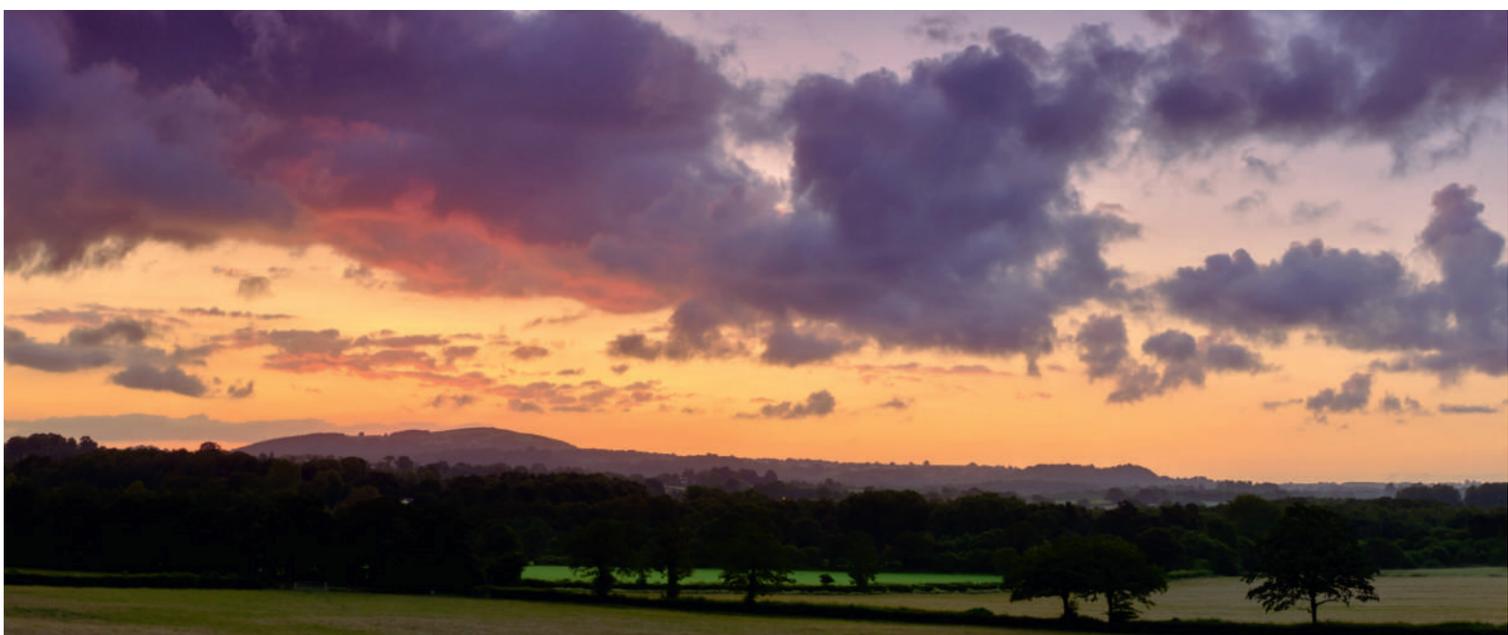




Grape escapes

First came the British vineyards – and great British wine. Then came the vineyard restaurants, shepherd’s huts and even full-blown vineyard hotels. Here are some of the UK’s best stays, tried and tested, from the ‘English champagne region’ of Sussex to the castaway magic of the Isles of Scilly



WORDS: SUSAN LOW, LES DUNN. PHOTOGRAPHS: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

LLANERCH Vale of Glamorgan, Wales

WHY IT’S GREAT

One of Wales’s oldest vineyards, Llanerch began making its Cariad (Welsh for ‘sweetheart’) wines in a shed behind the farmhouse back in the 1980s, here in a peaceful spot in the Vale of Glamorgan, a 20-minute drive from Cardiff. Bought by an entrepreneur with a goal to create an Australian-style wine hotel, Llanerch expanded and reopened in 2019. It’s a slick operation, but with down-to-earth Welsh hospitality to save it from pretentiousness.

TOUR & TASTING

Over a leisurely hour-long tour (April to October, £15pp) you stroll among the vines and get to try three of the five Cariad wines (a sparkling brut and a sparkling blush, dry and off-dry whites and a rosé). The wines are actually made at the Three Choirs Vineyards in Gloucestershire, and while they aren’t going to challenge the best bottles from Burgundy any time soon, the sparkling blush is an enjoyable drop.

WHAT’S FOR DINNER?

