 to 25 year contract to grow fruit for us. In return we pay them, um, a very reasonable price for their fruit, um, and we get clonal and root stock selection as part of the deal. So, we choose how many acres they plant to an extent, ie we say, can you plant this much? And they say yes or no, um, we choose the, the varieties,

the root stocks, and the clones that they plant. And then we work together, um, growing this fruit over the, over the growing season and preparing it for harvest. And then, yeah, and then they completely disregard us when it comes to picking dates and pick whenever they can. I'm joking. I'm joking. It's a great model. Cause it works really well for everyone. You know, these growers are assured of a, a good price for the next 15 years. Um, and we get the best sites in the country without any major capital outlay as it were. Um, yeah, because we don't have to buy them. So, you know.

Janina Doyle 00:34:36 And in theory, am I right in thinking as well, if they get lower yields, if they bring you better quality fruit, they also get paid more as well, right?

Fergus Elias 00:34:44 Yeah. Yeah. So, there's a matrix for how they get paid. So, the higher quality, the fruit, the more they get, but it doesn't matter.

Janina Doyle 00:34:50 Everyone's a winner.

Fergus Elias 00:34:51 If they, if they wanna bring in 10 tons an acre of Band A Fruit I'm, I'm not gonna complain. That's fine by me. Um, so we, we don't limit them to a maximum yield per acre, but you know, there are obvious payoffs between, and we make it clear. We make it clear that we'd rather, they picked for quality than quantity. And, and we, we, we reflect that in our pricing, you know, they could theoretically crop at whatever rate they want, but if they're not hitting quality bands, then it's not worth doing. So that's, that's, that's the way we've done it because we don't want to tell them how to, how to suck eggs. We're not, we're not, we're not gonna nanny them. We want the best quality fruit, and we're willing to pay the best, you know, some of the best prices around it. They're really, they're good contracts.

Janina Doyle 00:35:37 There you go everyone, growers listening. Um, now question, have we planted more Pinot Meunier?

Fergus Elias 00:35:45 Uh, we have, so we're looking to increase our Meunier percentages to around about 30%. Um, so the moment it's probably about 10 or 15% of our plantings, we'd like to see it higher.

Janina Doyle 00:36:00 Yeah, because for anyone who doesn't know, we released another and I say, we, I wasn't there at the time, but I was drinking it, which was the Red Miller. So, it was a still Red, it was still Pinot Meunier. It went on to be the first English Red to win the Gold Trophy at the International Wine Challenge. Everybody loved it. It sold out way too quickly. It was an absolute dream. You know, anyone who tasted it wants to know when, in fact, was at a fair on Saturday showcasing Balfour wines. And someone came up to me and was like, are you gonna be doing another Red Miller? That, this is the question I get. So, so Ferg, are we gonna do another Red Miller, 2.0?

Fergus Elias 00:36:42 Um, I mean, would never say never, um, the climactic conditions and I, I mean, I've never seen Pinot Meunier like that. It was some of the best fruits, some of the best Pinot Meunier I've ever come across, the numbers. You, there's a, there's a reason that Meunier appears so much in champagne blends and things like that. It crops highly, it ripens early, but it, it reaches a plateau, it reaches a ripeness and then it doesn't tend to push beyond that. It gets to a point where it's ripe and it goes, okay, I'm done. And that's, that's, that's when you pick it, it doesn't always respond well to added hang time, which is the way you sort of really make, if you're pushing for red wine with Pinot Noir, you try and encourage more hang time. So once the fruit get reaches, sort of the chemical ripeness, you leave it and you let it get to the phenolic ripeness, and watch those sugars creep up at the same time.

