

Date: 28.04.18

Publication: The Telegraph Magazine

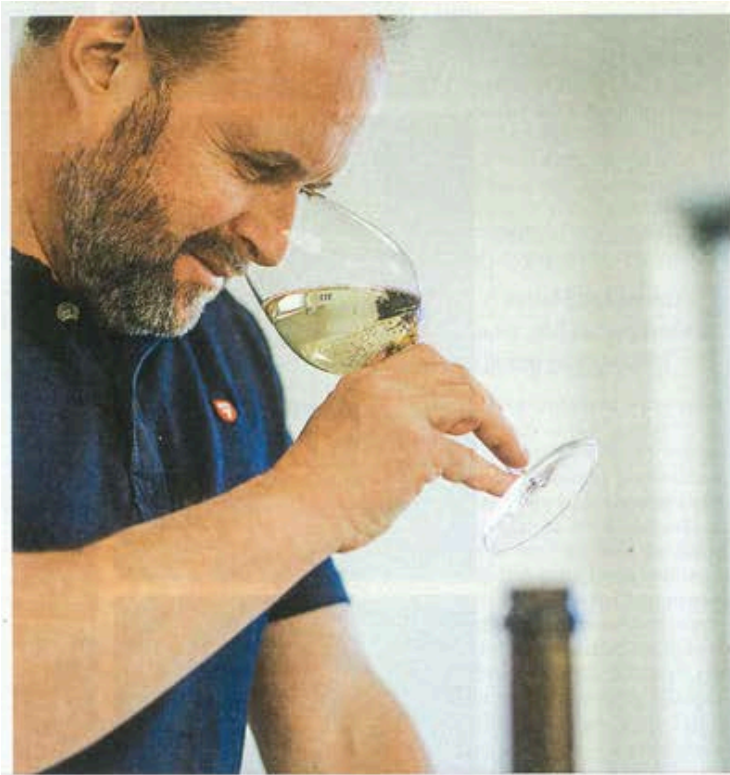
Circulation: 476,466

Telegraph magazine

FIZZY LOGIC

Will Sussex ever challenge Champagne as the best sparkling-wine producer in the world? One couple has gambled millions that it will, and Bollinger is already sniffing around their South Downs vineyard.

By Victoria Moore. Photographs by Jason Larkin



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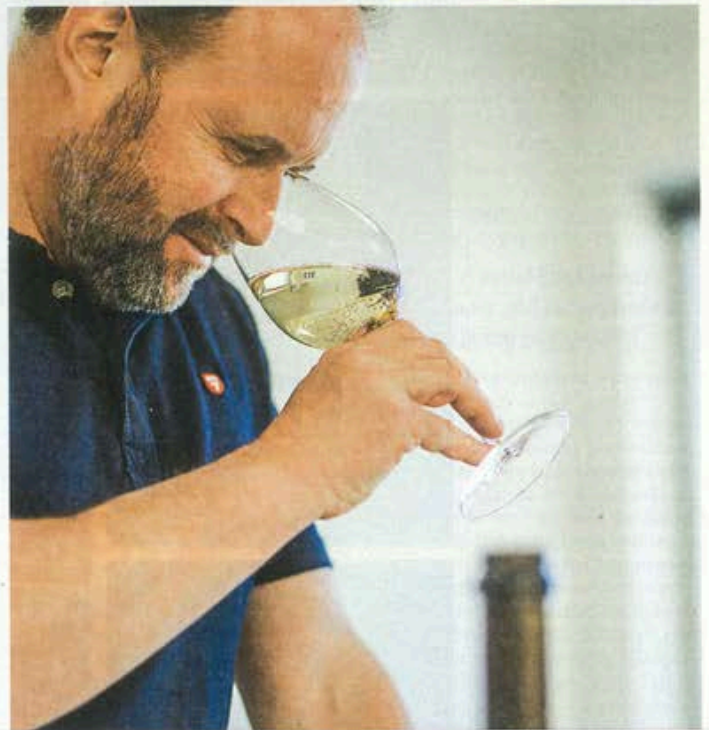
The Cut// Food

