

Wrath of grape pickers: Greedy parakeets are ruining our harvest



Simon Falush and Lizzie Edmonds

HUNGRY parakeets have severely dented the wine harvest at London's only commercial vineyard since medieval times.

Forty Hall Farm in Enfield, which has 10 acres of land behind a Grade I listed Jacobean manor house, has been hit by flocks of the birds feasting on its grapes – having learned over recent years when and where to find them.

Last week, volunteers picking chardonnay and pinot noir varieties at the vineyard saw 60 parakeets fly away when they sounded the bird scarer.

As well as the parakeets, the weather was also blamed for the shortfall in the crop. Forty Hall produced a yield of 3.2 tonnes this year, compared with 4.9 tonnes in 2016, but the maturing vines could have seen production rise.

The thin crop at Forty Hall meant that the organically grown grapes were picked early and sent to a winemaker.

Vineyard manager Liam Burgess said: "The cold weather led to a big drop in the volume of grapes growing, but the birds eating the grapes had about the same level of impact on the yield.

"March was really warm, which meant that there was stronger growth than usual early in the year. But a sharp air frost in late April killed 80 to 90 per cent of the new shoots."

Mr Burgess said a warm May meant

those shoots that were left were able to provide a decent volume of grapes but the cool and damp July and August led to mildew and slow growth.

There are estimated to be up to 50,000 parakeets living in Britain, mainly in London and north Kent.

One of the largest colonies, of about 6,000 birds, is in Esher, while smaller ones are found in Kensington Gardens, Hyde Park and Epping Forest.

There are a number of theories about how the birds arrived in the UK. One story suggests rock star Jimi Hendrix released a pair – called Adam and Eve – in Carnaby Street in the Sixties.

Another theory is that in 1951 a parakeet was released from the movie set of *The African Queen*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn, during filming in Shepperton Studios.

In recent years there have been mounting calls for a widespread cull of the birds.

Forty Hall's 2015 Ortega wine was selected by wine critic Matthew Jukes in his 2016 Compendium of the Best English Wines and its wine also won an award at the Soil Association 2017 BOOM awards. The vineyard even boasts inhouse eco-therapy to promote grape-picking to boost well-being.

Charlotte Antoniou, one of three eco-therapists at the farm, said: "It does things to people that they don't expect it to, and enables them to open up."

Enjoy 15% off these gift cards

Save on movie nights, meals out
Pick one up today.



ENJOY 15% OFF