

Hoffmann and Rathbone

A sparkling new English venture



Ulrich Hoffmann and Birgit Rathbone are taking part in one of the wine world's quiet revolutions. While new vineyards are being planted in exotic locations like Argentina and Brazil, a small group of people have focused their attentions on the chalky slopes of the southern regions of Great Britain.



Until recently, the notion of making fine wine in England would not have been seriously considered. Yet a combination of increased localized expertise and a little global warming have led to the creation of a number of Sussex-born sparkling wines that regularly beat top Champagnes in blind tastings. There is a tangible buzz in the industry and a feeling that the region has found its identity in producing top-quality, high-end sparkling wines.

Now Ansty – a little village in the rolling hills of Sussex, to the north of Brighton, that boasts a pub and a cricket team – sees Hoffmann and Rathbone's small, family-run business hand-producing sparkling wine in much the same way as countless estates in the villages of the Champagne region.

Hoffmann, a skilled wine consultant who represents half of the Hoffmann & Rathbone business, has been making wine for 15 years. His career includes spells at the Rolf-Willy estate in Baden-Württemberg in his native Germany, Chateaux de Fieuzal and Haut-Gardère in Bordeaux, Artadi in Navarra, Cain

Vineyards in Napa Valley. One of the wines he crafted in England was served on the Royal Barge as part of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebration in 2012, while another was described by Jancis Robinson MW as "probably the best English red" she had ever tasted.

Hoffmann might have continued on his travels had he not fallen in love with both the Sussex countryside and his now wife, Birgit Rathbone.

Together they have created a small business that is exclusively focused on quality. The grapes are drawn from the local region, whose cool climate is perfectly suited to growing the traditional Champagne varieties of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier. The first release was a 2010 blend of Pinot Noir and barrel-fermented Chardonnay, of which only 1,500 individually-numbered bottles were produced. Leading UK critic Jamie Goode, who gave it 91 points out of 100, said that it had: "Lovely purity and freshness... distinctive personality and real finesse."

A Classic Cuvée was released soon after-

wards and a Blanc de Blancs is set to follow. All wines are traditionally bottle fermented and aged on the lees for at least three to four years with an additional six to twelve-month maturing on cork before release.

Hoffmann's wine consultancies afford him the luxury of patience and absolute insistence on quality: nothing is released until it is ready to be sold and unless it is unquestionably worthy of the brand. Handling the tiny volumes that are currently being produced is simple: everything is sold by allocation. And to judge by the reception of the first releases, if you want to enjoy these delicious fruits of the English wine revolution, you'd be well advised to do that before everybody else does.

INFO



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