



GRAPE MINDS THINK ALIKE

Move over Champagne – there’s a new premium wine region in town. We encounter acres of picturesque vines, beautiful views and award-winning wines when we meet the five passionate producers who have come together to form Vineyards of the Surrey Hills

Words | **Sophie Farrah**

WHEN YOU THINK of famous wine regions, perhaps the South of France springs to mind, or California’s Napa Valley, but how about the Surrey Hills?

Just 20 miles south of London, sandwiched between Kent, Sussex and Hampshire, lies a cluster of five beautiful vineyards, each producing internationally award-winning wines in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Sounds pretty good, doesn’t it?

Together, they’ve joined forces to create Vineyards of the Surrey Hills (VoSH) – a new, world-class wine tourism destination that celebrates the excellence of the wine being produced there. Cultivated on limestone hills that share the same geological stratum as the Champagne region, each vineyard is located along the rolling North Downs Way; its south-facing slopes, chalky soil and microclimate providing optimum conditions for wine production.

As a newly formed wine region, these family-run vineyards are now working closely together to create and deliver memorable visitor experiences, while also sharing knowledge, resources, and above all, a passion for creating the best possible wine. There are tours and tastings aplenty, and vineyard hopping is positively encouraged, but despite their proximity, each one has something very different to offer, as we discovered... Our first stop was Albury; this small, beautiful vineyard

is located just outside Guildford and is where Nick Wenman fulfilled his lifelong dream of planting vines in 2009, after retiring from the IT industry. Today, he runs the business with his daughter Lucy and vineyard managers Dominic and Alex.

“Everyone has historically thought of Sussex and Kent as key wine-growing regions, but we want to put the Surrey Hills on the map,” enthuses Lucy, as she showed us around their 12-acre plot.

Albury is the only organic vineyard in the Surrey Hills, and one of very few in the UK. It produces a range of delicious, award-winning sparkling wines made from traditional Champagne variety grapes, but it’s their Silent Pool Rosé that has made the biggest splash, after it was chosen to be served on the royal barge for the Queen’s Jubilee in 2012. Now it sells out every year. Here, visitors can enjoy a variety of tours and tastings, or just pop in for a glass (or bottle), enjoyed while overlooking the vines. There are also regular events featuring live music and local food.

Our next stop, less than a 10-minute drive away, was High Clandon – the smallest vineyard of the Surrey Hills. Here, South African owner Sibylla Tindale and her husband Bruce tend to each vine by hand in their small, but perfectly formed, one-acre vineyard.

“VoSH celebrates the beauty of the Surrey Hills AONB, and the fact that the chalky terroir of these



glorious rolling downs can produce such exquisite wines,” enthused Sibylla, as she showed us round her stunning gardens, with their equally stunning views.

“As there are only five vineyards in this special area, it made abundant sense to create a delicious wine region to attract both tourists and wine aficionados. Also, having more than one lovely vineyard to visit is a wonderful attraction!”

The offering at High Clandon is aged-matured vintage fizz only; each release has won a staggering array of awards and sells out every year. Visits to the vineyard are by appointment only, while monthly tours and tastings can be pre-booked.

Our next destination was Denbies, which was until recently the largest single-estate vineyard in the UK with a whopping 265 acres ‘under vine’. Established in 1986, it encompasses a large winery, hotel, restaurant, shops and various visitor experiences, as

well as seven miles of public footpaths,

open to all. It

produces a wide range of award-winning still and

sparkling wines, some of which we were lucky enough to try in one of the vineyard’s new, heated, luxury cabanas, overlooking acres of beautiful vines.

“Regional clusters of vineyards are forming all over the UK, so the collaboration of our award-winning vineyards, located in an AONB, presented a significant opportunity,” explains Denbies’ COO, Jeannette Simpson.

“We are all completely different in size, production and visitor offering, and so together we can provide a large selection of tours and experiences that really complement each other.”

Speaking of which – after our wine tasting, we hopped aboard the vineyard’s brilliant outdoor train tour, which trundled through the vines to the top of the estate, where we could enjoy the stunning views of Box Hill with a glass of Denbies’ delicious sparkling in hand.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year is

“Having more than one lovely vineyard to visit is a wonderful attraction!”