So, it doesn't, it doesn't reach. Um, it doesn't tend to do that. Um, so this batch, uh, that we used to make the 2018 Red Miller was, was a bit of a freak. We really weren't sure what, what was happening. So, we, which is why we crushed it for red. We thought, well, no one ever needs to know, and we can always make it into a rose, um, or blend into our rose. And it, and it would've been fine. Um, but it just kept getting better. Um, it was really interesting because it was in a stockage tank because the oak regime was quite limited. It, it had some oak, but not masses. And so it was in a tank next to our Luke's Pinot Noir, uh, which is our, our portfolio red and, and Luke's has this phenomenally sort of it's, it's very much made in the German style. We go for, you know, quite a low percentage of oak. It's quite fruit forward. It's about beautiful sort of red fruit profile. And, and I love that, but you sort of tasted the Meunier next to the Luke's and you, they had a similar sort of, um, what's the word? Uh, we made them in a similar way. And so, but what was really interesting was the Meunier instantly was showing sort of like an older profile. It tasted a bit like, you know, aged Pinot Noir. It was really interesting. It developed much quicker.

Janina Doyle 00:38:50 For me. Yeah. Wilder, it had this earthy tone, there was, there was real depth, but then lightness and brightness. Yeah. Very intriguing.

Fergus Elias 00:38:56 Yeah. It was such a, it was a fascinating wine. And because they were next to each other, I was tasting them side by side quite regularly. And it was, it was phenomenal to what, you could tell they were the same genus. You could tell that somewhere there was a genetic link between the two varietals, but beyond that, it, they were chalk and cheese. Really interesting. Um, so the answer is, I don't know.

Janina Doyle 00:39:19 Yeah. It's about vintage, right? We're gonna have to wait and see what, what happens. Okay.

Fergus Elias 00:39:24 2022 looks good. You know, you've got the right climactic conditions thus far. So, you know, no reason not.

Janina Doyle 00:39:30 Is the fact that we are going through a heatwave, and we like, haven't seen any rain for weeks and weeks and weeks going to be a problem. At what point when we are kind of, we are at flowering, now turning to fruit set, obviously it's great. We don't want rain that could damage the flowers, but is there gonna be a problem at some point considering we don't irrigate?

Fergus Elias 00:39:51 No, I reckon we're alright.

Janina Doyle 00:39:53 Great. Love that conclusion, everyone. Just carry on enjoying the sunshine.

Fergus Elias 00:39:58 Yeah. Yeah. I think on the whole, you know, we're okay. We, we, we had a lot of rainfall over the winter. The water table was quite high. You know, these vines have, are pretty well established, especially on the home sites. Yeah. I'm not, I'm, I'm not, I'm not worried, worried at the moment. And, and we do have, some of our younger vineyards do actually have irrigation, so they might, might well be able to run, run water through those lines. If, if things, if the vines do start to look stressed, but, um, I it's, it's early doors.

Janina Doyle 00:40:29 We're gonna be okay.

Fergus Elias 00:40:31 Yeah. I think we're okay.

Janina Doyle 00:40:30 Good. Now, just to finish off then, actually, just talking about some of our other plantings, just very quickly, what I find fascinating. And I wonder if this is the future for Balfour, you tell me. On our home vineyard, we planted on clay soils, which I think you and Owen explain that often, with fruit can give some real depth. That's lovely.

Fergus Elias 00:40:06 Yeah.

Janina Doyle 00:40:47 Then we've planted the other hundred acres across Kent and they're either on chalk soils or on greensands. Um, so if I remember rightly the chalk gives you a real raciness and the greensands was bringing and bringing aromatics. Was I listening correctly?

Fergus Elias 00:41:05 Uh, yeah. You're not a million miles off. Um, yes.

Janina Doyle 00:41:08 You just don't wanna say yes.

Fergus Elias 00:41:09 Um, no, haven't forbid I just go, yes you are correct.

Janina Doyle 00:41:14 How dare you? No. Um, so with the fact that we've now got these three different soils, is the future at all to do more, a Pinot Noir on chalk soils, a Pinot Noir on clay soils or a Chardonnay on green sands. Is there, is there anything that might ever happen with that?

Fergus Elias 00:41:30 Uh, yes. I think they're more the different soil types. It's interesting. I think they are more colors for the pallet to be able to have different, to have different soil types.

Janina Doyle 00:41:46 In a blend, right?

Fergus Elias 00:41:47 For blend is, is really useful. Um, that doesn't mean I'm not going to look to isolate certain things, but I actually, I think that Pinot Noir in England responds best to clay. Uh, I'm, I'm a, I'm a firm.

Janina Doyle 00:42:05 Okay. Interesting.

