



# ENGLAND'S SPARKLING MOMENT



The chalky soils of Kent in southern England are producing some top-quality wines

BY H. LEE MURPHY

**I**t's a chilly autumn morning in the southeast town of Kent, England, at the remote Chapel Down Winery. The property is fronted by a narrow, two-lane roadway and has few neighbors beyond oat and barley farmers and a pasture notable for frolicking alpaca. Yet the winery is hosting two dozen visitors, freezing even in their Barbour coats as they inspect vines and nose blancs de blancs under the tutelage of customer experience manager Gavin Kean. This sight isn't unusual: Chapel Down Winery offers three tours a day and welcomed more than 60,000 visitors last year.

The English sparkling wine industry, which once toiled in obscurity, is finally emerging. Wineries like Chapel Down are sprouting up across southern England on the belated discovery that the chalky soils and generous south-facing slopes bear a strong resemblance to the terroir of Champagne. In addition, climate change has brought temperatures in southern England to within a couple of degrees of northern France, where the growing season is actually shorter.

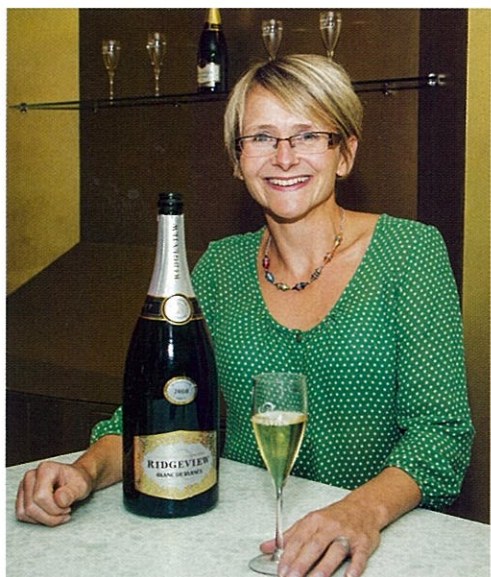
There is rising parity between the wines now being produced in England and those in Champagne, for which the U.K. is the No.-1 export market. In a blind tasting hosted by Britain's Wine and Spirits Association for members of the on-premise trade in Paris a year ago, a bottle of 2009 Nyetimber from England outscored the non-vintage Billecart-Salmon

Blanc de Blancs Champagne, which is 50-percent more expensive. Judges also preferred the 2011 Gusbourne Rosé over the Ayala Rosé Majeur. Many French critics in attendance admitted they couldn't tell the English products from their own. While most of the investment so far in British wine has been led by small entrepreneurs—some of them Americans—Champagne house Taittinger recently acquired a 170-acre apple farm in Kent, not far from Chapel Down, and is planting vines.

Until now, English wineries have been content to concentrate their sales within their domestic market. But U.K. wine production is expected to double to 10 million by 2020. The English are now busy lining up U.S. importers, with New York City-based ABCK Corp. representing Chapel Down. The winery's 2010 Three Graces (\$50 a 750-ml.) is a blend of 60-percent Chardonnay, 33-percent Pinot Noir and 7-percent Pinot Meunier, aged on its lees nearly six years. It began rolling out in February and is currently on the menus of such Manhattan restaurants as Buddakan, Grand Central Oyster Bar and Quality Meats, according to ABCK president Arnaud Brachet. ABCK begins importing Chapel Down Brut (\$40) this month and will add Chapel Down Brut Rosé (\$50) in June. Distribution is expected to eventually expand beyond New York to California, Florida, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Sparkling wines made in southern England, including Chapel Down, have begun to gain traction in the United States.





The English wine industry (Chapel Down vineyards pictured right) has grown dramatically, with the number of wineries doubling in the last decade to 140. Founded in 1995, Ridgeview Wine Estate (CEO Tamara Roberts pictured left) was an early entrant.

## Targeting The United States

"The quality is now there," says Miles Beale, the CEO of London's International Wine & Spirit Centre, which created an English Wine Trail map last year with at least a dozen wineries for oenophiles to visit. "Wineries here are looking at the United States, Hong Kong and Singapore as their initial export markets."

