

# The changing landscape of English sparkling

The wines are flying off the shelves, even at Champagne prices, and wineries across the UK are opening their doors to enthusiastic tourists. Susie Barrie MW charts the rise of a booming industry

THE SCENE IS a windswept field in Kent. The date: 3 May 2017. I am watching the first vine of an ambitious new 40ha (hectare) vineyard being planted. It's an increasingly common scene in the UK – a record-breaking one million vines are due to be planted in 2017 – so on one level this occurrence is hardly newsworthy. That is, until you consider that the man wielding the spade is not only French, but also president of one of Champagne's leading grande marque houses: Taittinger.

Never has there been a more exciting time for the UK sparkling wine industry. The fact that notable Champagne houses Taittinger and Vranken-Pommery have recently bought land in Kent and Hampshire respectively, with the intention of making their own English fizz, speaks volumes about how seriously the UK is being taken as a producer of world-class sparkling wine.

It's no secret that a quiet revolution has taken place in the industry over the past 25 years. But the pace of change has quickened considerably during the last decade, to the point where English sparkling wine is now a serious global player with regular shipments to 27 countries. Given that we in the UK consume well over 100 million bottles of fizz per year, and total production of UK sparkling wine

*'The fact that notable Champagne houses have bought land here speaks volumes about how seriously UK sparkling is being taken'*

currently averages fewer than 4 million, there is also significant potential for expansion on the home front, too.

If you're considering buying English sparkling wine, it's important to appreciate the level of quality you can expect, and to understand why the price-tag is closer to that of Champagne than, for example, Prosecco. As a general rule, UK producers are making wines to a very high standard, in relatively small quantities, and often with virtually no expense spared in terms of equipment, manpower and (traditional-method – ie, Champagne style) winemaking.

And UK land prices are high, especially when vendors get wind of the fact that their land might be suitable for viticulture. 'There's a lot of hope value on land,' says Hugo Corney of Court Garden in East Sussex. Most vineyard and winery equipment also has to be sourced from abroad. As Sam Linter of Bolney in Sussex states: 'Nothing is made in the UK; everything comes from Europe and we have to ship it in. This alone adds 50-60p to the cost of a bottle'.

It's understandable, then, that English sparkling wines aren't cheap. But it's the taste in the glass that matters – and the vast majority of these wines can easily stand comparison to good Champagne at a similar price.



Photograph: Charmaine Grieger

In terms of style, UK producers make everything from classic cuvée (ie, a blend of varieties) to blanc de blancs, blanc de noirs and rosé. As a rule, wineries tend to launch their brand with a wine made from whichever grapes initially perform best on their site, before building a range. It isn't possible as yet to say that the UK suits one style over another, although Chardonnay as a grape variety is showing particularly strong potential.

Although most wines until now have been vintage dated, a key trend among producers is a move to non-vintage wines (a blend from different years) for some of the range. It's only possible to make non-vintage wines once a stock of reserve wines has been built up, so non-vintage is rarely an option for new estates.

Corinne Seely, winemaker at Exton Park in Hampshire, has been building up reserves since day one, with the intention of making non-vintage wines a speciality. As an aside, Seely released a 100% Pinot Meunier rosé last year, which is highly individual and well worth seeking out. Leading producer Ridgeview changed its Signature range to non-vintage earlier this year and both Nyetimber and Hattingley Valley have recently moved their classic cuvée wines (plus rosé in the case of Nyetimber) to non-vintage, too.

It is not better or worse to make non-vintage rather than vintage wines. What it allows winemakers is a little more flexibility in tough years and the opportunity to make a very consistent style of wine. It's also ➤