Right Rathfinny Wine Estate vines grow on the south-facing chalk slopes of Cradle Valley; Mark Driver samples the blanc de noirs

MARK DRIVER HAS THE relaxed demeanour of an English gentleman most at ease when he's in charge. He needs it. With his wife, Sarah, he is the owner of Rathfinny Wine Estate, England's most ambitious vineyard set-up to date. Over the past eight years, he's overseen four building projects that, he says, 'make *Grand Designs* look like a sideshow'. He's planted 250,000 vines and fitted out a winery with a capacity to make one million bottles a year. It must have cost a fortune. How much? 'I always say over £10 million,' he says cautiously. Of the Drivers' own money: 'Nobody's crazy enough to lend for you to do something like this.' And no, that figure doesn't include buying 600 windswept acres of the South Downs in the first place.

Rathfinny's eagerly awaited very first sparkling wines, the 2014 blanc de blancs and the 2015 rosé, were unveiled this week and will make their debuts in a few select restaurants - including Le Gavroche and Hakkasan in London - and shops over the spring.

There have been a few wobbles getting them there. The first Rathfinny vines went into the ground in 2012 - a season so terrible some English vineyards failed to pick a single grape. 'Then 2013 was really dry, and there was a hosepipe ban. The springs came really late. I kept asking our local farmer, who still worked the rest of the land, "What the hell's going on?"' says Driver. He had done his homework on weather records, and this wasn't in the plan. On one anxious day, he remembers driving around his vines in the Cradle Valley, a narrow fold of chalk that leads down to a point at which a vast panorama opens up, with views across green flood plains to the Seven Sisters and a glimmer of sea at Cuckmere Haven. 'I was with our New Zealander estate manager,



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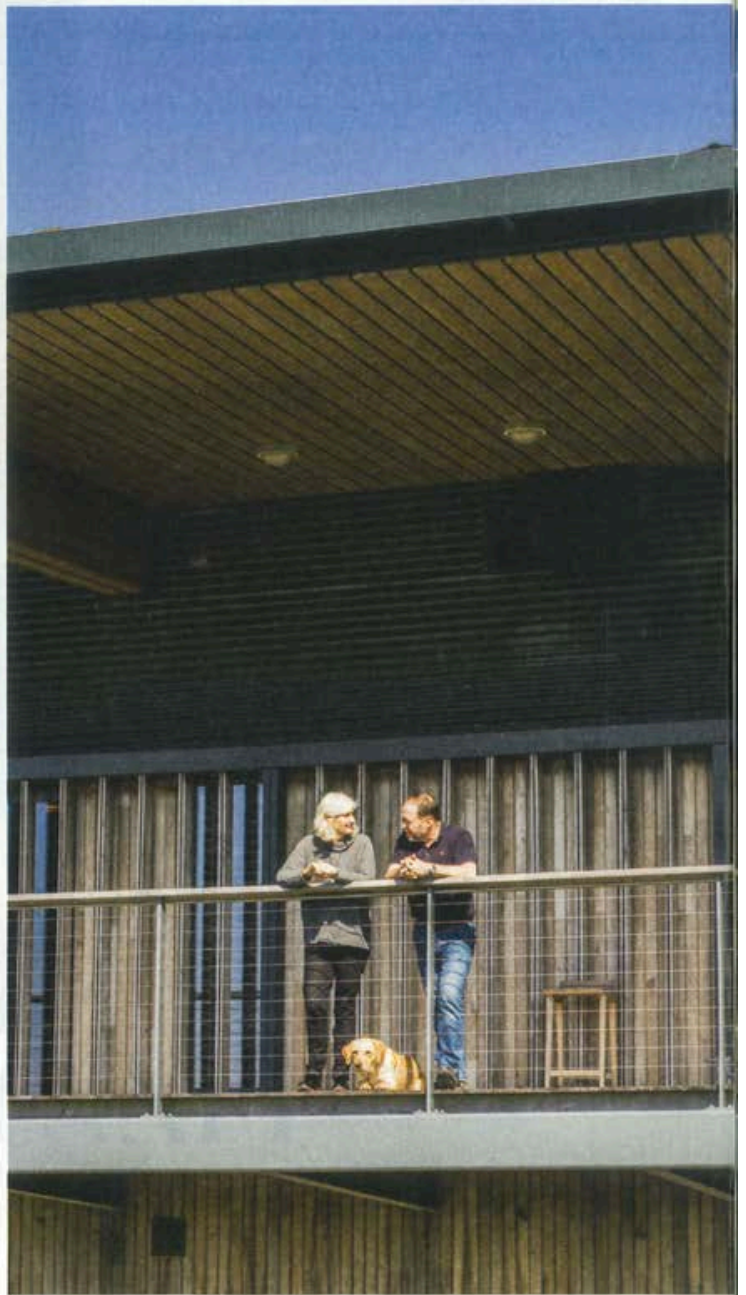
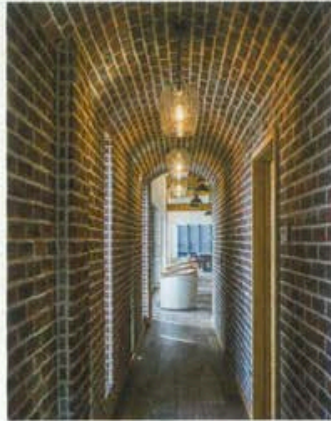
Will Sussex ever challenge Champagne as the best sparkling-wine producer in the world? One couple has gambled millions that it will, and Bollinger is already sniffing around their South Downs vineyard.

