

SIX OF ENGLAND'S BEST VINEYARDS, *on the south-east wine route*

England's viticultural renaissance is turning heads on both sides of the Channel. There are more than 400 commercial vineyards throughout England who jointly put out wine at a rate not seen since the Middle Ages. An interesting aspect of England's wine in the south-east is that so much of it is sparkling; here alone +30 vineyards are producing wines that would rival those in France's Champagne region.



The south-east is home to some of the most highly regarded producers, like Ridgeview who won a trophy as the best sparkling wine in the world, beating competitors from Champagne, then there's Chapel Down who won a gold medal for its sparkling Rosé Brut, and Denbies who picked up a gold for their Chalk Ridge Rosé.

Currently, the principal English wine outlets are the vineyards and wineries themselves, alongside a few specialist wine stores and farm shops, as well as a selection of Waitrose supermarkets; which is reason enough for discerning wine buffs to arrange a vineyard tour, and engage with English viticulture.

Like the manicured vineyard and state-of-the-art winery of Hush Heath in Staplehurst, which is planted with apples (to help introduce nutrients into the clay soil) and three champagne grape varieties. They run a substantial environmental programme - in the surrounding oak forest they have a massive owl population; the deer have returned, including albino deer; they are home to several hundred natural bee hives; for every tree they fell they plant three more; and amongst the vines, they

plant the vineyards with meadow flowers. Their philosophy is simple: If you want to produce a great wine you need to grow a good grape, which starts with taking care of the land. www.hushheath.com

Kent's oldest commercial vineyard, Biddenden, sits amongst quiet, picturesque villages in a sheltered valley. The vineyard's history is evident everywhere, from the traditional look of the branding and labelling, to the focus on Germanic grape varieties, and the 17th century horse-driven pack press that stands proudly at the entrance to the cellar door. Rather than chasing the Champagne dream, they've focused instead on producing the wines they love as well as their famous Biddenden Cider, along with farm pressed apple and pear juice. They're open all year around for free tastings in their well-stocked shop, and encourage self-guided walks around their established estate. www.biddendenvineyards.com

Chapel Down is England's leading wine producer and the vineyard of choice for the Royal Wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. To get behind the scenes at Chapel



Down, join a guided tour of the vineyards and winery, which includes a tutored tasting. You'll learn about the challenges they face in growing grapes in a cool climate and how they make sparkling wines using traditional methods. You're encouraged to stroll around the vineyard and walled herb garden, take lunch at their celebrity chef restaurant and visit their irresistible wine and fine food store (which has a fantastic cheese counter). www.chapeldown.com

The Oxney Organic Estate in Beckley, near Rye, produce sparkling and still wines exclusively using their own grapes and is managed along environmentally sound and sustainable farming principles, and a low intervention ethos, letting the wines take their time through the winemaking process. Their vines are Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay and Seyval Blanc, grown in a fine sand and silt loam. The vineyard, part of an 850-acre organic farming estate, have converted several old barns into holiday cottages and, also located in the vineyard, shepherds' huts. A lunchtime guided tour is followed by a cheese platter and sparkling wine, served in the Oast House.

www.oxneyestate.com



>> When fully planted the 600-acre Rathfinny Vineyard will develop to become one of the largest single vineyards in England, and one of the biggest in Europe. Their state-of-the-art winery in Alfriston, East Sussex, can annually produce over one-million bottles of traditionally crafted Sussex sparkling wine - the first of which will be available in June 2018. Small groups walk amongst the vines with an experienced guide who speaks of the vineyard's history and the wildlife on the estate, thus framing Rathfinny's place in this classic south-downs landscape. The tour culminates in the beautifully designed tasting room, with a further option for lunch in the Gun Room which, legend suggests, was the gun store for the Duke of Wellington. Booking is essential

www.rathfinnyestate.com.

Carr Taylor's Vineyard, a family-run winery near Hastings, have been producing wines on their 37-acre estate for almost 50 years. They pioneered the traditional French method of in-bottle second fermentation and went on to produce England's first commercial sparkling wines - Champagne in all but name. Although they use the same traditional methods as their French cousins, Carr Taylor's soil differs, producing a fruitier, more flavoursome wine rather than emulating Champagne. A tour of the estate includes a visit to the winery to see the vats and presses they use, along the way learning about their wine-making techniques. This is followed by a call on the bottling room to see the machinery and hear about their specialist production methods, and finally, a tutored wine tasting. www.carr-taylor.co.uk



What could be better than learning about English wine whilst partaking in a glass or two of the homegrown stuff as the sun sets across a fetchingly beautiful vineyard landscape. When it comes to wine-tours, the rule of thumb is to visit Burgundy, Rioja or the Mosel Valley. Wine connoisseurs want to see where the magic happens, which most don't feel is applicable to these shores. Convince yourself of this as a seductive sparkling wine sashays across your palate in the tasting room of an English vineyard. Then decide if this rule urgently requires reconsideration. AC

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