**Above: Nyetimber uses only estate-grown grapes for its wines**



## Growth of an industry

**Number of commercial vineyards in England and Wales** 503 (2015)  
**Number of wineries** 133 (2015)

### Annual production (in bottles)

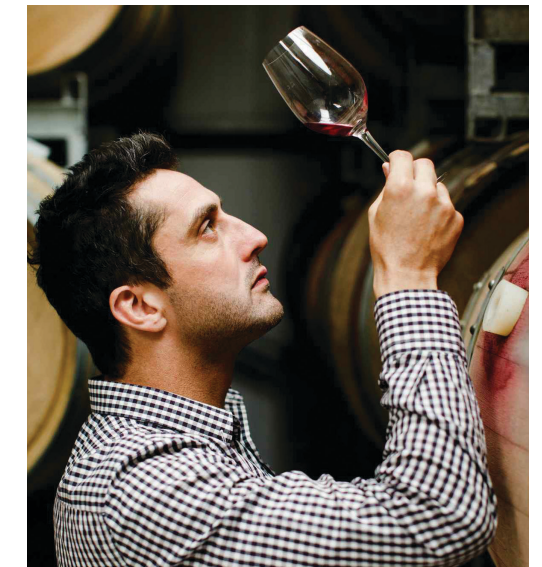
2013 – 4.45 million (*of which sparkling is approx 2.94m*)  
 2014 – 6.3m (*sparkling approx 4.15m*)  
 2015 – 5.06m (*sparkling approx 3.34m*)  
 2016 – 4.15m (*sparkling approx 2.74m*)  
*Overall wine production is predicted to reach 10m bottles by 2020*

### Area under vine (approximate)

2,330ha (includes 2017 plantings)  
*Hectarage planted in the UK has doubled in the last eight years, and is set to grow by a further 50% to 3,000ha by 2020*

- Sparkling wine accounts for 66% of overall UK wine production
- Chardonnay, Pinot Meunier and Pinot Noir account for more than 50% of total varietal plantings
- Exports of English wine are set to increase tenfold by 2020, when they are predicted to represent 25% of production
- There are more than 150 vineyards open to the public in the UK

Source: English Wine Producers



*‘We see the development of oenotourism as the next key stage in the English sparkling wine scene’*

**Charlie Holland, Gusbourne winemaker (above)**

worth remembering that it is perfectly legal to include 15% of previous vintages in a vintage-dated wine, and some winemakers prefer to express the characteristics of each vintage. As Bolney’s Linter states: ‘I like the vintage variation and I’d like to stick to our heritage [vintage wines].’

Beyond the wines themselves, if there is one buzzword in the industry at the moment it is tourism. When I last wrote about English sparkling wine for this magazine two years ago, I mentioned a handful of wineries that were doing a particularly good job in this regard. One of those was Camel Valley in Cornwall, a trailblazer and one of the first English wineries to really understand the value of wine tourism. Now, however, it’s almost impossible to speak to any winery owner without a gleaming new visitor centre or tasting room being mentioned.

With many vineyards now planted and wineries built, investment is shifting towards the visitor experience. To support this, a new interactive UK wine map has been launched to guide an ever-growing number of eager wine tourists (*visit [www.englishwineproducers.co.uk](http://www.englishwineproducers.co.uk)*). As Richard Balfour-Lynn of the picture-perfect Hush Heath Estate in Kent jokes: ‘Two years

ago we had 1,500 visitors – and, to be honest, I think most of them were lost in the countryside. Last year we had 18,000 visitors, and we’re expecting 25,000 this year’.

It’s a burgeoning side to the industry and one that leading UK producer Chapel Down has recently embraced with the opening of The Wine Sanctuary, a new tasting room at its site in Tenterden, Kent. As MD Mark Harvey says: ‘The idea is to have a premium offer, to raise the bar for English wine.’ The opening coincided with the launch of a new range of wines from the Kit’s Coty vineyard near Aylesford, including a prestige cuvée that is England’s most expensive wine to date.

## Dynamic scene

When it comes to noteworthy producers, there are now so many that it’s almost impossible to know where to begin. Of the larger players, Hattingley Valley in Hampshire continues to do an excellent job with winemakers Emma Rice and Jacob Leadley making wines for a range of clients, as well as some terrific cuvées under the Hattingley Valley label. Rice and Leadley are tireless innovators and Hattingley was one of the first English producers to drive the ‘prestige cuvée’ trend by releasing the

**Above: Chapel Down’s The Wine Sanctuary in Kent is one of many tasting rooms springing up across the UK**

stunning King’s Cuvée 2011 a couple of years ago. Although now sold out, the next vintage (2013) is about to be launched, as is a new sparkling red.

There have been big developments at Gusbourne Estate in Kent. This summer saw the opening of a new cellar-door space known as ‘The Nest’. As winemaker Charlie Holland says: ‘We see the development of oenotourism as the next key stage in the English sparkling wine scene.’ This facility is intended ‘as a destination, smart and well-branded’ where visitors can enjoy an in-depth experience of both the winemaking process and vineyards.

Gusbourne also has a new prestige cuvée in the pipeline, but it will be at least another year before it is ready for release. Holland’s precise and elegant style of winemaking suits extended ageing of wines prior to release, so it should be worth the wait.