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Main picture Sarah and Mark Driver outside the tasting room, which will soon incorporate a restaurant.
Right, from top Winemaker Jonathan Médard; a brick archway leads to the tasting room; last year's sparkling wine. **Far right, from top** Courtyard seating, estate manager Cameron Roucher



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Cameron Roucher. I said, "Have we made a mistake? Have I messed up?" And he just said, "Yeah, maybe."

English wine has made huge advances over the past couple of decades, finding its niche with sparkling wine made from chardonnay and pinot noir. Well-publicised triumphs over champagnes in blind tastings have helped the industry to burgeon – growers planted more than one million vines last year – and seen a shift from hobbyists and pioneers to serious business. But the long-term viability of English winegrowing remains untested. It takes courage to invest in the British climate as deeply and as quickly as the Drivers have done. Can it work? How much bigger can the whole thing go?

Happily neither Driver is short on sangfroid. 'I was once asked if I lay awake worrying that it wasn't going to work, and I said, "Honestly, that's never crossed my mind,"' says Sarah, a slim and socially polished former City solicitor who grew up on a tea plantation in Hong Kong. She has also worked as a commercial mediator and now runs a literacy charity (three of the Drivers' four children are dyslexic) as well as looking after Rathfinny.

Sarah and Mark met 31 years ago in Greece. He was doing a season as a skipper for a flotilla holiday company; she was working in a restaurant after her law exams. He asked her to marry him the first night they went out. 'I just laughed,' she says. Three months later, he was still asking. 'I said, "All right, then." My mother kept saying, "I'll give you the money for the wedding but why not just have a party?"'

While establishing careers in Hong Kong and London, the pair flirted with the idea of buying a vineyard, looking at land in New Zealand after enjoying the wines on trips there in the early 1990s. But family life took over, and the idea didn't resurface until 2009, when Mark left the hedge fund group where he had worked for 10 years. The decision came out of the blue. 'I was in a minor panic,' says Sarah. 'I thought, "Oh, God, he's going to be around all the time."'

