

Climate change is good news for English wine

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Acolon grapes are ready to be transported from a vineyard near Scaynes Hill, part of the wine department of Plumpton College in East Sussex

While climate change menaces vineyards in southern Europe, English winemakers are raising a toast to warming weather as it improves their wines and has helped revive an ancient tradition.

"Climate change is benefitting us a lot," said Chris Foss, head of the Wine Department at Plumpton College, the first to offer courses in winemaking in Britain and a symbol of its maturing wine industry.

"Generally speaking for the English wine industry [climate change](#) has been a big big bonus, it really helps us develop."

England has gone from having only a few wineries three decades ago to having more than 600 today, according to Alistair Nesbitt, who researches climate change and the [wine industry](#) at the University of East Anglia.

Most of Britain's winemakers are located in Surrey, Sussex and Kent in southeast England and in Hampshire in the southwest. But more have begun to spring up in the north, particularly in Yorkshire and Scotland.

Global warming means "an increase in [average temperatures](#) during the summer and autumn, which is good for ripening the grapes" according to Julien Lecourt, head of viticulture research for East Malling Research in Kent.

Scientists also predict a rise in average temperatures in winter and spring, and less rain in summer, which would help to contain diseases like botrytis cinerea and mildew.

Higher minimum temperatures during winter and spring would also mean less dangerous late frost to crops, Lecourt added.

Red wines next?

Climate change and chalky soils have largely benefitted English sparkling wines, which accounted for more than two thirds of the more than six million bottles produced last year.



Instructor Dave Perrin carries picked grapes at a vineyard near Scaynes Hill, part of the wine department of Plumpton College in East Sussex

"The quality of sparkling wine is really, really good," said Nesbitt, reflected by the numerous awards gleaned worldwide by the industry in recent years.

Glasses of Ridgeview Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs 2009, a sparkling wine from the South Downs in Sussex, got an official stamp of quality when it was served at Buckingham Palace at a state dinner in October in honour of visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"As temperatures continue to increase there will be greater opportunities for better quality still wines, including red varieties," according to Collette O'Leary, marketing director of the 10-year-old Bluebell vineyard in Sussex.

On some years, some vineyards have been able to produce good pinot noirs, according to Foss, but the quality cannot yet be relied upon due to changable weather that remains a dampener on potential.

"We also see that yields and temperatures are very variable from year to year," Nesbitt said. "So the average warming pattern is not a straight line because it's up and down."

For example 2012 was particularly difficult for growers due to a cold and rainy month of June that caused a very late grape harvest, that was still ongoing in early November.

It's not Rioja

"We shouldn't kid ourselves, Britain is not about to become the Rioja," said Lecourt, referring to the region known for Spain's most famous wine.

"We are talking about a temperature increase of between zero and two degrees by 2038."



Most of Britain's winemakers are located in Surrey, Sussex and Kent in south-east England and in Hampshire in the south-west

As for commercial production farther to the north, it doesn't look likely.

"You could go and grow a vineyard in Greenland or Iceland if you wanted to, but that's different from having commercial production," said Nesbitt.

"If you're talking about serious production, you've got to draw a line in the middle of England."

And the little industry still has far to go, covering just 2,000 hectares (nearly 5,000 acres) of planted vines at present.



Chris Foss, Head of the Wine Department, poses for a photo in the storage area of the department, at Plumpton College in East Sussex

"The vineyard acreage in the UK at the moment is a bit higher than Tasmania," Nesbitt said. "It's beautiful but it's small. It can grow and it will grow significantly."

Meanwhile, in the face of similar ambitions in Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, England has managed to make the most progress, according to Lecourt, who notes that there is an ancient English tradition of winemaking.

"We must not forget that the Romans planted vines here," Lecourt said.

"When Aquitaine was under English rule, the English were involved with the explosion of winemaking there," he said, referring to a region of

France.

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