

When James Dodson was studying viticulture at Brighton's renowned Plumpton College, he was planning a future career growing wine in the south of France or managing a vineyard in New Zealand.

The one thing he didn't expect to find himself doing just a few years later was running a successful business helping a rapidly-expanding customer base of English wine growers produce grapes for the domestic market.

As with many dream-changing career switches, it followed James' realisation that the market was creating a demand for his skills and expertise. It became increasingly clear to him as he neared the end of his course that the expansion of interest in English wine was opening up a business opportunity –one he could take advantage of.

Alongside that interest has come a growing demand that has followed a sea change in the quality of English wine – a sea change that his company, Vineworks, is helping to continue through the advice and the expertise it provides to wine growers all over the southern half of the country.

Now working with new partner Darcy Gander, who studied with James at Plumpton, the business has a customer base that stretches from Ashford to Exeter, and has moved from helping growers establish new vineyards to helping them with the ongoing management as well.

The message is clear: English wine is a growth area - and it's more than just the warmer climate that is seeing English wines beginning to challenge, and sometimes beat, those from more traditional grape-growing areas.

“It's about making sure the soil is right, choosing the right aspect for planting, using the right technology and, above all, planting the right grapes,” explained James, who graduated from Plumpton in 2007 but had already set up Vineworks in 2006.

Those changes have seen English wines – particularly the sparkling style – take the market by storm in recent years, with Champagne producers looking over their shoulders and Spain's Cava growers recently asking James to send them some samples so that they can see what the fuss is all about.

Their concerns are hardly surprising. The Ridgeview Estate in Ditchling was recently named Best Sparkling Wine in the World in the prestigious Decanter Awards. While James is quick not to take credit for that particular prize, his company has worked at the world-beating vineyard.

“It's perhaps not so surprising English sparkling wines are that good when you look at the geology involved,” explained James. “The South Downs is on the same chalk band as the Champagne region and only about 90 miles north as the crow flies.”

The big change, in James' view, is that vineyards have stopped growing Germanic varieties and have followed the market by planting grapes such as Pinor Noir and Chardonnay.

English wine is benefiting not from warmer weather – though that has undoubtedly helped, but from better decisions and from taking advice from experts such as James and Darcy, whose recent degrees from Plumpton – part of the University of Brighton – reflect current thinking.

“The important thing is to choose the kind of grapes that suit the climate and the soil and to make the kind of wine that works with those grapes,” Darcy commented.

Because the weather in this country tends to mean the fruit has a shorter ripening period, it means they are harvested when they still have a higher level of acidity and less sweetness, which is ideal for the sparkling style that needs that little extra bite.

Replanting is an expensive business but the right kind of grapes and the right technology allows the grower to produce a premium English product that may not compete with the cheaper mass-market sparkling brands but is becoming well-recognised among those who recognise a good wine – such as Decanter magazine judges.

The rest of us like it too; English wine sells out each season and continues to command a premium price.

When James set up Vineworks he was looking to take advantage of the growing interest in vineyard development by providing trellising services and focusing on helping customers establish new vineyards.

At the time there was talk of a European Union planting ban in order to prevent over-production, a scare that prompted many diversifying farmers and existing growers to move quickly to plant new vines.

That extra incentive, together with the general upsurge in interest, ensured a strong start for Vineworks, and four years later the company already has a strong customer base.

Always keen to stay one step ahead of the market, and unsure if the growth in new vineyards would continue, James decided to diversify into management as well as establishment, and brought Darcy on board earlier this year to give the company a broader range of skills and help it move to the next level.

After leaving Plumpton Darcy worked for a number of big vineyards, and when the two former friends found themselves quoting for the same jobs it seemed to make sense to join forces and work together.

“As it happens there doesn’t seem to have been any drop in demand for new planting, and so we are still doing plenty of establishment work as well as offering a much wider range of consultancy and management work, from technical advice to manpower,” explained James.

Vineworks offers a full planning and advice service, soil analysis, land preparation and planting, as well as trellising, pruning, spraying, canopy management, mowing and harvesting. It has a strong team of skilled workers that can come in once a year to

prune or harvest and it can bring in specialist plant and machinery to keep the vineyard producing the best quality grapes.

“For some customers we run the whole show, while for others – generally growers with a more hands-on approach to their vines – we may just provide some specialist labour during the grape harvest,” James explained.

Having spent the previous four years helping to plant new vineyards, the company has no shortage of customers, many of them people who remember Vineworks’ attention to detail at the planting stage and who now need a bit more help managing the established vineyard. About 50 per cent of establishment customers come back for management support.

Not that establishment has slowed down. “We already have around 40 hectares lined up for planting with new vines next spring and I am sure we will have plenty more phone calls between now and when we start next April or May,” James commented.

“We are always happy to talk to new customers but setting up a new vineyard takes a fair bit of time, depending on how much soil preparation is needed, so we would prefer farmers and growers to talk to us now rather than leave it until later in the year.”

This year’s harvest will do nothing to dampen the enthusiasm amongst growers or amongst farmers looking to diversify. With the grape harvest 20 to 30 per cent up on last year it looks like being another bumper season that is likely to prompt further expansion. The only thing likely to hold things back in the future is a shortage of tank space to handle the increasing crop and turn it into wine, and that’s where James sees another opportunity for growth.

When it comes to planting, Vineworks brings in renowned German contractor Ernst Weis, whose specialist kit can handle an astonishing 10,000 vines in a single day, all planted in a dead straight line exactly the right distance apart.

The company uses metal posts simply because they last 25 years instead of the ten years normally associated with standard wooden supports – and there’s no problem with driving them into even the most chalky soil.

“We have specialised equipment that allows us to put metal posts into anything, quickly and easily,” said James. “I could even fix a post into this floor,” he said, pointing to the concrete floor of the barn in which he is standing.

Since using the right equipment invariably makes for a better job, Vineworks has also worked with a company called Platypus to devise an exclusive ground anchor that makes for a much more effective and reliable trellising system.

“We also have long standing relationships with other industry specialist’s such as rainbow manufacturing who supply vineyards and UAP who provide agronomy services and products” said

“We want customers to know that we can provide them with the best service possible, and so we have worked with other experts to develop new and more effective ways of giving them the vineyard they want,” said Darcy.

Now that Vineworks has moved into providing full servicing for owners as well as vineyard establishment, James’ dream has changed again.

“At the moment our customers are spread across the south of the country because that’s the nature of the beast, but in time I’d like us to be the central servicing hub in a much more focused group of quality English wine makers – the kind of company that currently operates in the Nappa Valley in California.”

Now just four years old, the company has expanded rapidly