The Drivers' second child, Millie, was doing university applications, and on the Ucas website Mark noticed you could study viticulture in England. 'I thought this was bizarre – why? I hadn't

tasted English wine for 20 years and remembered it as being pretty nasty.'

One boozy English sparkling wine vs champagne blind tasting evening later, the Drivers were converts and Mark was signed up to a viticulture course at Plumpton College.

Among Mark's successes at the hedge fund had been a decision to invest in shipyards in Korea, because he predicted a growth in natural gas. 'I thought, "How are you going to transport it?"' At that time, there were only 120 suitable ships in the world, against tens of thousands of crude-oil tankers, and only three major shipyards could make them.'

He applied this way of thinking to wine. 'I looked at the numbers. We were importing 1.8 billion bottles of wine into Britain a year and producing fewer than five million. At that time we were consuming about 36 million bottles of champagne [that figure has now fallen to 27.8 million] and we made only two million or so of sparkling wine. So

'I hadn't tasted English wine for 20 years and remembered it as being pretty nasty'

I thought, "Why not plant a vineyard? Why aren't other people doing it?"'

He's not the only former City worker thinking along those lines. Ian Kellett at Hambleton Estate in Hampshire also has a master plan to produce a million bottles a year. His logic was the same: leave aside the very top producers (Krug, Salon and so on) in Champagne, and England ought to be capable of producing sparkling wine that is at least as good as most of the rest. Then all you have to do is persuade people to buy it. Thus Rathfinny has planted mainly chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier (the champagne varieties) for the fizz, with a little pinot gris and pinot blanc for a still white.

Besides its size, what also marks out Rathfinny is the audacity of the initial vision. Others establish themselves, then add on tourism features. Taking inspiration from New Zealand and South Africa, Rathfinny was conceived as a 360-degree experience from the get-go. A restaurant is coming; there are already walking trails around the estate; hugely successful pop-up events

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Below Rathfinny Wine Estate was built to offer tours and tastings from the outset, as well as a shop, café and holiday lets

BEST ENGLISH WINES

Victoria Moore

Wiston Estate Cuvée 2013 South Downs, £36, swig.co.uk; £32.95, wistonestate.com

Irishman Dermot Sugrue makes this barrel-aged blend of pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier with notes of French toast, lemon curd and honey. His style is always electrifying, and this wine has searing precision.

Berry Bros & Rudd English Sparkling Wine 2013, Gusboume Estate, £25.95, Berry Bros & Rudd

Gusboume's wines excited from the moment they arrived on the scene, in 2010. The producer has vineyards in Kent and Sussex, and makes this superbly creamy and refreshing chardonnay-based sparkling wine exclusively for Berry Bros & Rudd.

Nyetimber Rosé NV, £39.99, Waitrose; £44.99, or £39.99 in a mixed six, Majestic

Nyetimber is the standard-bearer for the English wine renaissance, and its sparkling rosé is sublime. Carrying the scent of wild strawberries, cool chalk and raspberries, it has a tangy redcurrant thread darting through it like quicksilver.

Hambledon Première Cuvée NV, £42, waitrosecellar.com; £42, Berry Bros & Rudd

A sense of majesty and a rich complexity make this one of the most champagne-like of English sparkling wines. Made in Hampshire from grapes grown on chalk.

Camel Valley Pinot Noir Rosé Brut 2014, £29.99, Waitrose

An early pioneer and still a key player, Camel Valley in Cornwall is the first English sparkling-wine producer to be granted a Royal Warrant. This pink fizz is easygoing and fun.

(at which English wines from other producers are served); Sunday lunches and brunches that sell out within two hours of being announced; a cellar door; and B&B accommodation (the Flint Barns built to house seasonal workers are cosy and stylish enough to let).

