

HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE

HOTEL REVIEW

THE ENGLISH WINE CENTRE

Berwick, East Sussex

JONATHAN GREGSON

I HAD previously been on wine-tasting breaks to Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne, and thoroughly enjoyed the experience, finding them both instructive and stimulating. But when contemplating a similar outing to East Sussex with English wines, I confess to having my doubts.

That may be because I first became acquainted with English wines 20 years ago, and first impressions stick. With a few notable exceptions I found them too Germanic in style and too thin.

But English winemaking has progressed by leaps and bounds, as I discovered when staying at the English Wine Centre at Berwick, just to the east of Lewes, in one of five newly opened guest rooms in Green Oaks Barn, adjacent to its wine shop and restaurant.

Owner Colin Munday explained: "We only stock English wines, of which some 140 examples are on offer, though we continue to search for more vineyards."

Since they run tutored tastings as well

Whether it's due to global warming or improved techniques, English wine has come into its own

as including practically all of those in stock on the restaurant's wine list, this was clearly an opportunity to refresh and expand my knowledge of English viticulture (including a fine selection of sparkling wines). Far more so than simply visiting a single vineyard, because of the range on offer.

It was a revelation. Whether it's due to global warming or improved wine-making techniques (Plumpton College, specialising in viticulture, is just down the road) I don't know but English wine has come into its own.

Moreover, now that the previously lunch-only restaurant is open for dinner at weekends, and with stylish and well-appointed rooms just across the courtyard, one can explore some of the finest English wines available, without resorting to the spittoon or arguing about who is the driver. I didn't make



life easy for Alison Hughes, one of four wine specialists who run tastings and advise on pairing wines and food, by choosing pea and garden mint soup as my starter. The response, an aromatic Juniper Hill from the Denbies winery in Surrey, lived up to the challenge, while the Stanlake Park Madeleine from Berkshire that was served with my partner's starter of feather-light smoked mackerel paté and gooseberry jam was a perfect match.

Head chef Mark Goodwin's approach is to use locally sourced and seasonal produce to create uncomplicated, "modern English" dishes that complement the wines.

I threw down the gauntlet again by going for slow-roasted loin of free range pork with a shallot and cider sauce for mains, to which they responded with a remarkably full English red, Chapel

Down Trinity, its blend of Pinot Noir, Rondo and Pinot Noir Précoce yielding cherry and hedgerow fruit aromas.

My partner went one better, tasting two wines with her wild sea trout in a creamy watercress sauce.

The first, King's Fumé, another gem-like white from Stanlake Park, was declared "delicious", while the Biddenden Gribble Bridge Rosé that followed was "an excellent pairing, although disconcertingly the same colour as the sea trout's flesh".

Observing us sniffing and slurping away was local potter Jonathan Chiswell Jones, who occasionally exhibits his wondrous lustre ware at the English Wine Centre's 17th century Oak Barn (which is more usually hired for weddings and civil ceremonies).

He refrained from firing as he had to prepare his kiln for firing some large

pieces commissioned by London auctioneers Bonhams the next day, so after an aperitif of very English ginger beer he moved onto wine. Nonetheless, he still attacked the Hankham lamb with gusto.

After a good night's sleep in our room overlooking a delightful garden designed by Chelsea-award winner Roger Platt, it was time to explore our surroundings, though not until after breakfast in bed served on proper trays with legs (as it was sunny, I had my excellent 'Full English' in the courtyard).

First stop was nearby Berwick Church with its remarkable 1940s murals by Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant. Then a stiff walk through South Downs National Park to the foot of the Long Man of Wilmington, a giant figure etched out of downland chalk.

Experts are divided as to whether it's

Rural retreat: the English Wine Centre in East Sussex has five new rooms and more than 140 varieties of wine



genuinely prehistoric or an 18th century folly. Whichever, it seems to exert a powerful force over the thatched and flint-built farms and villages that huddle beneath the Downs.

Just to the north at Upper Dicker is 800-year-old Michelham Priory, with its great moat, ancient waterwheel and lovely gardens. This weekend it hosts the Sussex Guild Exhibition of local artists and craftsman, including Chiswell Jones' work.

To complete our break, on the way back to London we stopped at Sedlescombe Vineyard, England's first organic wine maker. Not content with this, owner Roy Cook last year produced the UK's first biodynamic wine – for which special "preparations" are applied in accordance with cosmic and lunar rhythms.

The wine, named First Release, is both light and fruity. Moreover, one of his vineyards has a truly stunning view over the moated ruins of Bodiham Castle. Medieval and "New Age" co-existed side by side. It was a very English experience.

■ *The English Wine Centre's Green Oak Barn has double rooms from £125 B&B, a three-course meal costs about £19 at its Flint Barn Restaurant, with wines at £4.50 a glass, englishwine.co.uk*

■ *Sedlescombe Vineyard, near Robertsbridge, is open from 10.30am to 5.30pm daily, englishorganicwine.co.uk*