Greyfriars, our next destination, which Mike and Hilary Wagstaff took over in 2010 with the aim of expanding the original vineyard planted there in 1989; they now have a total of 40 acres under vine, on two neighbouring sites. Here, each element of the wine-production process takes place on-site; what Mike describes as ‘grape to glass’. Where smaller vineyards take their grapes to external wineries for production, Greyfriars has built its very own, as well as a large storage cave in the chalk slopes. Their wines have won several international awards, and the vineyard hosts regular tours, tastings and foodie events. This year, it also unveiled an impressive new tasting room.

“Located just a stone’s throw from London, we grow amazing and varied wine, with beautiful vineyards and brilliant people. We want to encourage visitors to come and experience everything that we have to offer

– not just the wine,” enthuses Mike.

Our fifth and final stop was Chilworth Manor, an astoundingly beautiful historic house

and estate owned by Graham and Mia Wrigley. The couple planted vines in 2013, making it the newest of the Surrey Hills vineyards. Their 10-acre plot produces fruit for an incredibly popular English rosé and, for the first time this year, a hotly anticipated sparkling wine. Currently, Chilworth Manor is the only Surrey Hills vineyard not regularly open to the public, but it hosts several annual charity events that are open to all, and a new, permanent tasting barn is planned for next year.

“I think that the Vineyards of the Surrey Hills will become known as an umbrella that represents quality – we’re all so passionate about what we do, and we’re all family businesses too,” Graham explains.

“Already it’s fast becoming a destination to visit two or three vineyards in a day. I really believe that we could be the Napa Valley of the UK. When we started out, we didn’t realise there would be this wine tourism element but there is such a demand for it, which is great, and most of all – it’s fun.” We’ll drink to that. ♦

WHERE TO STAY NEARBY

The Merry Harriers

This charming traditional village inn, complete with friendly resident llamas, offers good food and four comfortable and serene bedrooms with countryside views. In its pretty gardens there are a further six bedrooms, and five luxurious shepherd’s huts. Their ‘Taste of Surrey’ package includes a tour at Albury Vineyard as well as a bottle of their highly coveted Silent Pool Rosé. → merryharriers.com

Beaverbrook

Nestled in the heart of the Surrey Hills, Beaverbrook is a quintessential British country estate. There are 29 sumptuous, beautifully designed rooms to choose from, divided between the House and the Garden House, including three suites. There’s also an impressive architect-designed spa, cinema, several stylish eateries and 470 acres of beautiful countryside to explore. → beaverbrook.co.uk

Denbies Vineyard Hotel

If you’re looking to fully immerse yourself in Surrey’s beautiful vines then this is the place for you. Located on the wine estate itself, Denbies is home to one of the UK’s very few vineyard hotels. There are 17 recently refurbished bedrooms here, with both spacious luxury suites and doubles with king-sized beds as standard, overlooking the vineyards and rolling hills beyond. → denbies.co.uk



TOP BOTTLES

Chilworth Manor Brut Rosé 2018, £36.50

Released this year, the vineyard’s first fizz has been a huge success; it’s a delicate salmon pink in colour and bursting with creamy summer fruits, butterscotch and brioche. There are plans to release a sparkling white wine later this year too. → chilworthmanorvineyard.com

High Clandon Euphoria Cuvée 2016 Prestige Vintage Brut, £39

The word ‘euphoria’ is used to describe intense feelings of happiness, and that’s exactly how you’ll feel after a glass or two of this delicious, award-winning fizz. Resulting from a late harvest with five years’ lees ageing, it tastes of crisp citrus and buttery brioche, with rich peach and alluring florals. → highclandon.co.uk

Albury Estate Classic Cuvée, £32.95

This award-winning, certified organic English sparkling wine is a classic cuvée of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier. Fresh and lively, the ripe acidity is complemented by a subtle sweetness. → alburyvineyard.com

Denbies Surrey Gold, £9.75

This is Denbies’ most popular wine, and the first they ever produced. A blend of Müller-Thurgau, Ortega and Bacchus, it’s quite Germanic in style – off dry, but fresh, fruity and aromatic. → denbies.co.uk

Greyfriars NV Sparkling Rosé, £19.50

This award-winning, delicious pink fizz is a delicate pale colour, with aromas of summer berries and a fresh fruity palate. A perfect aperitif, it is incredibly good value too. → greyfriarsvineyard.co.uk