The Drivers say they were lucky to snag the place. They had instructed an agent to look for a property anywhere south of the M4; on chalk; with free-draining, south-facing slopes; no frost pockets; existing buildings that could be converted; and at least 250 acres of plantable land – the minimum Mark calculated would be required 'to employ the right people – a really good viticulturist and winemaker'. They looked at a place in Hampshire but were told no way would they get planning permission for a winery. Then Rathfinny came up. A rare chance to buy a farm of this size, it provoked a bidding war, eventually selling for just over £5 million – almost double the guide price. 'I met one of the underbidders recently,' says Mark with an amiable smile. 'A guy who used to work at Cazenove and wanted it for a shooting estate. He's still very sore that he didn't get it.'

Mr Shoot might have found the place a bit too breezy for his plus fours; the first thing I notice on arriving at Rathfinny is

that all the trees are hunched over, testament to a fierce prevailing wind. Is this a problem? Yes, it turns out. The Drivers have had to put windbreaks everywhere, and Mark says chunks of the higher land have turned out to be too exposed. 'We thought we'd have around 400 plantable acres. We're up to about 300, maybe 350.' He's negotiating to make up the acreage by planting on neighbouring land.

Clearly the Drivers do not do things by halves. Sarah says that she is 'detail' and Mark is 'vision'. She also describes him, with a wry smile, as 'not a

Wine grown and made in the county could be sold as a 'glass of Sussex'

committee person', adding that he is more likely to bark in frustration, 'Why won't they just do what you tell them?'

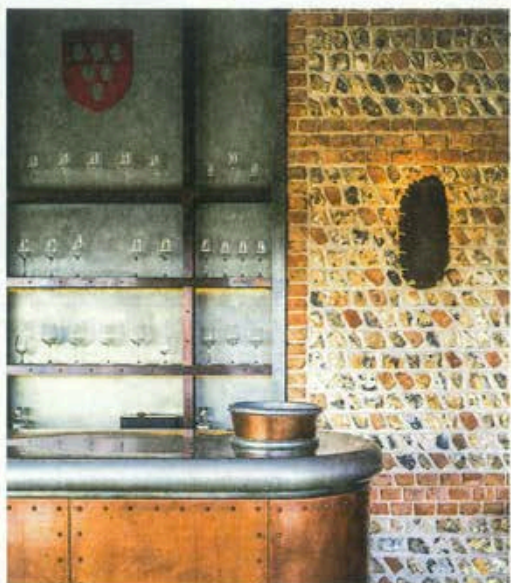
Their energy has fed into the English wine scene, even if it has caused a couple of furores along the way. Mark has thrown himself behind a proposal to create a Sussex PDO (Protected Designation of Origin). 'Our wine's not just English, I think that's too generic. It'd be like calling champagne "French sparkling wine".' The idea that wine grown and made in the county could be sold as 'a glass of Sussex' has been

criticised for having little integrity: wine is all about the magical combination of soil and climate known as terroir, whereas the county boundaries are administrative, not geological. Plus there is no winemaking tradition to protect. Mark counters that he and others were keen for stricter quality regulation, which the wider English PDO had rejected. Was he surprised by the reactions? 'I've been told people were really cross, but I'm not on the [online] English wine forums so I missed it all.'

Clearly PDO Sussex is a masterstroke from a marketing point of view. It is especially useful for Rathfinny, which has aligned itself closely with the county – its logo is a redesign of the Sussex coat of arms that replaces martlets (heraldic birds) with grapes.

The other uproar has been over the decision to put sparkling wine in 500ml bottles – 'the Sussex pint, we're calling it. I think it's the perfect size'. Hundreds of bottles of the 2015 blanc de noirs were filled and cellared (before the referendum), but regulations won't allow them to be sold anywhere in the EU.

