

BOTTOMS UP
Peter Hall planted
his first vines at
Breaky Bottom,
East Sussex, in 1974.
His wines have
become collectors'
favourites

C'EST INCROYABLE!

Burgundy? No, East Sussex. Not so long ago English wine was a laughing stock. Now it's getting so good even the French want a sniff of the action. Santé to that, says *John Arlidge*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ORLANDO GILI



tanding among the rows of vines that stripe the south-facing chalky slopes of Domaine Evremond, Patrick McGrath is doing his best Man from Del Monte impression. He plucks a light-green grape from one of the branches heavy with clumps. “With a bit of sunshine, it will start to darken and ripen in three to four weeks’ time,” he predicts. “We’re looking at a good crop. Our target is 400,000 bottles a year.”

Names, looks, production numbers — even the weather — can deceive. These vines are not rising to meet the afternoon sun on the slopes of Reims or Epernay, where McGrath learnt his trade at the Bollinger champagne house, “in the *Ab Fab* ‘Bolly, darling’ days”, before going to work for its cross-town rival Taittinger. McGrath is in the garden of England, ten miles west of Canterbury in Kent.

Domaine Evremond is the first European investment outside France by a family-run champagne maison. Taittinger bought 170 acres of the Kent countryside for £1.5 million six years ago to plant vines and is now investing £6 million more in a new winery to replace the current one in a converted barn. “We had the first proper harvest last year and bottled our first non-vintage blend this year,” McGrath says.

The 61-year-old is not the only oenophile in the curious position of working for a French winemaker in a country whose vintages were until recently regarded across the Channel as unfit even for cooking. Fifteen minutes’ drive down the road on the outskirts of Canterbury, Charles and Ruth Simpson have added an English arm to Domaine Sainte Rose, the 100-acre vineyard and winery they run in the Languedoc, where they produce 400,000 bottles of sparkling wine, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and merlot each year.



SPARKLING IDEAS
Left: at **Domaine Evremond in Kent, Patrick McGrath has teamed up with the French champagne house Taittinger to produce 400,000 bottles of fizz a year**

Below right:
Ruth and Charles Simpson, owners of the Languedoc estate Domaine Sainte Rose, have bought 90 English acres to produce still and sparkling wine

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“All our neighbours in France thought we were barking mad to come here,” Ruth says, laughing. “But you don’t see the genesis of a new wine region very often in a lifetime. New Zealand was the last.” The Simpsons have bought 90 acres and are investing £1 million to buy another 25 acres to increase production of their English sparkling and still wines to 250,000 bottles a year. “We’ve had a lot of venture capitalists contacting us,” Charles says. “People want to throw serious money at English wine.”

And not just the French. Mark Dixon, the billionaire founder of serviced office group Regus, now renamed IWG, is buying up so much land for vines across Sussex, Kent and Essex that he is creating what he hopes will soon be the largest vineyard in England. He aims to start making the first affordable — around £15 a pop — branded sparkling next year, England’s answer to the Spanish Freixenet. Thanks to Dixon and other wealthy investors, the number of acres of southern England under cultivation has jumped 70 per cent over the past five years and annual UK wine production has reached 12 million bottles. Figures from WineGB, the body that represents British winemakers, show that last year sales of English wine rose by a third to about seven million bottles. “Every day’s orders are like Christmas,” says Bob Lindo, whose sparkling wine produced

at Camel Valley, near Bodmin, has a royal warrant. He has been “so overwhelmed” that “we’ve had to start rationing. We can no longer satisfy the demand.”

Put all the latest moves together, says the *Sunday Times* wine columnist Will Lyons, and it’s clear that “English wine is now entering its third chapter”. In the first, which began in the 1970s, a small group of hobby farmers began planting vineyards and making wine — often not very good. In the second, starting about 15 years ago, a slew of new producers created English sparkling wines that became internationally recognised — Nyetimber, Gusbourne, Harrow & Hope, Rathfinny and Hambledon. These are now giving champagne a run for its euro, with sales for some main brands up 55 per cent last year, while overall champagne sales fell by 5 per cent. Thanks to increased investment, the third chapter, starting now, “will be all about the emergence of a new, high-quality winemaking country”, Lyons says.

A key plotline in chapter three is the emergence of still wines. Charles and Ruth Simpson’s 2018 The Roman Road English chardonnay made it into the top 50 wines in the world out of more than 16,500 surveyed by *Decanter* magazine in its 2020 World Wine Awards. “It was a real shock. We were competing against some of the best burgundies,” Ruth says. She concedes she never thought England could crack still wines. “I was the biggest sceptic. When we were researching, we couldn’t find anything we’d drink. Most of it went down the sink. But 2018 was a game-changer.” That summer was warm and dry and produced the best English harvest on record. The Simpsons have moved on to produce pinot noir, rosé and pinot meunier.

