

Sussex enjoys its champagne moment

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Consumer Affairs Correspondent

First it was prosecco, then it was frost. Now Sussex is the latest foe to strike fear into the heart of the champagne country.

Sparkling wine from the county has been granted protected regional status, bringing it in line with the elite wine-making regions of Europe.

The award by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) means only producers based in Sussex and meeting a demanding set of quality standards will be able to use the name of the county on their labels.

Approval by Defra means that recognition by the EU's geographical indication scheme is now a formality and should be completed within six months, putting Sussex on a par with La Rioja in Spain and Champagne in France.

Mark Driver, of the Rathfinny Wine Estate on West Sussex's Lullington Heath nature reserve, said: "We believe this will help Sussex become synonymous with high quality sparkling wine. So when you go into a bar in London or Tokyo you will be asked: 'Would you like a glass of champagne or a delicious glass of Sussex?'"

While comparisons between the Champagne region and Sussex might seem far-fetched, the rolling hills of the South Downs have many similarities to the famous area of northeast France. Both have the same chalky soil that experts say is perfect for producing the best wine and both enjoy similar climates, with comparable temperatures, rainfall and hours of sunshine.

Sussex wines had already been gaining international acclaim. Earlier this year sparkling wine producers from the county won nine gold medals at the prestigious International Wine & Spirit Competition awards.

The new status will limit the grape varieties that can be used to make Sussex wines and will insist upon hand harvesting and lower yields in vineyards, ensuring that only the best grapes are used. The stricter winemaking rules will also include a qualitative assessment and longer bottle ageing for sparkling wine.

Earlier this year Jane MacQuitty, chief wine critic of *The Times*, described Nyetimber's 2010 bottle grown on the Tillington vineyard in West Sussex as a "gorgeous, intense, mouthwatering, toasted brioche and red berry scented fizz . . . every bit as good as a French prestige champagne".

Experts said that the award of protected regional status was a huge fillip to England's burgeoning wine industry,



VIVIENNE BLAKEY/RATHFINNY

Rathfinny's vineyards in West Sussex have been leading the English charge in the sparkling wine stakes



which has experienced booming sales in recent years. Research by Defra found that protected status helps grow sales and boosts tourism to the region. Demand for English fizz is already bubbling up nicely with sales increasing 300 per cent at Marks and Spencer and almost 200 per cent at Waitrose last year. One in every 50 bottles of bubbly bought in the UK is now grown on English vineyards.

The growing status and success of Sussex sparkling wine is a further blow to the embattled vineyard owners of Champagne.

Last year their sales fell flat in the UK and were overtaken by their Italian

rival, prosecco, for the first time. To add to Champagne's woes, this year's crop was decimated by spring frosts with some vineyards losing 70 per cent of their harvest.

Miles Beale, chief executive of the Wine and Spirit Trade Association, said: "Protected status not only recognises the particular growing conditions found in Sussex but it also shows the commitment of winemakers in this region to produce high quality wines under strict production criteria."

"The status will enhance English wine's established reputation as a high quality product to rival the best and boost its vast export potential."

Famous names with special protection

Melton Mowbray pork pies Must be made with a traditional recipe, including a minimum pork content and in the vicinity of the Leicestershire town.

12.5 per cent beef and 25 per cent vegetable, although the product does not have to be baked in the county.

Stilton Only cheese produced, processed and prepared in Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, using traditional methods, can be described as such.

Jersey royals Potatoes must be grown, prepared and processed on Jersey using traditional methods.

Cornish clotted cream Limited to products made from milk produced in Cornwall that contain a minimum 55 per cent of butterfat.

Scotch Only applies to unsweetened and unflavoured whisky produced in Scotland with a minimum of 40 per cent alcohol.

Cornish pasty A traditional recipe must be used that is at least



Seasonal jeers at washout wonderland

Tom Whipple Science Editor

It is that time of the year again when the nation tolerates a torrent of Christmas advertisements, mulled wine that numbs the tongue and winter wonderlands that are anything but wonderful.

Even by the usual standards of muddy grottos, moribund reindeers and sinister Santas that characterise this annual marker of the festive period, however, the Bakewell Winter Wonderland seems to have excelled.

After its opening this weekend, guests rushed online to complain that the Derbyshire event was more a boggy fairground than a Christmas treat for the family.

One customer noted that the reindeer carousel was simply a few cardboard antlers taped on to some horses.

The tea cup ride, ghost train and car ride did not seem to fit any theme at all. Rather than the festive snow implied by the advertising material, there was instead a "huge boggy field".

As for the grotto . . . well at least it wasn't muddy. It was also half-finished and — in something of an oversight — for part of the weekend it was lacking a Santa.

Tracy Woodward said she travelled to the event, taking her caravan, intending to stay for the weekend. She said she lasted 20 minutes.

"I'd describe it as a muddy open field with a scattering of stalls," she said. "Most of the stalls were selling alcohol. It didn't have anything to do with Christmas. When you get there at 11am you don't want to visit a bar." She said the only useful thing for sale was mat-



Workers try to cover the muddy site over the weekend at Bakewell Winter Wonderland in Derbyshire

ting, which she put down in the car to protect the carpets from her family's muddy feet on the drive home.

Caroline Naylor, 51, also said she lasted 20 minutes — after travelling for an hour to get there. "It definitely wasn't a winter wonderland," she said. "There was no Christmas spirit whatsoever. The Santa's Grotto was extremely grotty and it was thinly spread out."

Bakewell Winter Wonderland apologised on its Facebook page, blaming the weather. "We have had a lot of setbacks," the organisers said. "All winter wonderland is now open." On a positive note, few customers complained about entrance queues. William Haggard, 22, from Matlock, said: "We didn't queue to get in but we definitely queued to get out."



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