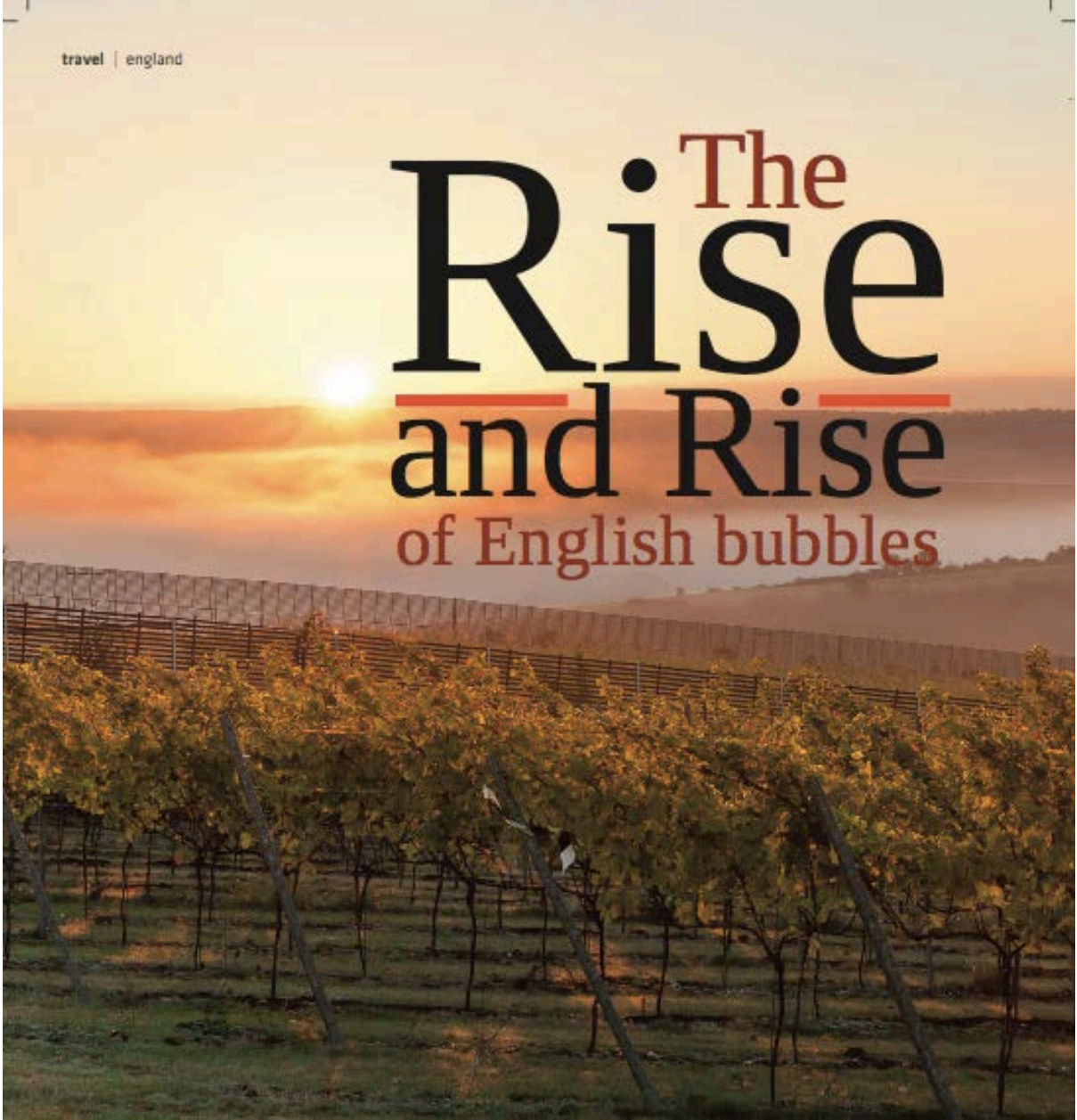


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**WineNZ**

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**The**  
**Rise**  
**and Rise**  
**of English bubbles**



**mission**

**Martin Gillion** visits  
Sussex and Hampshire  
to sip some remarkably  
good examples of English  
sparkling wine.

I wonder how many of those UK voters gave a thought to the fact that come Brexit time their access to European wines might be curtailed — perhaps quite a bit! Brits who were accustomed to whipping to Calais through the Channel Tunnel for a long weekend of secondhand Gaulois smoke, duck a l'orange and interesting, individual wines sourced from boutique wineries in Burgundy or the Loire may soon be in for a shock on their return journey.

In the past, the amount of wine shipped back by holiday makers via the Eurostar would have filled many swimming pools several times over. Daily, probably. Although why swimming pools should

be a popular measure of reckless storage of liquid is beyond me. But I digress.

But now, sacré bleu, gorblimey or WTF! there's a good chance cases of wine trucked back to St Pancras station will face a considerable surcharge.

But all is not lost.

By a strange quirk of fate, the situation has arisen at just the point when UK wine is beginning to be noticed.

