

What's eating Guildford's grapes?

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English wine still flies entirely under the radar of many consumers, but the industry has experienced a quiet revolution in recent years.

Modern wine-making in the UK started with the establishment of Hambledon Vineyard in the South Downs in 1952. Since then, English wine has wended a slow path from emerging industry to a true force to be reckoned with. There are more than 1000 commercial vineyards across England and Wales, many of which have a commendable global following, with up to 30% of their sales volume going to foreign export.

The quality of British soil and the cold climate allows the grapes to develop crisp acidity, perfect for producing A-grade sparkling wines. East Sussex's Ridgeview won best sparkling wine for its Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs 2006 at the Decanter World

PHOTO: Ridgeview



Hambledon Vineyard

Wine of Sussex PDO

It's perhaps no surprise that Nyetimber is able to beat the French at their own game. Both the subsoils of Champagne and those of the South Downs are abundant in chalk; they are in fact connected by a huge bedrock of the stuff that runs under the English Channel. It forms an ideal growing base and adds a desirable mineral quality to the finished wines.

Thanks (and I use the term lightly) to climate change, Sussex's maritime climate is arguably getting the edge on Champagne. The French region saw a 1.8°C rise in its average temperature between 1991 and 2020, which is beginning to move it away from the ideal conditions for producing quality sparkling. Sussex has seen a degree rise over the same period, but this is actually moving one of the UK's sunniest counties into a better position for optimum sparkling wine.



Finally, Sussex sits at a high latitude. This offers a longer growing season so that the grapes can mature to their full potential. The latitude also contributes to a wide diurnal temperature range, meaning there is a big difference between the highest and lowest temperatures over a 24-hour period. This is notable in providing ideal growing conditions for the production of both still and sparkling wine.

These factors have led to Sussex being awarded its own Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status. The scheme puts these wines on a level with Stilton cheese or Cornish clotted cream. While any producer in the UK can obtain



Wine Awards in 2010, which set the scene for things to come.

The real watershed moment for the industry came in April 2016, when a coterie of respected French judges rated several English sparkling wines higher than Champagne at a blind tasting held at Juveniles restaurant in Paris. One of the wines that demolished the competition was a bottle of 2009 Nyetimber sparkling wine. Nyetimber, established in 1988, remains one of Britain's leading wine producers. From humble origins in West Sussex, it has grown its estate to eleven vineyards with 425 hectares under vine across Sussex, Hampshire and Kent.

Its crowning achievement to-date was winning Champion Sparkling Wine at the International Wine Challenge in September 2025, one of the most prestigious awards in the industry globally. It was the first time a sparkling wine from outside Champagne had scooped the prize. Judges said that the Blanc de Blanc 2016 magnum was a "time capsule of a wine" that abounded with "mouth-watering acidity, citrus zest and camomile".

a Wines of England or Wales PDO, the Sussex PDO is the only locally specific accreditation besides 'Darnibole Bacchus', which is produced in a five-hectare area at Camel Valley Vineyard in Cornwall.

WineGB is the industry body that manages the UK Wine Schemes on behalf of the Department for Farming, Food and Rural Affairs, to make sure that the rigorous standards associated with this prestigious sign of quality are upheld. Its laboratory partner, Campden BRI, tests every wine entering the scheme so that consumers have assurance about the standards applied to the winemaking process and the preservation of the distinctive character of the region.

A producer applying for the Sussex PDO has to meet certain quality criteria to use the designation on its labels. As well as growing its grapes entirely within the counties of East and West Sussex, it must meet stringent criteria relating to the vinification process, reaching minimum sugar levels at harvest or observing the minimum maturation time in bottle for sparkling wines, which is currently set at 15 months, for example.

Grape varieties

The terms of the PDO dictate which grape varieties are permitted. As it is a very new designation, the list is much broader than you would see in most Old World wine-producing regions. This offers makers flexibility and gives the consumer more choice.

For sparkling wine, Sussex winemakers must principally use the traditional varieties used in Champagne: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot

Meunier. However, they are also allowed to use smaller quantities of Arbanne, Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Petit Meslier and Pinot Noir Précoce. A producer could choose to use a different variety altogether, but they would not be allowed to put 'Sussex Sparkling' on the label.

There are 24 permitted grape varieties for still wines of Sussex. The list includes familiar names, like Pinot Noir and Riesling, alongside grapes now common to many English and Welsh vineyards, such as Bacchus and Solaris. Besides that, there are more up-and-coming cold climate grape varieties which are less commonly seen, but still make excellent wines. These include Schonburger, Huxelrebe and Ortega. Many of these grape varieties were first bred in Germany, where a number of new vines suitable for colder climates have been developed in recent decades.



Nyetimber

Visit the Sussex Vineyards

As well as offering delicious still and sparkling wines, the vineyards of Sussex have created a phenomenal foodie destination. High end dining, world-class accommodation and a breathtaking landscape make a visit truly one for the bucket list.

Rathfinny

Take a short break in the South Downs and stay at the historic Flint Barns on the Rathfinny Estate. It is a beautifully appointed B&B, with a cosy rural aesthetic with views across the rows of vines.

rathfinnyestate.com



PHOTO: Rathfinny Wine Estate



PHOTO: Wiston Estate

Wiston Estate

This charming vineyard near Pulborough is home to Chalk, one of the best regarded restaurants in the county. They showcase the best local produce that expresses the heritage of the land as well as the wines. Treat yourself to the six course set Estate Menu to enjoy the best that farming and foraging can produce on the Sussex Coast.

wistonestate.com

Oxney Organic Estate

The Oxney Estate in Rye is the largest single-estate producer of organic wine in England. They offer tours of the vineyard throughout the summer, and an interesting comparative tasting of single variety sparkling wines paired with tempting snacks during the winter.

oxneyestate.com



PHOTO: Oxney Organic