Fergus Elias 00:42:06 I'm a firm believer in burgundy clone Pinot Noir from a clay site, I think is the way, the truth and the light, When, but then again, Chardonnay, Chardonnay on chalk is something else. It is, it is something sort of almost ethereal. It's this got this incredible energy to it, vibrancy that you don't get from Chardonnay on, on greensand or on, on clay. That's not to say, you know, that, that I'd want all my wines to have this, but it's, it's certainly, it's certainly interesting and it's certainly unique and you know, that could be something we play with. On the whole, I think, I think, you know, it's more about, it's not necessarily about isolating specific soil types. I think different soil types will just bring different characteristics to wines as, as blending components. Um, I'm more interested in going down clonal roots, so, I at, at the moment. Um, I'm sure in 12 months' time I'll be releasing my Winemakers Collection, which I will title Soil. And it will be a collection of six different wines from different soils.

Janina Doyle 00:43:06 Encouraged by Janina,.

Fergus Elias 00:43:08 Yeah, and It will be six different wines from six different soil types. But, uh,

Janina Doyle 00:43:13 Right now...

Fergus Elias 00:43:14 Right, right now my focus is clonal and I think, you know, I think it probably is a futures thing because a lot of these in new sites are on different soils, but they're also quite young. Um,

you know, we, we only planted in Essex. Um, well the first group went in, in 2021, but the majority actually got planted, oh no, 2020, the first group went in, but the majority got planted this year, you know? So, so we're not gonna see anything from there, for, in, in any real quantity for three or four years. Um, the other sites, the other Kent sites are still, you know, five years, probably five years old that they're not that they're oldest, but the majority are probably about five years old. So still, you know, it's, they're still young in their development. Um, and so yeah, yes, I think soil will come in, but not for another decade.

Janina Doyle 00:44:06 Um, I love it though. I love that we have all this, and I love the development. And for everyone it's just growing. I think the conclusion it's growing in England, things are getting more exciting. I think our wines are getting more and more exciting. The vines are getting older. The roots are going further. It's all a very exciting moment. Isn't it? Ferg?

Fergus Elias 00:44:24 Absolutely. I'm extremely excited.

Janina Doyle 00:44:28 Well, we know, you said you've put it in the diary. That's what you said at the, of the podcast.

Fergus Elias 00:44:31 I did indeed.

Janina Doyle 00:44:33 Fergus. Thank you. You're definitely gonna have to come back because I've got way more questions. So, everybody hold this space, go and get yourself a bottle of Balfour endorsed by both myself and by Fergus, we promise you will absolutely love it, right?

Fergus Elias 00:44:49 Oh yeah, no, it'll be really delicious.

Janina Doyle 00:44:52 Says the winemaker.

Fergus Elias 00:44:55 I hope you enjoy it.

Janina Doyle 00:44:57 Yes, they will. They will. Thanks Ferg. I'll see you tomorrow.

Fergus Elias 00:45:01 No probs, see you tomorrow, have fun.

Janina Doyle 00:45:07 So I certainly want to get Fergus back on again because his technical knowledge is incredible. And I think there's so much more we can get outta that brain of his, but for now come visit us. We are in Staplehurst, Kent. If you're leaving from London Bridge, on the train, it's just 45 minutes to Marden train station. Now, as always, I shall leave you with a wine quote and seeing as there has been quite a Pinot Noir focus, I found a brilliant quote from a judge at the drinks business global Pinot Noir masters tasting. Now, sadly, I do not know who the judge is, but hilariously, they said:

“Pinot is like the little girl who had a curl. When it is good, it is very, very good. When it is bad, It is horrid.”

Well, I hope that you are all convinced that in England Pinot Noir can be very, very good. Right, that is it for today and for this season. It's only four weeks I am away, so just go back over some old episodes and re-familiarize yourself with Wines of Ningxia, China, Wines of Brazil, Wines of Poland. And if I haven't covered a region that you really want me to do, get in touch with me by email janina@eatssleepwinerepeat.co.uk. And it's Janina spelt with a J, or on Instagram, direct message me at

@eatsleep_winerepeat. Right, don't forget to like, share, subscribe and comment if you haven't already.
And until the next episode, cheers to you.