

# My Hong Kong - the wine producer

Sarah Driver grew up on a 1950s tea plantation on Lantau. This month she's back in Hong Kong to launch English sparkling wine, Rathfinny Estate. By [Carolynne Dear](#)

**I arrived in Hong Kong in 1965, aged one, with my parents and brothers, Robert and Ian Whitehead.** My father worked for the government in the Parks Department (he was responsible for the planting of Statue Square) and we lived at Mount Nicholson. We did a tour of three years and then returned for a further tour, but in March 1969 my father suddenly died. We were allowed to remain in our flat to finish the school year - I was at Peak School with Ian, while Robert was at Island School. My mother had been working for the Blind Association, teaching English, and after dad's funeral she ended up meeting the association's chairman, Brook Bernacchi, at one of their events. He invited us to his home at Ngong Ping on Lantau (this was before the Big Buddha) and as children, we fell in love with the place. We returned to England, but Brook wanted to take care of us as a family and my mother agreed to marry him and come back to Hong Kong.

**We returned to Hong Kong to a very different life.** Brook was - and still is - an extremely well known figure here. He came out of the war as a young barrister and stayed in Hong Kong, eventually becoming head of the Bar. He started Hong Kong's first political party, the Reform Club, and was an urban councillor in Chai Wan. He was a vocal opponent of the government at times and I remember calls from the press at all hours of the day and night. He was a true social philanthropist and was key in the development of social housing and education for all. He founded the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Addicts and the Discharged Prisoner Aid Society.

**My childhood on Lantau was unusual.** We were the only English family on the island and it used to take the best part of four hours to get home on a Friday evening after school. We stayed on Lantau every weekend and school



Sarah Driver with husband Mark at their English vineyard, Rathfinny Estate

holiday, returning on a Monday morning by waking at 5am, eating hard boiled eggs in the Land Rover to the ferry, doing our homework en route and getting to school just in time for the bell. There was no road to Tai O and we used to travel down the riverbed to shop in the small town. During the week we lived at Carolina Gardens in Coombe Road.

**My step-father had started a tea plantation on Lantau in the early 1950s with plants from Sri Lanka, where he'd been stationed during the war.** I remember regularly picking tea, the bud and two leaves, and throwing them into large wicker baskets on my back. The tea was usually made in a small factory at night, when it was cooler. We also had stables with ex-race horses and army polo ponies which we rode across the plateau.

**I returned to England after my A-levels to study law at Bristol University.** I trained in the City of London with Herbert Smith and then returned to Hong Kong to work with them in the 1980s.

**I had my first child, Brook, at Matilda Hospital; it was quite hard to be a working mum in Hong Kong in those days.** I had to work full-time and also on Saturday mornings. Unlike in England where nannies could take children to various activities, our lovely maid, Rose, could not. So Brook spent a lot of time in the car park. I wanted to spend more time with him, and my husband Mark had received a good offer back in London, so that fixed things for us.

**Mark decided to retire at 46 which sent me into a panic.** I had a busy life with four fairly young children and I couldn't imagine him being around all day. We had visited vineyards in New Zealand in the 1990s and loved the idea of owning one, but we had no money



Harvesting the grapes

and life with four children got in the way. Mark revisited the idea when he discovered that England was producing some of the best sparkling wines in the world. He decided to go back to university for a degree in viticulture. At the same time, Rathfinny came up for sale. It was a perfect site - the same chalk soils as Champagne in France, and south-facing slopes in one of the warmest and sunniest parts of England. Due to global warming, we are where Champagne was about 30 years ago. But we are able to harvest our fruit later, in October, allowing the grapes to ripen and enhance their flavours.

**We bought Rathfinny in 2010, planted our first vines in 2012 and released our first vintages of Sussex Sparkling this year.** Sussex was the first region in the UK to establish a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin). The PDO establishes quality rules about how grapes are grown and wines are produced and each wine has to



be assessed. To be a Sussex Sparkling is a real mark of provenance and quality. I manage the branding and design side of the business, as well as the 'tourist' side. We offer tours and accommodation and have recently opened a Cellar Door and a Tasting Room with fine dining.

**Our wines are distributed in Hong Kong by Jebson Fine Wines.** They're available in restaurants such as Arcane and Bo Innovation and also Wagyu. Production is steadily growing and we hope to be more readily available here over the next few years as vintages are released.

**I still have family in Hong Kong and I love coming back.** I enjoy going back to Ngong Ping to the house I grew up in and catching up with old friends. And I like to take a long ride on the top of a tram to watch the world go by. I've written a memoir about my childhood and am now working on an historical TV series with my son, so I always get inspiration when I'm here. [rathfinnyestate.com](http://rathfinnyestate.com)

Driver (third from left) celebrating this year's vintage with family members