Whether it is climate change, in a good way, or the availability of better clones and improved viticulture practices, it's hard to tell. Certainly the quality has improved dramatically and there are a number of producers making serviceable wines, often marketing them through cellar door and restaurant facilities that have become increasingly popular.

On a UK trip 20 years ago, I was piqued to look at the emerging UK winemaking industry. I stopped at several wineries in the south and

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was unimpressed. I was introduced to varieties I'd never heard of. Try Kerner, Dornfelder, Acolon, Dunkelfelder, Reichenstein or Rondo. The list goes on.

Not surprisingly, due to similarities of climate, many had Germanic names and nearly all were hybrids rather than the *vitis vinifera* vines associated with mainstream winemaking.

By and large the industry was boutique: the vineyards small 'destination visits' where wine sales were often complemented by sales of country pickles, preserves, honey and mead.

In most cases I escaped with the enamel on my teeth intact, but, while I admire wines that are crisp and fresh, I really like to keep my tonsils happy.

Most of them were dire and expensive. But not all.

For even at that early stage, a few producers were making names for themselves. In most cases it was with sparkling wines rather than still whites. Certainly not with their reds.

And it is with sparkling wines that the UK is now starting to make waves, not only within the country, but also with export markets where they are winning accolades and medals in prestigious competitions.

The Blanc de Blancs of Nyetimber in West Sussex was selected for the Lord Mayor's banquet shortly after release in 1992.



vin Maxwell, proprietor of Hattingley Valley.

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Blind tasting comparisons since undertaken by elite Parisian experts, deemed several English examples equivalent, and in some cases superior, to prestigious Champagnes such as Billecart-Salmon and Ayala. In all cases, at a better price.

Of course where fame, if not fortune, is on the cards, the celebs will not be far behind. Just last year celebrated cricketer Ian Botham announced the launch of his own wine brand. The still wines are coming from Australia and New Zealand (good one, Ian) but the sparkling wines are all from the UK.

The rise and rise of English sparkling wines has been nothing short of meteoric.

Around the time of my 1996 visit, the market leader in UK quality sparkling wine lay with the efforts of Stuart and Sandy Moss at Nyetimber in West Sussex.

In 1986, Stuart, the wealthy Chicago maker of high-end medical supplies and his wife Sandy, an archaeologist and one of North America's leading authorities on Tudor furniture, had purchased Nyetimber, a 900-year-old property in Sussex: one that dated back to Saxon times, was itemised in the Domesday Book and whose half-timbered manor house, complete with minstrel gallery, dated back to Elizabethan times.

Finding their green-sand/chalky soils ripe for Méthode production, they promptly set about importing French expertise and Champagne equipment. In 1992 they released their first vintage Blanc de Blancs from their 16ha vineyard, followed by their Classic

Cuvée the following year. Both wines were acclaimed. Inclusion in the Lord Mayor of London's banquet that year recognised the quality and celebrity weddings soon followed the Lord Mayor's cue. English bubbly had truly arrived.

The wines subsequently took the 1999 International Wine and Spirit Trophy for the Best World Wide Sparkling Wine in the competition.

The estate has changed hands a number of times since Stuart and Sandy left in 2001.

It has expanded from the original 46ha to more than 170ha, all under direct control of the winery and all the bottles proudly acclaim

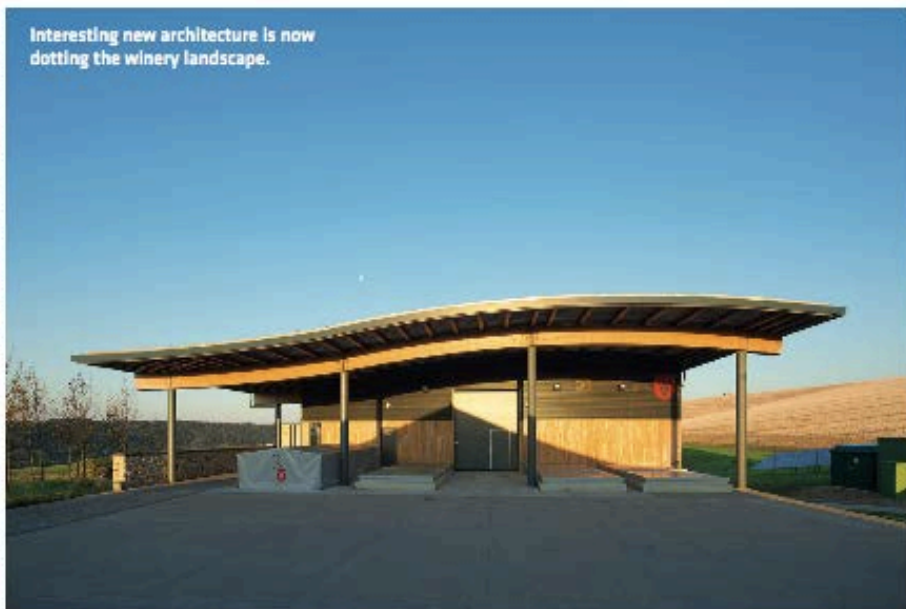
'The Product of England'. Undoubtedly the success of Nyetimber gave confidence to the future of UK sparkling wines.

