

Vine times

As the quality of English wines continues to improve, there's never been a better reason to visit the many wonderful vineyards

On gentle, south-facing slopes neat rows of vines are blazing autumn colour. They grow where the Romans once established a vineyard, as evidenced by archaeological finds. Meanwhile, production from the state-of-the-art winery alongside is increasing every year – with award-winning results.

Sounds like a go-ahead wine estate in France or Italy? Well

yes, but actually this operation is in Hampshire - Shedfield, near Southampton to be precise. Welcome to Wickham Vineyard (01329 834042; wickhamvineyard.co.uk), currently in the throes of harvest.

About 80,000 bottles of wine (sparkling rosé, aromatic whites, fresh rosés, elegant reds) are made here each year, with production gradually increasing as the vineyard expands from



its current 18 acres. Visitors are welcome to come and see it for themselves, taking either an audio tour or a guided group tour (although the latter are not available during the harvest), joining a course (ranging from one day to five weeks) or simply visiting the vineyard shop. Meanwhile, the vineyard's restaurant is being revamped and is scheduled to be reopened early next year.

England now produces some strikingly good wine from 400-plus vineyards across the country. It is the South East in particular that presents the really big success story. The chalky soil here is similar to that of France's Champagne region and over the last six or so years the sparkling wines of South East England have become better, have won increasing plaudits and are also becoming ever more competitively priced.

This and much more you'll learn at The English Wine

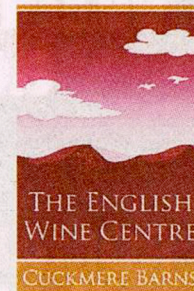
Centre (01323 870164; englishwine.co.uk) set in the pretty village of Berwick in the rolling South Downs of East Sussex. A nerve centre of the English wine industry, it is a dynamic complex with a shop, boutique hotel and restaurant. It also offers wine tastings, as well as vineyard tours in the area.

You'll find a good 140 English wines in the shop – along with enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff. Owners Colin and Christine Munday say that about half the purchases are sparkling wines from the South East. Then there's the restaurant, which emphasises organic and local produce (the likes of south-coast sea bream and Sussex chicken) and guides customers through the wine list (all English), allowing them to taste samples before making a choice of what to drink with their meal. Leave space for pudding – and accompanying wine. "English dessert wines are

magnificent," says Colin. "They're the next success story."

Other vineyards to visit in the South East include

Denbies Wine Estate (01306 876616; denbies.co.uk) near Dorking in Surrey; The Chapel Down Winery (01580 766111; englishwinesgroup.com) Small Hythe, Kent; Ridgeview Wine Estate (01444 241441; ridgeview.co.uk) Ditchling Common, East Sussex; and Brightwell Vineyard (01491 832354; brightwellvineyard.co.uk) Wallingford, Oxfordshire.



WICKHAM
VINEYARDS

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