In fine weather you can eat on the pretty garden terrace overlooking the vines. Inside it’s wood floors, comfortable banquettes and lots of greenery. Starters might include a heritage tomato salad with whipped goat’s cheese, followed by a slow-roasted shoulder of Welsh lamb with a sticky red onion jam. Puddings run the gamut of crowdpleasers: treacle tart, salted caramel cheesecake, lemon meringue posset... There’s also **Angela Gray’s Cookery School** (angelagray.co.uk) on site, should you fancy brushing up on your kitchen skills during your stay. →



A VINE STAY

For the most character, there are a few rooms in the original whitewashed farmhouse, though those in the new purpose-built blocks are more spacious, with bigger beds. Plush carpets and sleek granite bathrooms come as standard, and the new blocks incorporate slate, stone and wood in sympathy with the older buildings. *Dinner around £40 for three courses; doubles from £110 room-only; llanerch.co.uk*

staycation stars.

RATHFINNY WINE ESTATE Alfriston, East Sussex

WHY IT'S GREAT

Near the pretty village of Alfriston and just seven miles from the famous cliffs of Seven Sisters, the 600 acres of Rathfinny are on the rolling hills of the South Downs. It's a beautiful spot – and the wine is rather good too. The mission here is to produce world-class fizz, and the shiny stainless steel winery is equipped for the task. The Rathfinny USP is that all the wines are from a single vintage – unlike most champagne, which is usually a blend of different vintages.

TOUR & TASTING

For £25pp, visitors get a thorough grounding in how the pinot noir, pinot meunier and chardonnay vines (the predominant grape varieties used to make champagne) are grown and pruned. In the winery, the mysteries of primary and secondary fermentation, disgorgement and bottle-ageing are explained by knowledgeable guides. Then it's on to the luxe tasting room to sample the classic cuvée, blanc de blancs, blanc de noirs and rosé, all made in a lean, dry style that lets the character of each vintage shine through.

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

The Tasting Room restaurant echoes the modern aesthetic, with floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over the vines. Head chef Chris Bailey has buckets of talent, turning out beautiful platefuls of Japanese-influenced dishes such as a starter of scallop carpaccio with dashi-pickled cucumber, green tea and shiso, or a main dish of skate wing with pickled rhubarb, samphire and nori butter sauce. There's also a more casual restaurant, and the vineyard picnic hampers and antipasti platters are popular.



Dine overlooking the hillside vines at Rathfinny's Tasting Room; enjoy a comfy stay in the restored Flint Barns

A VINE STAY

The restored brick-and-stone Flint Barns, a 10-minute walk from the winery, have 10 bedrooms (including two family rooms for 4) around an adjoining courtyard, and a lounge with a wood-burning stove. With country-chic design and sleek bathrooms, the feel is stylish but unstuffy. There are no TVs, but dogs are welcome. Breakfast, served in the light-filled dining room, is big on local produce such as South Downs smoked bacon.

Doubles from £95 B&B; seven-course tasting menu at the Tasting Room £65; rathfinnyestate.com



TINWOOD ESTATE Chichester, West Sussex

WHY IT'S GREAT

Where once lettuce grew on Art Tukker's family farm, now vines cover the 85 acres near the cathedral city of Chichester, a half-hour drive from the wonderful beaches of the Witterings. The three sparkling wines – Estate Brut, Blanc de Blancs and Rosé – are made at nearby Ridgeview (Art is a shareholder). The first vines were planted on the chalk and flint soils in 2007, and the estate has quickly developed a reputation for quality.



TOUR & TASTING

Dutch-born Jody (Art's wife) conducts many of the tours (£18pp), explaining how the grapes are grown, harvested and transformed from juice to bottle-fermented sparkling wine. Moving onto the deck of the tasting room (so glam you'd hardly believe it was once a tractor shed), tasters can take note of the relative flavour profiles of each wine, and there's the option to try a very good cheeseboard (£14 for two) from local supplier The Cheese Man.

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

There's no restaurant at Tinwood but there are some great places to eat nearby, including **Cassons** (cassonsrestaurant.co.uk), which specialises in British seafood and game, the cutely thatched **Gribble Inn** (gribbleinn.co.uk), which does a darned good fish and chips, and, at the adjacent Goodwood estate, the quirky **Farmer Butcher Chef**, which serves sustainable modern cooking from the estate's produce (goodwood.com). →

Tinwood grows the 'champagne' grapes: chardonnay, pinot gris and pinot meunier; the tasting room patio is a fine spot for fizz



A VINE STAY

Spend the night in one of the three funky, cedar-clad self-contained lodges, which look out over the vineyard and are angled to catch the sunset from the deck. Each sleeps two and has its own look; all have a whirlpool bath, walk-in shower, air con, Nespresso machine – and (what else?) a wine fridge. They're dog-friendly and you can borrow mountain bikes to explore the surrounding countryside. A breakfast of boiled eggs, warm croissants, toast with jam, yogurt, fruit and orange juice is delivered in a picnic hamper.

