

The Great British Wine Renaissance



We are on the cusp of something truly exciting in Britain.... our home-grown reds, whites, rosés and sparkling not only match the best in the world, they are now beating them.

But how did this all come about?

Blame the Italians for our love affair with wine. Evidence of wine-soaked Roman soirees can be found in wine jugs, mugs, and a pip or two across the country.

So, wine making in Britain may be over 2,000 years old but making great wine may have eluded even the mighty Romans. From the fall of their Empire to the Battle of Hastings it was a lot cooler, and with various factions fighting for a piece of the British pie, there wasn't much time for wine making.

After King Alfred defeated the Danes, Christianity spread, and winemaking skills improved along with the weather. Post 1066, vineyards sprouted up across the country, further buoyed by William the Conqueror's thirsty court. The Domesday Book records 42 vineyards, probably small, mostly owned by nobles, and (unlike today) producing wine that was thin and sour, mercifully pacified by honey.

The 12th and 13th centuries are considered the first golden age of English winemaking with vineyards reaching as far north as Yorkshire, matched by our new love for Bordeaux, thanks to Henry II's marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine. For 300 years the Crown had its own vineyards over the channel, prompting our expertise in importing, bottling, (and much consuming) of wine.

When Henry VIII ascended the throne, there were approximately 140 vineyards in England and Wales. However, the return of poor weather and the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 saw the mighty grape side-lined for a century in favour of exotic coffee, chocolate, tea, hoppy beer, and distilled spirits.

From 1660, Charles II made all things French fashionable again. England didn't make much wine but continued to import it, with London merchants securing the finer international varieties, influencing the style and quality of wines gracing dinner tables at home and abroad.

This continued for 300 years, with quality viticulture only returning to Britain by the mid-20th Century. In the early 1950s, the birthplace of cricket delivered the first contemporary, commercial vineyard: a whole acre of a south-facing chalky slope near Hambledon in Hampshire.



Here, England's first modern, award-winning wines were created. Today, **Hambledon Vineyard** is still regarded as one of England's best (although somewhat larger).

This fuelled more vineyards across the country, ignited by the legendary hot summer of 1976. Remember, we were still drinking sweet German wines at this time and had staked our own vine future on their cooler grape varieties. It wasn't until the 1980s that producers started to experiment with classic Champagne grape varieties (Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier), led by pioneer winemaker, Christopher Lindlar (also known as Kit).

Two of Kit's clients, Stuart and Sandy Moss, discovered that the soils and climate in certain parts of southern England were similar to that of Champagne in France. They planted a vineyard in West Sussex, growing the same grapes and using the same methods to make sparkling wine and produced **Nyetimber**, winning a cabinet-load of trophies that has remained crammed ever since. Nyetimber now produces more than one million bottles a year across 900 acres of vineyards in West Sussex, Hampshire and Kent.



Today, England and Wales are home to more than 950 vineyards, supplying around 210 wineries. Without getting too giddy on our own bubbles, we are still small compared to other wine making countries: in 2022 we produced about 12.2 million bottles, Champagne produces around 300 million. Nonetheless, viticulture is the fastest growing agriculture sector in Britain. There are over 1 million vines planted each year and new landowners include some of France's leading Champagne Houses.

But how did this all happen so quickly (aren't we considered too cold and damp for vines)?

Grape Varieties

The revolution really started when local wine makers turned from German to Champagne grape varieties... Boom! Now around 70% of wine produced in England and Wales is Sparkling. In warm years, good still wines are made – find a 2018, 2020 or 2022 Pinot Noir or Chardonnay and you won't be disappointed.



Climate change

Grapes are a barometer for weather, a good year supports a good vintage. We can grow traditional Champagne grape varieties only because our summer days have become warmer and longer, average July temperatures are 18°C rather than struggling to 15°C just 30 years ago. As Wendy Outhwaite of *Ambriel Sparkling* notes, "Our *goldilocks climate* – not too hot, not too cold – allows for a long ripening season to create the best flavours in the grapes... one of many reasons (our sparkling) is so distinctive".



Our soils

Many vineyards free from the chalk seam running from Champagne in France across southern England, with some planted on rare, free-draining Greensand, (a natural sieve for our damp weather).

Innovation & Sustainability

Early pioneers of English and Welsh wines were bold and visionary, a spirit inherited by the latest wave of local wine makers, many coming from afar to join the fastest expanding wine region in the world. Our current lack of restrictions encourages creativity in growing and blending wines, and there is a particular British sensibility in making wines; everything is done by hand and many vineyards are highly sustainable and promote biodiversity.



It's been a yo-yo ride of wine making over the past two thousand years, yet today's wine making renaissance is revolutionary and remarkable. One could say Britain is the newest new-world wine region in an old-world wine country. Now is the time to explore the array of stunning vineyards on our doorstep and discover their award-winning wines. No longer the bridesmaid, English and Welsh wines hold court at the top tables across the world. Here comes the bride!

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