Chapel Down, a Kentish winery with 780 acres of vineyards across Kent and Sussex, now produces 800,000 bottles of still wine a year, including chardonnay, bacchus and its popular Flint Dry blend, alongside its signature sparkling wines. At Bolney Wine Estate in West Sussex, still whites, rosés and reds now outsell the sparkling wines that managing director and head winemaker Sam Linter first began to produce after taking over the vineyard from her parents in the early Noughties.

Another new strand is the growth of wine tourism. Linter has just invested “north of £1 million” to build a 7,000 sq ft shop, tasting room and restaurant. But she struggles to find a quiet table to chat to me even after lunch on a balmy Wednesday afternoon. “It’s already too small, so we’re working to extend our hours to get more people in,” she says.

At the 200-acre Hambledon vineyard and winery in Hampshire, founder Ian Kellett is spending £2 million on an enormous two-storey glass and oak restaurant, bar, entertainment space and a two-million-bottle cellar that he hopes will offer “the best vineyard hospitality in England by miles”.

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It’s all a far cry from the days when Peter Hall, a farmer rearing pigs, sheep, chickens and Christmas turkeys, planted his first vines on six acres of his 30-acre holding at Breaky Bottom, East Sussex, in 1974. (It’s a real place, not a made-up brand name to sell wine.) Hall, who is often spotted wearing a French matelot jersey and sailor’s cap, is called the godfather of English wine but Kurtz seems more appropriate. His vineyard is barely accessible — at the bottom of a valley, down a mile-long rutted track — and that’s the way he likes it. “I’m an eight-day-a-week hermit in this isolated place,” the 78-year-old tells me as he rolls up a scraggy cigarette and opens the back door to blow the smoke outside.

He still has only the six acres he originally planted and produces just 12,000 bottles of some of the finest English sparkling wine a year — notably a seyval blanc that is being snapped up by collectors. “My father used to say he never gave a tuppenny f*** for making money and I work long hours at my age, just keeping my head above water.”



he says with a smile. But he’s thrilled that what he and other pioneers started has become a “corporate whammo”, with the bigger players investing millions. “From half a dozen early planters to 800 vineyards and no sign yet of slowing up — Houston, we have lift-off!”

Short-term factors explain the sudden spike in interest in and sales of English wine. Before Covid hit, many English wineries supplied only wholesalers and restaurants, but when pubs and eateries were forced to close last March, winemakers had to appeal directly to consumers. Simon Robinson, who produces up to 650,000 bottles of sparkling and still wines a year at Hattingley Valley in Hampshire, set up a consumer web sales operation “in a weekend or two” last April. Since then he and his team, led by head winemaker Emma Rice, “have gone from £15,000 worth of direct consumer sales to more than half a million”, he says, running the numbers through his head in the tasting room, which is decorated with a mural of a raucous Mad Hattingley tea party. Lockdowns, social distancing rules and restrictions on overseas travel also left many of us looking for something new to eat and drink at home and safe places to go outside.

Another recent, unexpected shock — Brexit — has also helped. “The ‘Buy British’ environment has been important,” Robinson argues. Ever the canny City fellow (he’s a former partner at the ➤➤➤)



GRAPE MINDS
Simon Robinson and Emma Rice at Hattingley Valley in Hampshire have seen consumer sales increase 33-fold over lockdown

“magic circle” law firm Slaughter and May), Robinson has signed a deal with Pommery to enable the French champagne house to use Hattingley to make domestic sparkling — Louis Pommery England.

But it’s long-term structural changes — some man-made, some natural, some a bit of both — that are really behind the transformation of the industry over the past generation. Winemakers have grown better at the tricky task of working out which grapes to grow where. As he surveys his Cornish vines, Lindo says: “Thanks to the early pioneers like us, Bolney Valley and Breaky Bottom, we now really know the geology, the terroir and how to work with the right rootstocks, clones and grape varieties. Newcomers no longer have to waste time or money experimenting.”

Climate change is making growers’ lives easier. “A degree and a half of global warming has taken place, extending the growing season with earlier springs and longer, later summers,” explains Ruth Simpson. “That moves the champagne-style growing envelope 250 miles further north, which makes Reims almost exactly where Canterbury is now.”

Along the way the industry has developed what Hattingley’s Robinson calls “professional management and financing”. He helped to set up WineGB,

which offers advice on everything from raising capital to how to run a marketing campaign, while also hosting its own “trade tasting” and annual English wine awards to support the industry.