Doubles from £195 B&B;

tinwoodestate.com

staycation stars.

OXNEY ORGANIC ESTATE Near Rye, East Sussex

WHY IT'S GREAT

In the heart of the High Weald, one of England's unsung areas of bucolic gorgeousness, Oxney makes excellent wines in a quiet, tucked-away spot, with the beaches and walks of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve a 20-minute drive. Wine writer Matthew Jukes has eulogised the chardonnay, and the sparkling wines are wonderful too. Oxney offers an informal stay on a 'real' vineyard and doesn't aspire to swanky wine-hotel status, but it's all the more charming for it.

TOUR & TASTING

Every Saturday at 11am (April to November) there's a 1½-hour tour and tasting. The winery itself is modern and shiny, and as well as an indoor tasting room and shop there's an inviting outdoor covered area with bistro chairs and tables. You can book a post-tour picnic lunch for another £20pp.

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

You'll find several options an easy drive away. They do a great pizza at the **White Dog Inn** (thewhitedogwhurst.co.uk) and down in the chi-chi town of Rye, a 15-minute drive away, there's enjoyable seafood at **Webbe's at the Fish Café** (webbesrestaurants.co.uk) and hyper-local fare such as Romney Marsh lamb at the bright, lively **Globe Inn Marsh** (ramblinns.com).



Stay in a Jacobean treasure (top) or shepherd's hut (above), a short drive from Rye Harbour OPPOSITE Holy Vale Vineyard has a glorious island setting with a castle for accommodation and the beautiful Isles of Scilly to explore

A VINE STAY

Depending on the size of your group, your options for the night include the fetching Jacobean house on the vineyard and some converted barns a 15-minute drive across the River Rother. The cutest offerings, though, are the shepherd's huts among the vines, sleeping two. Each has a shower room/loo and a basic kitchenette to make breakfast, and you can enjoy a complimentary bottle of Oxney wine outside, warmed by your firepit (complete with a grill for barbecuing). *Shepherd's huts from £100 a night (minimum two nights); oxneyestate.com*



HOLY VALE VINEYARD St Mary's, Isles of Scilly

WHY IT'S GREAT

A visit to the Isles of Scilly, the archipelago of tiny islands off the coast of Cornwall, is a dream-like experience, and Holy Vale is the realisation of the winemaking vision of Robert Francis, genial proprietor of nearby Star Castle hotel. Backed by Monterey pines and resonating with birdsong, it's one of the loveliest wineries anywhere. The seven acres were planted in 2009 with pinot noir, chardonnay and pinot gris, and the first vintage arrived in 2014. Robert, who took a crash course at Plumpton College, makes the wine with input from Austrian winemaking luminary Willi Opitz. The amount produced is tiny – just 500 bottles in 2019 – but quality is high.

TOUR & TASTING

The hotel will shuttle you the short, pretty drive to the vineyard. Tours (£18.50, March to October), led by Robert, start with a stroll among the vines and a chat about the soils and grapes before moving on to the winery. "It's the most basic you'll ever see," Robert says – but it's evidence that pricey tech isn't required to make good wine. The tasting takes place around a 100-year-old snooker table ("It's not grand but it does the job"), where Robert leads tasters through six wines, from Holy Vale and elsewhere, with canapés.

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

Head chef Billy Littlejohn oversees the two restaurants at Star Castle (see below). Both are big on local produce, such as duck from nearby Salakee Farm, while fresh-off-the-boat crab and lobster star at the more casual Conservatory. The hearty breakfast will set you up for the day.

A VINE STAY

A 16th-century castle on a hill with views of the sea, the Star Castle is magical. Castle rooms are cosily traditional, and the set-apart garden rooms are near the heated indoor pool. *Doubles from £327 B&B; three-course set dinner menu £45; holyvalewines.co.uk; star-castle.co.uk*

GETTING THERE

delicious. travelled courtesy of Skybus (islesofscilly-travel/skybus), which flies to St Mary's from Exeter, Newquay and Land's End from £94 single. The ferry from Penzance to St Mary's (2 hours 45 min) costs from £58.50 for a single.



THREE MORE VINEYARD OVERNIGHTERS

1. JABAJAK in West Wales has a peaceful location and a stay-with-your-dotty-aunt vibe. The sparkling wine is high quality and dinner a delight. jabajak.co.uk

2. DENBIES VINEYARD HOTEL in Surrey brings you the slick winery hotel experience at England's largest vineyard on the North Downs. denbies.co.uk

3. THREE CHOIRS VINEYARDS in Gloucestershire makes wines for other vineyards (see Llanerch) as well as its own celebrated bottles. There's a good restaurant and rooms among the vines. three-choirs-vineyards.co.uk ☺