

Oxney Organic Estate

After selling Hotwire, an international PR firm specialising in high-technology companies, Kristin Syltevik and partner, Paul Dobson, a former golf pro, sought to make a lucrative investment and whilst sitting in a camper van in a French vineyard, it became clear what this would be – a wine farm. The idea blossomed, then grew legs.

With a background in PR, Kristin has sampled some of the best wines from around the world. She's always been keen on wines from Northern France, the ones that are fresh and clean on the palette, which may explain why English wines are so appealing to her. Combined with her love of cooking and growing things, the next step seemed inevitable – Kristin and Paul acquired farm land on the Kent/Sussex border along the River Rother.

"I thought it would be something fun! Creative even. So, we took the plunge, going organic from day one. At this point I need to point out that I was no good at chemistry at school and not much better at science, so I started with no knowledge in the field, zilch. I did a lot of sampling, picking out what I thought would work, and of course it didn't; then someone started speaking about terroir, none of which I believed – until I experienced it."

"This wake-up call compelled me to seek the advice of the Soil Association and fellow wine farmers – who clearly know I lot more than me. Of course, organic viticulture means we don't use herbicides, and there's a limited and natural disease



Oxney Organic Estate is run by indie owners, Kristin Syltevik and Paul Dobson. Kristin's responsible for the vineyard and holiday cottages, whilst Paul is the operations man, taking care of the arable and livestock farming.



Oxney Organic Estate, near Rye in East Sussex is an 850-acre collection of farms providing a mix of arable crops, sheep, holiday accommodation, and a large chunk dedicated to vines – the UK’s largest organic vineyard. Oxney’s first vines were planted in 2012, and the last tranche went in May 2018 – a combination of Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay and Seyval Blanc.

control regime. This means we need to be super vigilant and put a lot of effort into the vineyard. So, I quickly learnt that it is in fact all about the terroir, about the environmental factors that affect a crops phenotype – the composite of organisms, the unique environment, farming practices and growth habitat. Collectively, these characteristics and biodiversity give personality to the healthy terroir, which has a knock-on effect to the environment, in safeguarding wildlife habitats and maintaining soil structure.”

I ask Kristin about the most significant challenges she’s faced. “It’s been super hard work, incredibly intense and expensive. Coming from the cut-throat marketing industry I was astounded to be met with unbelievable support from fellow wine farmers, competitors really, who are happy to share their knowledge and expertise – which helped me succeed. It’s been an incredible eye-opener to human nature. We all meet regularly at one another’s farms.”

“In hindsight there’s a lot to be said about starting out in a business you have no experience in. The positives are you’re



bringing in your skills from other industries and you’re influenced by new ideas. On the down side there’s the sceptic nay-sayers, red tape, vine disease and having no control over the weather and potentially losing a whole vintage.

After slogging at it since 2009, Kristin is overjoyed at the success of the vineyard, which requires a lot more time and effort than non-organic vineyards. The hard work and steep learning curve saw Oxney’s Cuvée Classic receiving a Gold medal at the 2018 WineGB Awards. When measured against the other 230 big name wineries that entered, she’s rightly pleased.



» Kristin has a clear idea of her niche target market – foodies that buy English wines, with the bonus of throwing ‘organic’ into the mix. I ask Kristin where she plans to take Oxney in 2019 – both the estate as a winemaker and on the tourism side.

“We’re primarily focused on sparkling wine and have two ranges – the Classic range with Cuvée and a sparkling Pinot Noir Rose, and the Estate range with a sparkling Rose and Pinot Noir blend. We also do an exciting cider with apples gathered from a neighbouring farm. In terms of new products, I’m thrilled to announce that we’ll be launching a still Rose in 2019.”




“Other new territories for us is our first ever trade event held here this September just past – encouraging hotels and restaurants to buy Oxney wines.”

Whether you want an in-depth tour from vine to glass, or just fancy a wander through the vineyard and a glass in the tasting room, visitors are welcome. Oxney’s Cellar Door stands open to welcome wine enthusiasts to buy directly from the vineyard. They’ll soon be offering food-pairing morsels; Kristen is working with a reputed chef who’s putting this together.

“I also regularly have small visiting groups seeking the true agri-tourism experience and have them either staying at our luxury holiday cottages on the farm or at our shepherd’s huts which are constructed using oak from the farm and a lot of upcycled material.”

Day trippers could pre-arrange Charcuterie lunches in the vineyard. Working with nearby farmers and other wine estates, Kristin plans to create an annual tasting event, celebrating tastes in the area.

We’re fortunate enough to be surrounded by acres of lush vineyards in our region of England, with a couple of big-name wineries to boot. Now we can sip and sample some of the best sparkling wines in Europe at the UK’s largest organic vineyard – all this without leaving the country. 

www.oxneyestate.com

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