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Britain's burgeoning bubbly business

Sussex's vineyards are challenging the notion that the finest wines only come from across the Channel

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One recent Saturday morning, four Australians, two Britons and this reporter met beside 17 acres of chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier vines, ready to sample what's been called one of the world's finest sparkling wines, at the source. We were 88 miles from France's Champagne region, on the English side of the Channel, in a two-pub village called Ditchling, in East Sussex.

Here lies Ridgeview Estate, which took the top prize for bubbly at the 2010 Decanter World Wine Awards (DWWA), never before given to a producer outside France. This was no anomaly. Increasingly, English sparkling wines have been racking up international awards, and like Ridgeview, many hail from the South Downs.

With the same chalky soil as Champagne's Côte des Blancs — geologically linked by the Paris Basin, which runs under the English Channel — the rolling grassland, ancient woodland and white cliffs between Hampshire and Sussex counties in southeast England encompass not only part of Britain's newest national park, but also a burgeoning wine region. And rising temperatures have been working in its favour.

Husband and wife Mark and Sarah Driver (a former hedge fund owner and a former lawyer turned fine-wine enthusiasts) bought 600 acres in a valley between Alfriston village and the East Sussex coast and started planting vines. Their Rathfinny Estate recently opened as England's largest vineyard.

With their Moët & Chandon-trained winemaker, the Drivers plan to produce one million bottles of "world-class" sparkling wine annually (last year, all of Britain released about four million) while creating a sustainable, state-of-the-art hub for English wine tourism. From the Rathfinny Trail (a new public footpath that cuts through the valley) to the Flint Barns (the estate's formerly derelict farmhouse, just opened as an old-meets-new B&B and café), it's a bit of an "If you build it, they will come" scenario.

A three-hour tour, from £35 (\$71), took me through poppy-strewn rows of GPS-planted Champagne clones, hand-

pruned around steel posts, to the local oak-clad winery. The Drivers are already applying for Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) status to create a standard and a name for Sussex-made bubbly — à la "Champagne."

"Perhaps in the future we'll refer to this as 'Sussex,'" said Howard Corney of his Court Garden blanc de blancs, which he poured inside the Ditchling vineyard's restored barn while joking, "I have a cousin who very generously refers to our wine as 'Ditchwater.'" With his wife and winemaker-son, Corney has spent the past decade growing vines on the site of a Saxon farm that's still home to chickens, sheep and bottle-fed lambs, and won two trophies at this year's International Wine Challenge.

Whether or not the PDO pans out, Sussex has the most vineyards of any county in Britain, with more opening for tasting tours. (Some close for fall harvest, but reopen by spring.) Even Nyetimber, whose Classic Cuvée blend was served at the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and whose medieval West Sussex estate is normally closed to the public, has introduced occasional open days (£20) with guided tastings. Lately, it's also been touring the country in a 1968 double-decker bus, converted with a copper-and-wood bar and a retractable roof.

Nearby, the young Gladwin brothers, behind London's buzzy "wild food" restaurants Rabbit and The Shed, just started offering tours (from £25) at their family's Riesling-focused Nutbourne Vineyards. Beside its ancient windmill, now a terraced tasting room, they'll barbecue on old vine trimmings.

Meanwhile, having helped pioneer wine tourism everywhere from Champagne to South Africa's Cape during the past three decades, the Hampshire-based Arblaster & Clarke has begun operating on home turf. "I have lived and worked in the South Downs for over 20 years now," said Caron Fanshawe, the general manager.

She said she "never imagined" the company would one day offer a South Downs Vineyard Walk alongside its tours in such renowned wine regions.

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