Likewise at Nyetimber in West Sussex, the arrival of prestige cuvée wines is imminent. Winemaker Cherie Spriggs has made two: a white based on the 2009 vintage and a rosé based on 2010; both are due for release ‘soon’, according to Spriggs.

Nyetimber uses only estate-grown grapes for its elegant and consistently impressive

**Below: new prestige cuvées include Hattingley Valley’s Kings Cuvée**



range of wines. In terms of vineyard location, however, Spriggs explains: ‘Grapes don’t know what county they are planted in, but they do know if the site is high quality.’ With this philosophy in mind, the company has acquired a 20ha site in Kent that will take total vineyard holdings to more than 240ha across Hampshire, Sussex and Kent. Also in the pursuit of quality, Nyetimber has a new, custom-designed pressing centre in the heart of its Sussex vineyard, to enable swifter pressing of the grapes post-harvest.

With almost all of the UK’s larger producers looking to increase exports – the US in particular is a new, potentially huge market – there is arguably still room for new projects. In 2011 Robert and Augusta Raimés planted two chalky sites near their farm at Tichbourne in Hampshire, as a way of getting family and friends more involved in the work of the farm. The first vintage of Raimés, Blanc de Noirs (900 bottles of the 2013, made at Hattingley Valley) was a terrific first release.

Over in Marlow, Bucks, some seriously exciting wines are starting to emerge from Harrow & Hope, a new project begun by Kaye and Henry Laithwaite. Henry has a lot to live up to as a member of the Laithwaite’s ➤





Robert and Augusta Raimes planted two chalky sites near their farm in Hampshire in 2011

Wine family, and there’s an air of healthy competition as you sit around the tasting table with Henry and his highly accomplished winemaking mother Barbara. Barbara’s own wine, Wyfold, is consistently superb. Laithwaite’s also launched Windsor Great Park Vineyard 2013 last year, a sparkling wine made by the Ridgeview team from vines planted and managed by Laithwaite’s. Henry and Kaye are more than living up to the family name, and it’s great to see a young and dynamic pair making such strides.

Mike and Hilary Wagstaff took over Greyfriars in Surrey in 2010 and have spent the last seven years investing in and expanding the business. Apart from making some very decent wines, Mike is clearly a man on a mission to get everyone in the UK drinking English sparkling wine. ‘The Champenois have spent the last 300 years brainwashing us that if we’re celebrating, the drink to have is Champagne,’ he says. ‘We need to be out there getting people excited about drinking something local.’

Bride Valley (owned by *Decanter* consultant editor Steven Spurrier), Furleigh and Langham are now all well-established Dorset estates making world-class wines in a range of styles. The same can be said of Court Garden in Sussex, a winery that crept onto the scene a decade or so ago and has remained consistently impressive.

Of the rest, Ambriel and Blackdown Ridge in West Sussex, Coates & Seely in Hampshire, Fox & Fox in East Sussex, and Squerryes in Kent are all worth seeking out. And for the future, Rathfinny in Sussex and Simpsons Wine Estate in Kent have yet to release wines, but will certainly be ones to watch.

So to my recommendations, which you must treat as merely a starting point. I could easily have included three times as many wines. I’d therefore urge UK readers to seek out their nearest winery, pay a visit and taste local wines where they are grown and made. We now have a world-class English product on our doorstep and, as wine lovers, it is surely no more than our duty to celebrate that. **D**

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Barrie’s picks: glorious English sparkling to try

**Langham Wine Estate, Classic Cuvée Reserve Brut, Dorset 2011** 97  
£27.99-£33 Cambridge Wine Merchants, Duncan Murray, The Dorset Wine Co, Yapp Bros  
There is only one word for this: delicious. Rich, smoky aromas give way to a multi-layered palate of praline, honey and mushroom, all kept in check by a core of vibrant acidity. It is hedonistic but delightful and, given its maturity, excellent value for money. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alcohol** 12%

**Sugrue Pierre, The Trouble with Dreams Cuvée Brut, South Downs 2013** 97  
£33.40-£39 EeBria, Exel, Hallgarten Druitt & Novum, Hennings, Strictly Wine, WoodWinters  
From its restrained but complex aromas of brioche, truffle and spice to its vibrant, mouthwatering acidity, this is beautifully crafted and hugely exciting fizz. Although drinking well now, it has the structure to develop for several years. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 12%

