



RATHFINNY

AN INTRODUCTION TO RATHFINNY

Rathfinny Wine Estate was established in 2010 by Mark and Sarah Driver and is now producing Sussex Sparkling wines that rival the best traditional method sparkling wines in the world.

The first Sussex Sparkling wines, produced conforming to the strict Sussex PDO guidelines which ensures provenance as well as quality, were bottled in early 2015 and will be released in the summer of 2018.

As well as a wine producer the Estate is a popular destination for visitors, walkers and wine enthusiasts. We offer organised vineyard tours at the Winery and wine tastings currently at the Gun Room in Alfriston, whilst the Flint Barns provide wonderful 'home from home' accommodation and hosts sumptuous Sunday lunches. During the summer months, as well as the tours, we host popular 'pop ups' with up and coming chefs.

Sarah Driver, co-owner of Rathfinny said: "The world of wine is as much about providing a great experience as about producing fantastic wines and that's what we aim to give everyone that visits the Rathfinny Wine Estate."

LOCATION

The Rathfinny Estate is located in the South Downs National Park, an area of outstanding natural beauty in Southern England. It occupies the main part of Cradle Valley, on a south-facing slope close to the iconic Cuckmere Valley, just three miles from the sea and the famous Seven Sisters, about a half a mile south of Alfriston village. As well as being a stunning site, the Rathfinny Vineyard is perfect for growing sparkling wine grapes: The light, thin, clay loam soils over chalk are free draining and very similar to the Champagne region of France. The chalk provides a ready source of water for the vines during the drier summer months. The warm semi-continental climate and long summer days ensure perfect ripening, and the proximity to the sea helps mitigate frost risk, a major problem in cooler climate vineyards in northern Europe.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

Rathfinny Wine Estate has become a major employer in the area, providing full time skilled employment to over 30 people and seasonal work for a further 100 during late summer harvest and winter pruning. This has had obvious knock on benefits to the local community.

Along with the construction of the stunning new RIBA nominated Winery in the heart of the Estate, we have sympathetically restored the old Flint Barns into comfortable accommodation for both visitors and

seasonal workers. Accommodating up to 31 people in ten separate en-suite rooms, it is real 'home away from home'.

Environmental friendly and sustainable buildings - All the buildings are built with materials sourced from the local area. Rathfinny has adopted sustainable technologies such as photovoltaic cells, which power the Winery and wastewater recycling. The Estate is self-sufficient on water and nearly self-sufficient on energy.

The Winery includes a large Tasting Room, which is the venue for our popular wine tours (that take place between April and October), private events and specialist tastings and from June 2018 will become our 'Cellar Door', open to the public.

We encourage walkers to visit the Estate and have worked with the National Trust and the South Downs National Park Authority to open the 'Rathfinny Trail', a permissive path along Cradle Valley and through the Vineyard. It is marked with 'talking posts' that give information to the visitor.

Investing in the future of English wine – As well as providing regular training to our staff, Rathfinny Estate sponsored the 'Rathfinny Research Winery' at Plumpton College, to enable further research to be carried out to benefit the English wine industry.

Rathfinny Wine Estate – Producing world class Sussex Sparkling wines to rival the best in the world.

Mark and Sarah Driver



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FURTHER BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NAMES

Rathfinny was the name of the original farm, which was acquired by Mark and Sarah Driver in 2010 specifically to grow grapes for sparkling wine. Cradle Valley runs below Cradle Hill on the west side of the Cuckmere Valley. It is believed that a Mr H.L.Finney acquired Pinchemdown farm in the mid 19th century and changed the name to Rathfinny – ‘Rath’ being a Celtic word for an ‘enclosure’ as a fort or a residence for a tribal chief!

AREA PLANTED

After eighteen months of careful planning and preparation we planted the first 60,000 vines on a 20ha (50 acres) site in April 2012. We have now planted over 250,000 vines on 72ha (180 acres) and over the next six years we plan to plant out a further 80ha (200 acres) of vines. When at full capacity the Winery will produce nearly eighty thousand cases of Sussex Sparkling wine per annum, making Rathfinny one of England’s most significant wine producers.

GRAPE VARIETIES PLANTED

Five principal grapes varieties – Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris – 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, currently used to make still wines.