As they launch their first sparkling wine in 750ml bottles – and there is only a tiny amount of it, as vineyards take a while to come fully on stream – the Drivers have come a long way. They've



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UK WINE IN NUMBERS

Production figures
(equivalent number
of bottles)

2015	5.06 million
2016	4.15 million
2017	5.31 million

Approximate number
of wineries in Britain

150

5,548 acres

Official total area under
vine in 2017*

The most dense growing
areas are Sussex and Kent,
which together account for
almost half of plantings**

Sussex	16 vineyards
Kent	78 vineyards

Chardonnay, pinot noir
and pinot meunier grapes
account for more than
50 per cent of all plantings



learnt about (and built) a waste-water plant, become branding experts, put in 18,000 vine posts, and had to accept that they can't grow riesling (Mark's dream - 'I don't even want to tell you how much we spent trying to make the riesling ripen,' says Cameron Roucher. 'I told him it wouldn't work').

They have also seen the price of their land roughly double. (Land in the south-east that's good for grapes now goes for £12,000 to £15,000 an acre.)

Thanks to 2012, they were pushed back a year on the initial plan but are now catching up. It isn't the potential for occasional wipe-out harvests that poses the greatest risk to winegrowers:



Top The Flint Barns house either seasonal workers or holiday guests. **Right** The 2015 blanc de noirs, in the contentious 500ml bottle that Mark calls the 'Sussex pint'

hail, drought and frost can ruin crops in mainland Europe, too. What makes the numbers difficult for English vine growers is the low average yield, which at best is about half that in Champagne.

When do they project being in profit? 'What I look at is cash flow, and I hope to be cash-flow positive by 2021.'

If they wanted an early out, they could have had one. As English wine's

Now the champagne houses have come sniffing round. 'It's a bit cheeky, really...'

reputation has soared, the champagne houses have come sniffing round. Mark says he was approached by Taittinger, which wanted to buy a stake, and turned it down. 'It's a bit cheeky, really. We'd put in all the hard work and they just wanted to piggyback. The same thing's happened with Bollinger. I thought, "What can Bollinger do for us that we can't do ourselves?"'

It could bring years of sparkling-wine expertise, maybe? 'We've got a very good winemaker [Jonathan Médard, who is from Epernay and has worked at Louis Roederer].'

In the end, Rathfinny's success will be measured by its ability to make and sell wine. This is just the beginning. rathfinnyestate.com. *Victoria Moore's regular column is in Saturday*

Drink me

Hamish Anderson



I remember the first time I wrote an article on non-alcoholic drinks. It was 10 or so years ago, and such was the dearth of options, my recommendations comprised a widely known brand of elderflower cordial and a collection of homemade concoctions. Since then, the market for products with a depth and nuance of flavour not found in mainstream soft drinks has grown so much that a number of the major retailers now display them under the banner of 'adult' soft drinks (somewhat misleadingly, as in my experience children like them, too). Three delicious and diverse favourites for summer sipping are below, but one of my favourite homemade thirst quenchers is the lemon- (non-traditional lime is just as good) and-mint combination served in the Middle Eastern restaurants near where I live in west London. Simply blitz together lemon juice, mint leaves, sugar syrup (homemade or a shop-bought gomme such as Monin) and water, adjusting proportions to your tastes. You'll need a (non-plastic) straw to avoid filtering floating bits through your teeth.

Nix and Kix Cucumber and Mint, £1.35 for 330ml, Tesco

I was sceptical about this spiking of a classic with chilli, but it works brilliantly: cool, refreshing mint followed by a warm buzz of cayenne.

ChariTea Black iced tea, £1.49 for 330ml, Ocado

This organic Fairtrade brand donates to community projects in the countries it buys from, and ChariTea's drinks

taste good, too. This traditional iced tea has a refreshing twist of lemon.

Square Root Rhubarb Soda, £1.80 for 275ml, squarerootsoda. co.uk

I serve Square Root drinks in the Tate restaurants, and staff and customers look forward to this seasonal flavour. Forced Yorkshire rhubarb imparts a gorgeous pink colour, and the taste perfectly balances sweet, tart and fragrant.

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