



The 10 things you need to know about English wine

As UK vineyards top 1,000 for the first time, our expert has the low-down on a booming industry

By Susy Atkins, WINE AND DRINKS CORRESPONDENT

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Earlier this month, it was revealed that there are now 1,030 vineyards in the UK, with 87 new registrations in 2023. Figures released by Wine GB also show that visits to UK vineyards and wineries have risen by 55 per cent in just two years. There's nothing better than sipping a wine right beside the vines that produced it, while chatting to the people who made it, so consider

paying a call to a local producer. To get you up to speed, our expert answers 10 essential questions about [English wine](#).

Why is so much English wine sparkling?

Sparkling wine tends to be produced in relatively cool climate areas, from Champagne to Tasmania, because grapes from cooler spots are generally high in acidity and a crisp tang is essential to producing decent fizz. England's climate certainly provides that. Conversely, cool climate regions aren't the best for full-bodied styles of wine, so Britain is not a great place for big, ripe whites and rich reds.

Which other styles are worth trying?

That same refreshing, tangy quality means that England's lighter dry whites are often excellent. Check out the bacchus grape for summery notes of elderflower, citrus and fresh gooseberry. England's still chardonnays can also impress: again, these are fresh and succulent but with some serious complexity. Try the dry rosés too – at their best, they're elegant and delicately aromatic.

Are there any decent English red wines?

It's hard to ripen many red varieties sufficiently in England's cool climate – especially late-ripening ones – so fewer reds are made here. That said, wineries are striving to make good red, mainly in a soft and juicy style, and some are succeeding. Pinot noir is the grape delivering the best English reds. Gusbourne's is my favourite currently, though Sharpham and Balfour make decent ones too, among others.

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Unsurprisingly, English reds shine best when produced in a particularly warm year such as 2018 or 2020. In a cool year, pinot noir grapes tend to be made into white or rosé fizz instead.



Pinot noir is the grape delivering the best English reds | CREDIT: Gusbourne

Are all the vineyards in the south?

The majority of English vineyards are in the south of the country, and especially near the south coast. This is mainly a consequence of the rather warmer weather and because there are areas of chalky soil, such as the South Downs, which some winemakers – not all – associate with high quality fruit. But there are vineyards right across England, including some further north. Much further, in the case of a group of Yorkshire wineries such as Dunesforde, Little Wold and Leventhorpe which have come together to form a Yorkshire Wine Trail.

Are the French really planting vines in England?

This is not a rumour, it's real! The first two [champagne](#) houses to make wine in England are Pommery and Taittinger. Pommery planted vines in Alresford, Hampshire, in 2017 and has sourced other English grapes to make its sparkling wine, Louis Pommery England, while its vines mature. The results have increased in quality – a little too sherbety-tart on first release in 2018, I have rated the more sophisticated recent releases highly.

Champagne Taittinger planted vines near Canterbury, Kent in 2017, in collaboration with the English master of wine Patrick McGrath and importers Hatch Mansfield: Domaine Evremond now has 52 hectares of vines and its first cuvée will be released next year. Both houses planted champagne grapes (chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier) and use the traditional champagne method of long bottle ageing, though they can't use the word "champagne" on the label as the wines don't come from that region.



England's cool climate produces grapes high in acidity - which is essential to producing decent fizz | CREDIT: Ann Macleod

Why are English wines expensive, especially the sparkling?

There are several reasons: first, a cooler climate means lower yields in the vineyards and second, English wineries and vineyards are generally small, with few economies of scale. And third, the sparkling wines are almost all made in the meticulous and expensive champagne method, so with a second fermentation and long lees ageing in the bottle rather than in large tanks as for prosecco.

Do English wines age well?

The sparklers certainly do. That tingling acidity keeps the wine fresh while it evolves, taking on toastier, more marmaladey tones over five years or more. Much older wines are rare at the moment, but some wineries such as Dorset's Furleigh Estate and Hampshire's Exton Park are releasing, respectively, 10-year-old-plus fizz or sparkling wines with much older reserve components in the blend, to much acclaim. The simpler whites, rosés and reds are not meant for long ageing, though some of the newer still chardonnays show promise.

What food should I serve with English fizz?

The high acidity, citrus streak and dry finish of most English sparkling wines mean they're perfect with oysters, crab, prawns, white fish and classic British fish and chips! I also like them with light, savoury canapés such as tomato bruschetta, salads (they can cope with a lemony dressing) or scrambled eggs with smoked salmon and other egg-based brunch dishes. The sparkling rosés are especially good with sushi.



Most English sparkling wines pair well with classic British fish and chips | CREDIT: Getty

What are the up-and-coming wineries to watch?

Too many to mention them all here but seek out Black Chalk for fine fizz; Langham Wine Estate in Dorset which has a highly talented young winemaker in Tommy Grimshaw; Flint in Norfolk for interesting experiments; the Irish consultant Dermot Sugrue's own wines at Sugrue South Downs; and relative newcomer Busi Jacobsohn in Sussex which scooped the sparkling trophy at the Independent English Wine Awards 2023. Then there's Blackbook in Battersea which sources its grapes from vineyards close to its London home to make excellent still chardonnay and pinot noir.

Which county is best at making wine?

Sussex acquired Protected Designation of Origin status for its sparkling wines last summer. But this was controversial – many other counties make fizz that is just as good. County boundaries don't reflect geological changes and, besides, some producers source grapes from elsewhere such as Lyme Bay Winery in east Devon, which champions the fruit of the Crouch Valley in Essex. There are no distinct regional styles of [English wine](#) as yet.

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