Last year Robinson threw down the marketing gauntlet to his rivals by doing something that no English winemaker had dared to do before: he made a television advertisement. It featured French winemakers doing a tasting and expressing a mixture of dismay and ill-concealed disgust at the “*incroyable*” quality of his *vin Anglais*.

It’s a fizzy performance all round but it cannot mask the fact that, in global terms, the English wine industry remains minuscule. Italy, France, Spain, the US and Australia measure annual wine production not in the millions but the billions — of litres, not bottles. “We’re a flea on the elephant’s backside,” jokes Frazer

Global warming has moved champagne-style growing 250 miles further north. Canterbury is “the new Reims”

Thompson, chief executive of Chapel Down, as he takes a seat on a wooden-top stool in one of his dark-blue tasting rooms.

But that, argues Charles Simpson, is a strength because it allows England to specialise in high-end wines, with prices — and margins — to match. “When you’re making 500,000 bottles you can be focused, artisanal.”

At around £30 a bottle many consumers say English sparkling wine is expensive, but Simpson insists it is better value than champagne “because if you spend 25 or 30 quid on champagne, you’re probably getting a Moët & Chandon or a Veuve Clicquot and it’s, you know, a bit Coca-Cola. They produce millions of bottles every year. English sparkling is boutique.” One reason English sparkling wines are as pricey as champagne is that they are produced using the same costly and time-consuming *methode champenoise*, which involves a secondary fermentation in the bottle.

The question that men such as Simpson and everyone else in the business are asking now is: can English wine seize its moment in the sun to go on to become solidly ➤➤➤

profitable, albeit with far smaller volumes than the established nations?

At Chapel Down, which produces two million bottles a year, CEO Thompson is glass half full. “The economics of starting a winery can be ruinous because you don’t really get any cash in for at least ten years after you grow your first grapes, but from the start we were clear we wanted to become profitable. We are now — and we’re not alone and more will follow.”

Chapel Down is one of only two English winemakers that are listed — it shares trade on the Aquis Exchange, along with brewers such as Shepherd Neame. It has just raised £7 million through a crowdfunding round at a market capitalisation of almost £90 million. Its latest accounts show turnover up 32 per cent to £13.3 million last year and gross profit up 31 per cent at £5.1 million.

Ruth Simpson points out the advantage all English winemakers have that should drive growth and profits — the fact that we drink so much of the stuff. “The UK is the sixth-largest market in the world for wine, with 1.6 billion bottles bought a year. Ninety-nine per cent is currently imported. The headspace for growth is extraordinary,” she says. “We’re a trading nation, we love variety, to drink and eat from around the world. So it won’t be like France, where 99 per cent of the wines drunk are local, but I guarantee you English wines will account for more than 1 per cent and I don’t think it’s far-fetched to say 30 per cent.”

As production grows, there is scope for exports too. Hattingley Valley is picking up fans in the US, perhaps because British Airways serves it in first class and in its business lounges. (BA cabin crew jokingly call it “Hattinger” to wind up French passengers.) One quarter of its production now goes overseas. The Simpsons are shipping to Scandinavia, where “consumers don’t have the same hang-ups as the French, the Italians and the Spaniards when it comes to English wine,” Charles says. Sam Linter points out that the Department for International Trade, which had lacked resources to support English wine before Brexit, has now “changed massively and given much more help”.

Longer-term trends could boost sales further, both here and abroad. Thompson argues that consumer tastes are moving in favour of the style of English wines. “In many markets worldwide, people are increasingly consuming cool-climate wines, which tend to be more acidic, lighter, lower in alcohol and more refreshing in taste. Look at New Zealand sauvignon blancs. English wine is a perfect product for today’s consumer.” Domestic wine is in tune with consumer sentiment in other ways, he adds.



MATURING WELL
Aged 78, pioneer Peter Hall still works the six acres he originally planted at Breaky Bottom

“The industry has relied on skilled EU workers in vineyards and fewer are coming over. It could be our major Achilles’ heel”

“Small-scale, local, craft-based products with low food miles will have great appeal as we come out of the pandemic and environmental concerns grow.”

Not everything in the English country garden is rosy. Brexit may be encouraging some consumers to buy British and geeing up ministers — but new paperwork needed to sell into the EU single market and increased transport costs that have pushed up the price of almost everything winemakers import, from tanks to bottling equipment, “makes doing business a nightmare”, Charles Simpson says.

Post-Brexit labour shortages that are already affecting the picking of fruit and veg might have an impact on vineyards. “It could be our major Achilles’ heel,” Robinson concedes. “The industry has been forced to rely on skilled EU workers for seasonal labour in vineyards and fewer

are coming over. There’s no domestic pool — and we have been trying.”