Browse through the English Wine Producers' latest website and there is barely one that does not produce a sparkling wine, in some cases several.

But while the relative size of individual wine producers in the UK remains small, there are some that have grasped the opportunities in a breathtaking manner.

One such is Rathfinny in Alfriston, East Sussex, not far from Hastings of the 'Battle of' fame and 30 minutes down the road from Brighton.

Interesting new architecture is now dotting the winery landscape.



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Vineyards in England are growing in size, to become significant businesses.

At Rathfinny, they've not done things by halves.

When I visited their Kiwi winemaker Cameron Roucher in 2013 there were already 50 acres (20ha) of vines planted on the rolling hillsides of the old cereal farm. Cam told me there were a further 500 acres (200ha) still to sculpt and plant.

Today their plans have come to fruition. The first sparkling wines will be released this year, and the UK wine world is looking forward to the potential production of as many as 1,000,000 bottles from the estate every year.

Rathfinny welcomes visitors to their 'Gun Room' cellar door and cafe in the restored building reputed to be the gun room for the Duke of Wellington. There is also 'historically

themed' accommodation in the restored flint barn.

A few counties away, in Hampshire, Hattingley Valley has already made a name for itself, once again with sparkling wine.

Established by lawyer Simon Robinson,, who has had experience as a wine lab proprietor and a wine consultant, the 28-acre (11ha) estate near the villages of Upper and Lower Wield in Hampshire — not far from Winchester — was purchased in 2008 and planted in 2010. Their first releases were in 2013. The emphasis is predominately on sparkling wine, although a little pinot noir table wine is also made.

The varieties are as you would expect: pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier,

but also includes pinot précoce — an earlier ripening mutation of pinot known in Germany as frühburgunder.

Today the estate manages 60 acres (25ha) and also takes in a little fruit from elsewhere. While the winery currently crushes around 200 tonnes, it has capacity for a 500-tonne crush and is looking forward to future development.

The Hattingley Valley wines range from their Classic Blanc de Blanc (£30) that has had a little barrel fermentation, a rosé (£30) from pinot and petit meunier as well as a 'Kings Cuvée' (£80) that is made only in exceptional years.

On my visit last year, Australian Rebecca Fisher, the company's marketing manager, told me that their last 'Kings' wine yielded only 450 bottles. "The interest we've had could have seen us sell 1500," she said.

There is no longer any doubt of the ability of UK producers to make quality sparkling wine. Optimism abounds and investment is increasing. Just last year *The Daily Telegraph* predicted plantings of more than one million vines in the year ahead, mostly with sparkling varieties.

In the foreseeable future, if you visit the nascent wine regions of the UK, you are not going to see the swathes of sparkling dedicated vines that are the hallmark of Champagne. It's an industry that is certainly still in its infancy. But the quality of the resulting wines certainly show the potential that has hitherto been unrecognised.

Maybe in the globally warmed future sparkling wines may be travelling on the Eurostar in the opposite direction?

# mission

## Stop lugging the luggage

A week in an English cottage can give you a taste of village life, as well as save your backbone!



Rustic, rural luxury - the ideal place to unwind.

If there's one downside to the travel caper, it's the packing, unpacking and lugging of suitcases. Narrow flights of stairs for two days in a small hotel near the Sofia in Istanbul, winding cobble-lumped lanes with the trolley case for an overnight in Corfu or a treacherous icy slope to the hotel in Helsinki before the morning ferry for St Petersburg can really do your travelling head in, as well as your back.

But the alternative is in the 'less is more' department. Locate yourself in one place for a decent length of time and ignore the things you can't easily get to but really enjoy what is available within a walk or a short drive.

You'll only have to deal with the suitcases once.

It's been our philosophy for quite a while now, and when it comes to the English countryside, the rented cottage option is great.

It's easy to rent them online and you can almost always find one with a heritage twist or a location that holds some interest in its own right.



For our latest trip, where we did the research for this English bubbly piece, we took a cottage in Lyndhurst, slap dap in the middle of the New Forest where the ponies and donkeys not only have free rein but also right of way on the roads and byways.

Lyndhurst's lovely village and our cottage just a short walk from the centre, the great Horse and Hounds pub, the New York-styled deli (but with decent coffee) and the major road to Portsmouth and the Mary Rose museum

(<http://www.maryrose.org>) just around the corner.

Great atmospheric cottage, lovely garden and well equipped to the point of having really nice crystal wine glasses.

No humping of cases for a full week. Magic.

2018 will see us renting a cottage on a farm in Gloucestershire, complete with alpacas — the benign animals that spit in your face when startled or annoyed.

I've been told that the Kiwi accent gives them a bit of a stir up. But we'll see. Maybe a Kiwi drawl from Gore will trick them into thinking the rolling r's are straight from Hampshire?



A walk in the woods is a good way to sharpen the appetite.

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Cute accommodation is available everywhere in the English countryside – at a price.

#### REAL REVIEWS

*WineNZ* travel is self-funded and honest. We do not accept junkets from airlines or hotels to say nice things.

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