WINES TO BE PRODUCED

The first wines were made in 2014. The still wine from that year, known as Cradle Valley, was released in 2015 and the first Sussex Sparkling from that year will be released in June 2018.

Mark Driver, co-owner of Rathfinny Estate said: “We produce small amounts of still wine, but we’re predominately a sparkling wine producer. High quality ‘Sussex’ Sparkling wine requires at least three years to mature in the bottle to develop all those complex flavours, so I’ve had to learn to be patient. We’re very proud of our first Sussex Sparkling wines, they taste delicious.”

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 sparkling wines in the world.

“English sparkling wine is already very highly regarded and we hope that Rathfinny will be compared favourably with some of the best sparkling wines in the world. We want Rathfinny to be served in the best restaurants in London, Paris, New York, Beijing and Hong Kong.

“Our ambition is that in twenty years’ time you will walk into a bar or restaurant in New York or Beijing and you’ll be asked, ‘would you like a glass of Champagne or a delicious glass of Sussex, I can recommend the Rathfinny.’”

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 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 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, makes it a perfect place to grow sparkling wine grapes.

Cameron Roucher, Estate Manager at Rathfinny, who moved 12,000 miles from New Zealand 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 had spent the last 10 years working in California, to oversee the design and construction of the new Winery as well as make all of the wines. “It’s the perfect climate to produce world class sparkling wines” he says.

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 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 so that each building is largely 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 is treated onsite 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.

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.

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.”

RECENT HISTORY OF WINEMAKING IN ENGLAND

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 Sparkling Wine. This has never before been awarded to a sparkling wine producer outside of France. This has put English sparkling wine on the world stage. Over the last eight years English wine producers have won more international awards for sparkling wine than any other wine-producing region in the world.

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THE ENGLISH WINE INDUSTRY – AN OVERVIEW

The English wine industry is relatively small with some 500 vineyards covering just 6,000 acres (2,400 hectares) mainly in the southern half of England. Although there is evidence of Romans growing vines in England, it has recently enjoyed a resurgence - the oldest English vineyards are only about 40 years old.

According to the Wine and Spirits Trade Association (WSTA) in 2016, the value of English wine sales had risen to £100m.

The United Kingdom is a major consumer and still, currently, the second largest importer of wine in the world, but only a very minor producer of wine. In 2016, 5 million bottles of English wine were produced; this is enough to keep the British in wine for about 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)

In France, English Sparkling Wine is now treated with much greater respect. French Champagne house Taittinger planted vines in Kent in 2017 - "We were very impressed by the quality of English sparkling wine already produced here," said Pierre-Emmanuel Taittinger. Pommery are rumoured to have planted vines in Hampshire. Louis Roederer and Duval Leroy have also been looking at buying land in England. 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.

Market research group Mintel believe that the UK has potential as a wine exporter; "The undoubted improvement in the quality of English wine in recent years, combined with the weakness of Sterling against the Euro, means there is an opportunity for English wine producers looking to penetrate the European market," said Jonny Forsyth, senior drinks analyst at Mintel. "The difficulty will be in breaking down existing perceptions of lower quality."

A 2011 Mintel report 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 spring weather encourages an early bud break with no late spring frosts. A warm, dry June ensures good flowering and with sustained summer sunshine allows the grapes to have a long growing season, producing good clean fruit with high phenolic ripeness.

Late summer sun is critical as it's a fine balancing act between vineyards delaying harvesting, generally in October, in 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.

SUSSEX SPARKLING WINE (PDO)

The introduction of a Protection of Designated Origin (PDO) for 'Sussex Wine' is all about ensuring 'Provenance' and 'Quality'.

The traditional method for making English sparkling wine is bottle fermentation. A process – whereby after the primary fermentation, the wine 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.

The new Sussex PDO rules dictate that the wine must be in bottle for a minimum of fifteen months prior release. At Rathfinny we plan to 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 a plug of yeast lees and a small dose of sugar is then added and a cork is applied to maintain the carbon dioxide in the wine.

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.

Under the Sussex PDO rules all 'Sussex' wines must go through an independent analysis and a qualitative tasting ensuring the quality of the wine.

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