Warmer temperatures might be favourable in the long term but, as winemakers in France, Germany and the US have discovered, climate change also brings an increase in extreme weather events — late frosts, floods, wildfires — that can destroy harvests overnight. A triple whammy of frost, hailstorms and heavy rain this year have left French winemakers with their worst harvest since 1977.

Despite Simpson’s argument that English sparkling wine is better value than champagne, he accepts that “price is still a hump we need to get over”. Even still wines start at about £12. Thompson says the solution is to create premium English brands that can support premium prices. He knows a thing or two about the subject: he’s a former global brand director at the beer giant Heineken.

“The industry needs to start investing in marketing and PR to develop brands that create a crucial emotional connection with consumers,” Thompson says. “We need to tell our stories with more vigour, humour, quirk and style — the key ingredients that make great modern British brands, from Paul Smith to Aston Martin.” The aim is to create a local answer to New Zealand’s Cloudy Bay — an upscale product that ➤



put the Kiwis on the wine map. If we fail, the risk is that “English wine will end up like prosecco or cava”, Thompson says. “Few of us could name a single prosecco or cava maker. It’s just prosecco or cava, with prices to match.”

So it comes as no surprise that back on the chalky slopes of Domaine Evremond, Patrick McGrath has switched from Man from Del Monte to the Count of Monte Cristo, weaving a “narrative” around his new baby. “The name Evremond comes from Charles de Saint-Evremond, who’s the only Frenchman to be buried in Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey,” he tells me. “He was a soldier, hedonist and essayist who was kicked out of France by Louis XIV, came over to the court of Charles II and introduced the early wines of Champagne to the British. So it’s fitting his name will be on the first French bottle of English wine.”

McGrath turns the steel tap on one of the 15,000-litre tanks containing the first wine from last year’s harvest, which will eventually go into the 2021 non-vintage blend. He fills a glass and offers it to me to taste. It’s acidic, but he assures me that after secondary fermentation “it will be elegant, rounder, fatter, more generous and, we hope, magical. It’s certainly got the French team very happy. The proof will be in the pudding in three years’ time.”

If you like the idea of English fizz made by the French, I’d reserve a few bottles and see what you think for yourself when it’s ready. Just don’t call it English champagne ■

“Cool-climate wines are more acidic, lighter, lower in alcohol and refreshing. English wine is perfect for today’s consumer”



Will Lyons

Lie back and drink of England



THE SUNDAY TIMES
WINE Club



NV Harrow & Hope Brut Reserve
The Sunday Times Wine Club, £28
Buckinghamshire

High above the town of Marlow, Henry and Kaye Laithwaite have 16 acres where they are producing sparkling wine of serious quality. This classic blend of pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot meunier has a vibrancy and freshness that has gained the couple a loyal following.



Simpsons
2020 Rabbit Hole Pinot Noir, £26
simpsonswine.com
Kent

The third vintage of Charles and Ruth Simpson’s single-vineyard pinot noir is an absolute delight. Purple-hued and silky in texture, it has abundant supple, rich red fruit and a plush mouthfeel. What Rabbit Hole lacks in complexity it makes up for in sheer drinkability.



Hattingley Valley Wines
2014 Blanc de Blancs, £39.50
hattingleyvalley.com
Hampshire

Emma Rice built Hattingley’s winery on a former chicken farm near the village pub. Partly matured in old Burgundian oak barrels, this 100 per cent chardonnay is one of its best examples, with soft notes of apple and a creamy, toasty texture.



Breaky Bottom
2014 Seyval Blanc Cuvée Peter Christiansen, £264 (case of six)
breakybottom.co.uk
East Sussex

Peter Hall first produced still wine from the seyval blanc grape but switched to sparkling about 25 years ago. It was a wise decision. This minerally cuvée delivers tart, crisp intensity and ages well. Hall’s wines will be collectors’ items.



Chapel Down
2018 Kit’s Coty Chardonnay, £180 (case of six)
chapeldown.com
Kent

It’s hard to believe this creamy, ripe chardonnay is produced on the North Downs of Kent and not the Côte d’Or. This might well be England’s leading chardonnay, with beautiful aromas of apple and hazelnut and a lingering, pillow-soft finish.



Heritage Wines
2018 Sov’Ran Ortega, £16
heritagewines.co.uk
West Sussex

The ortega grape variety could have a bright future on these shores — it has all the classic hallmarks of a generous, refreshing white wine. This is juicy, lively and has a scintillating acidity that rivals a top-notch sauvignon blanc. Made in tiny quantities, but well worth seeking out.



Hambledon Vineyard
Première Cuvée, £45
hambledonvineyard.co.uk
Hampshire

England’s oldest commercial vineyard is also one of its most innovative, under the meticulous eye of owner Ian Kellett and a team led by former champagne maker Hervé Jestin. This is outstanding, with a precise, delicate character.