**Nyetimber, Blanc de Blancs, West Sussex 2010** 96  
£38.50-£43.99 Berry Bros & Rudd, Davy’s, Farr, Drinkmonger, Harrods, Jeroboams, Justerini & Brooks, L’Assemblage, Lea & Sandeman, The Finest Bubble, WoodWinters  
Developed bread and wood-smoke aromas are matched by a fine mousse and savoury, apple peel flavours. Stylish and classic. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 12%

**Chapel Down, Kit’s Coty Coeur de Cuvée, North Downs, Kent 2013** 95  
£100 Chapel Down Winery  
This ambitious new prestige cuvée blanc de blancs is still very young, but shows enormous promise. Full of spiced apple fruit, chalky minerality, tangy acidity and a hint of autolysis. Tuck away for a while. **Drink** 2018-2022 **Alc** 12%

**Wiston Estate, Cuvée Brut, South Downs 2013** 95  
£32.95 Booths, Corney & Barrow, Harvey Nichols, Hennings Wines, Simply Wines Direct,

**The Finest Bubble**  
Once again, the latest release of Wiston’s vintage cuvée from winemaker Dermot Sugrue is superb. Savoury, yeasty aromas are matched by fresh, focused acidity in the mouth, along with hints of roasted nut and ripe apple. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 12%

**Cottonworth, Classic Cuvée Brut, Hampshire NV** 93  
£24.99-£28 All About Wine, Fareham Wine Cellar, Toscanaccio  
Savoury, autolytic notes on the nose are the result of 27 months’ lees ageing and 30% reserve wine. The overall impression is one of elegance, with biscuit and light truffle flavours underpinning a very fine and refreshing frame. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 12%

**Court Garden, Ditchling Reserve Brut, East Sussex 2010** 93  
£29.70-£31.99 Butlers Wine Cellar, Dulwich Vintners, Handford, Quaff  
A blanc de noirs that is typically broad and bready with baked red apple fruit and hints of roasted nut from oak.

Though it’s from the 2010 vintage, it is still beautifully lively with juicy acidity and a very appealing drinkability. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 12%

**Fox & Fox, Inspiration Brut, East Sussex 2013** 92  
£33-£39 Justerini & Brooks  
This characterful Pinot Gris-based blanc de blancs is rich in colour, aroma and flavour. Intensely creamy but refreshingly dry, with bread and spiced red apple aromas, it is full of energy and life. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 11.5%

**Gusbourne, Blanc de Blancs, Kent 2013** 92  
£37.50-£42.95 Berry Bros & Rudd, Goedhuis & Co, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, Jeroboams, Justerini & Brooks, Lea & Sandeman, Oddbins, Selfridges, WoodWinters  
As with all of the Gusbourne wines, there is a precision and subtlety here, along with the saline minerality and steely acidity of a classic blanc de blancs. Elegant, bready and tight-knit,

it is young and needs time to develop. **Drink** 2018-2020 **Alc** 12%

**Hambledon Vineyard, Première Cuvée Brut, Hampshire NV** 91  
£42.50-£49.90 Berry Bros & Rudd, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, The Finest Bubble, Virgin Wine, Waitrose Cellar  
A blend of the Champagne trio from 2011 with 15% reserve wine from 2010, this is the first release of Hambledon’s top wine. There is evident development of colour and aroma, with buttered toast and rich, bready notes to the fore. A bold, stylish fizz for classicists. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 12%

**Greyfriars, Rosé Reserve Brut, Surrey 2013** 94  
£23.50-£25.99 Lea & Sandeman, Waitrose  
Made from 100% Pinot Noir with a third of the blend fermented in old oak, this antique gold-coloured rosé is full of spiced plum fruit and creamy, roasted nut flavours. A rich-textured and toasty

style that’s a great match for food. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 11.5%

**Digby Fine English, Leander Pink Brut, NV** 93  
£29.99 Armit, Harvey Nichols, Marks & Spencer, Waitrose  
From its pale salmon colour to its restrained but spicy, red fruit palate, this is a subtle and stylish rosé. Elegant and autolytic, balanced, long and harmonious, it’s one to sip and savour. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 12%

**Ambriel, Rosé Extra Dry, West Sussex NV** 91  
£22.50 Hawkins Bros, Private Cellar, Wine Pantry, Wine Therapy  
Charles and Wendy Outhwaite’s West Sussex estate is a relative newcomer to the English wine scene and I particularly like their juicy, easy-going rosé. Full of summer fruit flavours and red apple tang, it’s great value and ideal for picnics and parties. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 10%

For full details of UK stockists, see p97