



RATHFINNY

AN INTRODUCTION TO RATHFINNY

We acquired Rathfinny Farm in October 2010 after a long search for land in southern England specifically to grow grapes for sparkling wine. After eighteen months of careful planning and preparation we planted out the first 60,000 vines on a 20ha (50 acres) site in April 2012. The name was changed to the Rathfinny Wine Estate to reflect the changing use of the land.

We have now planted over 230,000 vines on 75ha (185 acres) and over the next six years we plan to plant out a further 91ha (225 acres) of vines, expecting the vineyard to produce over 1,200 tonnes of grapes by 2020. Our Winery will produce nearly a million bottles of Sussex Sparkling Wine per annum. This will make Rathfinny one of Europe's largest vineyards and wine producers.

Rathfinny Wine Estate is situated on the west side of the beautiful Cuckmere Valley just three miles from the sea and half a mile south of Alfriston village. We believe that Rathfinny, apart from being a stunning site, is perfect for grapes: the free draining soil, very similar to the Champagne region of France, is a light clay loam over chalk. The chalk provides a ready source of water for the vines and a heat sink to aid ripening. Nearly all of the 600 acres are set on a gentle south-facing slope. This, and the proximity to the sea, mitigates frost risk, a major problem in cooler climate vineyards.

Climate change and the work that Plumpton College has done to raise skill levels in the English wine industry, has meant that southern England is now producing some of the finest sparkling wines in the world. Ridgeview, Nyetimber, Camel Valley and Gusbourne have, in recent years, all won international awards for their wines. In 2010 Ridgeview won the prestigious Decanter award for its sparkling wine. This was the first time it had been awarded to a sparkling wine producer outside of France. Over the last eight years English sparkling wine producers have won more top international awards for sparkling wine than any other wine-producing region in the world.

Rathfinny Wine Estate will become a major employer in the area, providing full time skilled employment to over 36 people and seasonal work for a further 200 during late summer harvest and winter pruning. This will have obvious knock on benefits to the local community.

Along with the RIBA nominated Winery in the heart of the estate, we have sympathetically restoring the old Flint Barns into a comfortable hostel, a home away from home, to accommodate seasonal workers and wine tourism. All our buildings have been built with locally sourced materials, using sustainable technologies such as photovoltaic cells and wastewater recycling.

The Winery includes a large Tasting Room, which is available for private hire and is the venue for our wine tours. The Flint Barns, when completed (summer 2014), provide comfortable accommodation for up to 46 people in ten separate en-suite rooms, which are available for hire (when not being used by seasonal workers) by walkers, educational and special interest groups and other visitors by prior arrangement.

We encourage walkers to visit the vineyard and we worked with the National Trust and the South Downs National Park Authority to open the 'Rathfinny Trail' through our vineyard.

In conjunction with the Alfriston and Cuckmere Valley Historical Society we have opened a 'Cellar Door' and 'Heritage Centre' in the historic Gun Room on the Tye in Alfriston. The Cellar Door provides a venue to taste and buy our wines. Additionally, along with displays concerning the history of Alfriston and the Cuckmere Valley we are selling a wide selection of gifts and wine related products, many inspired by local artists.

In the future we will be working with Plumpton College to devise training programmes for vineyard staff and Rathfinny Wine Estate has sponsored the 'Rathfinny Research Winery' at the College, to enable further research to be carried out that will benefit the English wine industry.

We are hugely excited in continuing our ambitious plan to establish Rathfinny Wine Estate as a world-class producer of Sussex Sparkling Wine.

Mark and Sarah Driver

Rathfinny Wine Estate - Further background information

Grape varieties planted

Six principal grapes varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Riesling – have been planted at Rathfinny.

Our Sussex Sparkling Wine will be made principally from the three classic varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier, but may include small quantities of Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris in the blend. The Riesling has been reserved for still wine.

Wines to be produced

The first still wine, under our Cradle Valley label, was released in 2015. Our Sussex Sparkling is currently aging on-lees and will be available in 2017.

Mark Driver, founder and owner of Rathfinny with his wife Sarah, said: “We will produce small amounts of still wine, but we are predominately a sparkling wine vineyard. High quality Sussex Sparkling Wine requires at least three years of bottle fermentation, so everyone will have to be patient while they wait!”

He added: “The first plantings in April 2012 marked the start of a journey for us to create a Sussex Sparkling Wine to rival the best on offer from across the channel.

“English sparkling wine is already very highly regarded and I hope Rathfinny will be compared favourably with the likes of Bollinger and Pol Roger. I want Rathfinny to be sold not just in the best restaurants in London, but in Paris, New York, Beijing and Hong Kong as well.”

Perfect soil and perfect location

Rathfinny lies on the same band of chalk that forms the Paris Basin, running up through northern France, crossing the Champagne region and into Southern England to form the North and South Downs. The Cretaceous geology consists of chalky deposits made by the skeletal remains of sea creatures over 100 million years ago, which were then heaved upwards tectonically to become part of the land. For vines, the shallow but fertile, well drained chalky soil is an ideal growing medium for sparkling wine grapes.

The location of the vineyard is on a south-facing slope, just a few miles from the south coast of England, sheltered from the worst of the south westerly winds by a ridge that runs parallel to the vineyard.