Still wine, primarily from white grapes, represents roughly 25 percent of Britain's production, but much of it is derived from hardier Germanic grapes like Bacchus that were planted back in the 1950s. Some good Pinot Blanc wines are being made, and there are expectations that Riesling might someday have a chance in England. But for now, the vast majority of exported sparkling wine is made from the traditional big three grapes of Champagne—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier.

Some 1,000 cases of Chapel Down's wines are planned for shipment in 2017. "At these prices, we'll be going head-to-head against Veuve Clicquot," says Chapel Down managing

director Mark Harvey. The export total is a fraction of the 90,000 cases that the winery produces annually, but it's a number destined to grow. "We can scale up quickly, with the goal being to reach 200,000 bottles for America within three to five years," Harvey explains.

At Ridgeview Wine Estate in East Sussex, 45 miles south of London, production includes a half-dozen cuvées within its 300,000-bottle annual total. Founded in 1995, Ridgeview exports about 15 percent of its production to the United States, handled by Grand Cru Selections in New York and Victory Wine Group in Texas, among others. Labels include Bloomsbury and Cavenish (both \$50 a 750-ml.). Another 10 percent of

### WINERY LIST

1. Furleigh Estate Vineyard
2. Harrow & Hope
3. Hattingley Valley Wines
4. Hambledon Vineyard
5. Nyetimber
6. Bolney Wine Estate
7. Ridgeview Wine Estate
8. Rathfinny Wine Estate
9. Hush Heath Winery
10. Chapel Down Winery
11. Gusbourne





*The British Bottle Co. exports a portfolio of English labels to the United States that includes (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) Bolney Wine Estate; Hush Heath (owner Richard Balfour-Lynn pictured); and Digby Rosé Brut.*

Ridgeview's production is spread among Japan, Scandinavia, Holland and Switzerland.

"We've received a lot of interest in our wines coming from the United States, and we'd like to see our business there double in the next three to four years," says Ridgeview CEO Tamara Roberts, who gave up a career in accounting to work at her family's winery in 2004. She has looked around the region and sees an increasing number of big-name investors buying up land. "People with very large ambitions are getting involved here," Roberts says. "There could be a massive explosion in new wines in three to five years coming from England."

Nevertheless, English wines still need marketing to extend beyond the word-of-mouth coming back from the tasting rooms in Sussex and Essex. "We realize we can't do all the marketing ourselves," Roberts adds. "We've got to band together and do something as a group."

## Spreading The Word

The group is growing. There are currently 140 wineries in England, a total that's doubled in the past decade. Another 500 to 600 growers are cultivating grapes that are sold to the wineries. The International Wine & Spirit Centre is seeking a national tourism grant to spur more publicity. "Importers from the United States are actually visiting here for the first time," Beale says.

Some of the dealers include transplanted Englishmen like Bartholomew Broadbent, whose Broadbent Selections is based in Richmond, Virginia. He's importing Gusbourne (\$52 a 750-ml. for the 2011 Brut Reserve). Redmond Johnson,



CEO of The British Bottle Co. (and son of British wine writer Hugh Johnson), has put together a new export program for several wineries, working with Vine Street Imports in Mount Laurel, New Jersey, for U.S. distribution. The labels include Digby, Hush Heath and Bolney, with prices ranging from \$40 to \$76 a 750-ml.

The British Bottle Co. shipped 1,000 cases to the United States last year, and Johnson estimates that volume will approach 3,000 cases in 2017. "We're not even in California yet," he says. "This year, about 15 percent of the English wine we export will go to the U.S. market—far behind the 35 percent that goes to Asia. Over time, I expect that 40 percent of our exports will go to the United States."

The explosive English wine scene includes the famed wine journalist-turned-wine producer Steven Spurrier, who founded Bride Valley Winery in 2008. The 24-acre vineyard in Dorset produces the Bride Blanc de Blancs and Bride Rosé (both \$60 a 750-ml.) and is distributed in the United States by the Boisset Collection—a French company finding room in its portfolio for an English sparkling wine. "Our wine in America is sold out already," Spurrier says. "We can sell all we can make. English wine is finally being taken seriously."

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