



Alison Nightingale

VILLAGE PEOPLE

When Alison Nightingale and her husband Nick Cooper arrived in Hurstpierpoint 12 years ago, looking for a thriving village in which to bring up their young children, she could have scarcely imagined that she would end up helping to put Sussex wine on the map.

Alison – who runs Albourne Estate, just outside Hurstpierpoint – is one of a small number of entrepreneurs whose vintages are starting to overturn prejudices about English wine and win a reputation among connoisseurs.

However, when she moved to Hurstpierpoint after a three year stint in Singapore – leaving behind a career in marketing with Heinz and Nestlé – she had no intention of turning what was an interest into a successful business.

At first, Alison and Nick, who were living as a stopgap in London, just wanted somewhere away from the rat race, yet lively enough. “Nick was born in Steyning and knew the area well,” says Alison. “With trains from Hassocks it was easy enough for him to commute to London and we felt that Hurst was big enough to be a lively place to live but still a village with all of the benefits that this brings: a friendly community and somewhere I could easily push a pram.”

And so the family moved into Western Road in 2003. An exciting chapter was about to open in their lives which was to see them swap village life for a farm – a farm set to be transformed into one of Sussex’s few dedicated vineyards.

It began as a challenge to learn a new skill. As their three daughters – now aged 8, 11 and 13 – started to become more independent, Alison felt she needed an interest and so embarked on a four-year part-time degree course in vine-growing and wine production at nearby Plumpton College. This has enabled her to be as comfortable on a tractor taking in the latest harvest, as in analysing the alcohol content in the lab or marketing her range of white wines to local businesses.

At the time, she had no ambition of setting up her own vineyard, although during her stint working overseas she had enjoyed visiting New World producers in New Zealand and Australia. It was the course, together with the growing success and interest in English wine, that inspired her.

“The timing was perfect,” says Alison, who has already won several prestigious awards for her wines. “I was looking for a career which would fit around my family and I started vine growing when locally sourced food and drink was on the rise, with shoppers wanting to know more about the background of where their purchases came from and how they are made.”

The couple began looking for a suitable site for a vineyard and in 2009 jumped at the chance of buying what is now Albourne Estate, a south facing farm, sheltered and well drained on Shaves Wood Lane.

Nick has also established a beer-making business on site, Bedlam Brewery, which is backed by many local investors. While he still has a day job working in the oil industry, Alison runs the vineyard.

“It was a hard find because the site had to be right for us as a home as well as a business, with barns for the winery, the tasting room, lab and storage. Also, we felt to be commercially viable we needed to plant between 20 to 30 acres. It’s difficult to find an established vineyard in the UK to buy and so we had to plant our own 40,000 vines. The winegrowing calendar meant that we had to plough the field in September 2009, before we had even officially bought the property, so that it would be ready to plant in May 2010,” says Alison.

Her wines – a Bacchus, a White Pinot Noir and an Estate Selection – are winning wide acclaim. In fact her first vintage, released last year, was a sell out. The 2014 batch was launched on to the market in May and locals will have noticed their distinctive labels, showing wildlife on the vineyard, in pubs, restaurants and independent wine merchants in the area. Her sparkling range is due to be launched next year.

One of biggest sellers of Alison’s wines is South Down Cellars on Hurstpierpoint High Street. Alison knew the owner, Lucy Driver, years before she went into wine production and is grateful for her backing. “Lucy’s been really supportive and from day one has listed all of my wines. She’s typical of the businesses in Hurstpierpoint, which all make a point of helping each other where they can.” Other places listing Alison’s wine locally include Drakes Hotel in Brighton, Jeremy’s Restaurant in Borde Hill and Ockenden Manor Hotel & Spa in Cuckfield.

Although living outside Hurstpierpoint now, Alison remains a regular in the village. She's often seen ferrying her girls to school at Hurstpierpoint College and to various clubs such as Top Hats and Tutus drama classes and the gym club in the village hall.

"Many of my daughters' friends live in Hurst and I love the shops, cafés and restaurants there. It's still very much part of my family's life," says Alison.

And that's not to mention the link that Alison has with the local investors in Bedlam Brewery. To thank them Alison and Nick stage what she jokingly calls their 'mini Glastonbury'; a biennial festival on the farm, with live music, a barbecue, bonfire and of course plenty of beer and wine. Some 450 people turned up to the last Bedfest event, with 80 families camping overnight in June.

Alison has also opened the vineyard gates to locals inviting them on tours and tastings on selected Fridays and Saturdays over the summer. It gives visitors the chance to see every part of the wine making operation, ending with a tasting of the wines, which Alison sells to the public at the farm gate as well as online.

She says: "It's been really hard work, but the good thing is that people like the wine."

Contact www.albourneestate.co.uk for availability of vineyard tours or follow Alison on Twitter @Albourneestate

Bacchus is 'Best'

Alison's 2014 Bacchus has recently been voted the best in England.

The wine beat over 300 other entries to take the top Wine of the Year Trophy at UK Vineyard Association's English & Welsh Wine of the Year Competition 2015; the industry's annual national wine awards.

The awards, judged by six Masters of Wine, included entries of sparkling as well as still wine from several established brands. And this year saw the highest ever number of competitors entering the awards, making the announcement especially important for Alison, one of the few female wine producers to win such an important title.

"It shows that English wine has far more to offer than just the sparkling varieties, which have until now been getting most of the limelight," says Alison.



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