Cameron Roucher, Estate Manager at Rathfinny, who moved 12,000 miles from New Zealand with his family to be part of the ambitious project, said: “You couldn’t really ask for a better location than this for growing sparkling wine grapes. The soil, the climate, the geography – they are all perfect.”

Rathfinny hired Jonathan Médard, a renowned French winemaker, who has spent the last 10 years working in California, to oversee the design and construction of our Winery and wine aging facilities as well as make all of the wines.

The Rathfinny Wine Estate ethos

Working with Natural England, the National Trust and the South Downs National Park a programme of improvements is being implemented to enhance the local habitat, while reviving and reclaiming the natural chalk grass downland and creating wildlife corridors to improve biodiversity. The ‘Rathfinny Trail’ was established, allowing the public access to parts of the Rathfinny Wine Estate and running past the restored Flint Barns.

One of Rathfinny’s aims is to provide a sustainable built infrastructure to support the vineyard. Buildings feature locally sourced oak and flint. A renewable energy strategy has been implemented based on photovoltaic cells with the aim of being energy self-sufficient.

Ground water is being sourced from the Estate’s own bore hole, purified to remove calcium and microbes. The wastewater produced in the wine making process will be treated on site and released back onto the land. New windbreaks using indigenous hedge plants and trees are being grown to manage the micro-conditions on the slopes of the vineyard.

We are trying to build up a local work force and to support the development of skills that the English wine industry will require as it grows, Rathfinny has helped fund the construction of the new “UK Wine Research Centre” at Plumpton College, part of Brighton University.

Mark Driver said: “The Rathfinny project is not just about making wine: we are committed to supporting the wider ambitions of the English wine industry and that means nurturing the skills it requires to fulfil its potential.”

In the Gun Room we try to source products that are either locally produced made in Sussex or England and this is an ethos across the Estate whether it is in relation to the building materials we use, the companies and suppliers we work with or the furniture that we source. It is not always possible in the global world we live in, but it is an ideal that informs our decisions.

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The English Wine industry – An overview

The English wine industry is small with some 400 vineyards spread thinly throughout the southern half of England and Wales. Although there is evidence of Romans growing vines in England, it is only enjoying a recent resurgence - the oldest English vineyards are only about 40 years old.

The United Kingdom is a major consumer, but only a very minor producer of wine. In 2013, 4.4 million bottles of English wine were produced; this is enough to keep the British in wine for less than a day! The British consume 1.8 billion bottles of wine a year; English wines make up 0.3% off wine drunk in the UK. (The Economist, September 2011).

The UK consumer loves fizz; we are the second largest market for Champagne after France. Consuming some 36 million bottles per annum, more than the USA and Germany combined. We also drink nearly 100 million bottles of other sparkling wines per annum.

In France, 'Le Fizz Anglais' is now treated with greater respect. French houses Louis Roederer and Duval Leroy have been looking into buying land in England but to date no Champagne house has taken the plunge. However, with agricultural land prices in the South of England a fraction of what they would be in Champagne (a hectare in Champagne is over €1 million and only £25,000 in England), some people in the wine industry believe it is a move the large Champagne Houses would be foolish not to make.

A 2011 report by market research group Mintel said that English wine had to be taken seriously. Climate change means money is being ploughed into the vineyards of the South East and consumers are clamouring for British brands, rejecting the homogenized global drink brands.

Some of the most prestigious vineyards in England, Nyetimber and Ridgeview, are based in Sussex and sell well internationally. Other popular English vineyards include Chapel Down, Camel Valley, Gusbourne and Denbies.

Good years for English Wine

A good year for wine in England is when warm weather encourages an early bud break with sustained sunshine and no late frosts, meaning the grapes will have a long growing season producing good clean fruit with high phenolic ripeness.

Harvest time in late September and early October is critical, and it is a fine balancing act between vineyards stalling harvest in the hope of more sun to further ripen the grapes and picking before the rain starts.

An Indian summer is fabulous for English wine producers. The late summer heat helps lower the acidity levels and boost sugar levels – leading to a better balance in English grown grapes.

SPARKLING WINE PRODUCTION

All English sparkling wine is made in the “Traditional method” using bottle fermentation. A process whereby after a primary fermentation, the wine made is blended and bottled with a small amount of sugar and yeast allowing a secondary fermentation to take place in the bottle, creating the bubbles.

Once the yeast has finished fermenting the “yeast lees” stay in the bottle, the bottle is laid down for a number of years to promote the biscuity characteristics from yeast autolysis.

At Rathfinny we leave our wine “on lees” with a crown cap on the bottle for a minimum of three years.

After the bottle ageing process is complete the neck is frozen and the cap is removed. The pressure in the bottle forces out the yeast lees and a small dose of sugar is then added and the bottle is corked to maintain the carbon dioxide in the solution.

Sparkling wines are traditionally blended from three classic varieties to give different characteristics to the wine: the white Chardonnay gives a fruity taste and two reds, the Pinot Noir helps give backbone and the Pinot Meunier aids autolysis.

Prosecco and many other sparkling wines use the “Charmat” method of production, where the secondary fermentation, to add the bubbles, takes place in large tanks and the bottles are then filled under pressure. Under this method the wine spends less time in contact with the “yeast lees” and produces a wine, often with larger, less well diffused bubbles without the benefit of yeast autolysis. It is much cheaper to produce sparkling wine using this method.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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