

ISSUE 133

ELITE TRAVELER

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The Indulgence Issue

Namibian wilderness, diamond doctors,
Ferrari's favorite supercar and collectible whiskies

SUGRUE WINE

FIT FOR A KING

Described as 'the best winemaker in England,' Dermot Sugrue's acclaimed creations have won him a legion of high-profile admirers. So where does he go from here?

BY BEN OLIVER

As I arrive at the vineyard run by Dermot Sugrue and his wife Ana in Sussex, near England's south coast, this year's harvest has already begun. The first grapes were picked in mid-September, weeks earlier than expected after another warm summer — not that you'd guess that from the day's dispiriting drizzle and flat gray sky. Dermot's winery is a converted tractor shed, and as I drive up I glimpse him in its gloomy interior, clad in jeans and dirty boots, wrestling with the wide, heavy, uncooperative hose that runs from the grape press.

There is a stark contrast between this agricultural scene and the prizes and plaudits that have been heaped on the 51-year-old Irishman. He was described as "the best winemaker in England" by the late Steven Spurrier, the wine writer and critic who organized the famous Judgement of Paris in 1976, and it's hard to find anyone who disagrees. Certainly not King Charles III, who is particularly hands-on and has selected Dermot's wines to be served at state banquets. This summer, the 2009 vintage of *The Trouble With Dreams*, the first Dermot made under his own name, won Best in Show at the Decanter World Wine Awards. It was the first time a sparkling wine in a magnum bottle from any region — including Champagne — has been named one of the top 50 wines in the world. "Sparkling wine doesn't get much finer than this anywhere, not just in England," wrote Margaret Rand in *The World of Fine Wine*.

Sugrue South Downs wines might be the choice of kings and critics, but there are no frills in how they're made — produced simply by the hard physical labor of the couple whose name is now on the label. You wouldn't find Olivier Krug wrestling with a press hose. "We are farmers," Ana says. "It's like Dermot's

father said: 'You can win all these awards, but the next morning you'll be back out shovelling shit.'"

While his career began long before, it was in 2006 that Dermot became head winemaker at the Wiston Estate, another now acclaimed vineyard a few miles to the west of Sugrue, and his journey to 'best winemaker in England' status began. He produced every vintage there until 2022 and hundreds of other sparklers for dozens of other vineyards as a contract winemaker, building his reputation.

The same year he joined Wiston, a monastic order asked him to plant a small vineyard at their priory nearby. In return he asked for a share of the grapes, with which he would make wine under his own name. The initial crop was decimated by birds, causing Father Paul McMahon, whose idea it was to plant the land, to mutter, "That's the trouble with dreams." The first Sugrue vintage was made a year later, in 2009, and took its name from that rueful utterance. It was critically acclaimed, and Dermot continued to make it and other wines under his own label alongside his work at Wiston.

Ana, 37, learned the trade in her native Croatia before working as a winemaker everywhere from Austria to Peru. In 2020 she moved to Sussex to become a winemaking lecturer at Plumpton College, where Dermot studied and whose alumni have led the boom in English winemaking. They married in 2022 and decided to focus solely on what became Sugrue South Downs.

The side hustle is now the day job. After three years, it's lost none of the irreverence, bravery and originality it developed as a distraction from Dermot's more sober work at Wiston. And it's only just hitting its stride. The awards and celebrity investors continue to roll in, and new wine continues to pour out. Angela Hartnett, chef-patron of the Michelin-starred Murano in London's Mayfair, has been announced as the latest backer, joining actor Hugh Bonneville, veteran wine writer Hugh Johnson and hotelier Robin Hutson, founder of the Pig and Hotel du Vin groups. The second release of Bonkers, the still Chardonnay critics have compared to a Grand Cru Chablis and whose first release rapidly sold out, arrives later this year, as does Sugrue's first still red, an extraordinary Pinot Noir made with fruit from Crouch Valley in Essex.

Elite Traveler was among the first to try it (see page 124); in its depth and complexity you can taste the ever-warmer English summers. Dermot and Ana do not celebrate the global warming

that has made England an easier place to make great wine, though. Like farmers anywhere, they simply grow what is right for the conditions.

That warmer weather was more in evidence on my first visit a couple of weeks before. I had come to see the vineyards while the grapes were still on the vine. Dermot and I walked around Mount Harry, a 5.4-acre plot close to his winery, which he first leased in 2013. It sits high on one of the prettiest parts of the steep chalk ridge that forms the backbone of South Downs National Park. You look out along the rows of perfectly tended vines to a stone folly set into the soft folds of the ridge, and beyond that to sweeping views over the broad Sussex plain.

This will be Dermot's 23rd harvest in Sussex, and he was deciding when to bring in the 2025 vintage as we walked among the vines, their canopies dappled in the soft, late-summer sun. He picked the near-ripe grapes as we talked, tasting them, examining the seeds, looking for signs of disease or of bird or insect predation. He has the look of a farmer with a strong neck, his trademark flat cap pulled down tight over Irish red locks, and piercing, fast-moving blue eyes that convey energy and intellect.

The clergy have had quite the influence on his career. As well as those Sussex monks, a local archdeacon during Dermot's youth gave him a copy of *Vintage: The Story of Wine* by Hugh Johnson. "I digested it ravenously, like fine Claret," he says. "I knew I had found my *raison d'être*."

But you don't go straight into wine when you're born in Limerick to a farming family. Dermot nearly became a professional cyclist and spent 14 hard months working in an abattoir before a degree in Environmental Science, two vintages in Bordeaux and further study at Plumpton College. He was made head winemaker at Nyetimber, now one of England's great sparkling wine producers, within a year of joining, aged just 30. He took the same role at Wiston three years later.

The best English sparkling wine has acidity, minerality and a refined, precise tension that contrasts with the more buttery, toasty character of Champagne. The wines Dermot has made under his own name have often been at the more austere end of an already fairly ascetic region. *The World of Fine Wine* describes his work as "tense, salty and savory." One critic wrote recently that he occasionally finds them "too lean and racy." Ana admits that some

He has the look of a farmer with a strong neck, his trademark flat cap pulled down tight over Irish red locks, and piercing, fast-moving blue eyes that convey energy and intellect



Clockwise from above: Dermot and Ana Sugrue and family; investor's Hugh Bonneville and Robin Hutson at Sugrue's launch; the 2009 Trouble With Dreams; investor and wine critic Hugh Johnson; Sugrue's Sussex vineyards

SARAH WEAL

of their wines, such as Zodo, their zero-dosage sparkling, may not be “easy to understand.” Sugrue wines aren’t always crowd-pleasers, but they please the crowd that knows wine best. Hugh Johnson — before he was an investor — put Zodo in his desert island wine case.

The names and labels are as punchy as the wines. Bonkers was the couple’s first non-sparkling, but its full title — Bonkers Zombie Robot Alien Monsters From The Future Ate My Brain (Sur Lie) — means it is unlikely to make the wine list at future state banquets. In addition to Trouble and Cuvée Dr Brendan O’Regan (named for a great-uncle who invented airport duty-free shopping), there has been Cuvée Boz, named for Brendan’s late brother Barry, who “tragically didn’t come out for the second half,” and Dear Noodles, a love letter to Dermot and Ana’s mixed breed dog that also passed on. “Dermot has a habit of naming wines after dead relatives,” one employee explains.

I sit down with both Ana and Dermot and ask if they might be tempted into going more mainstream, in both their winemaking

and their marketing, now that Sugrue South Downs has become their sole gig.

“We have shareholders now but they want this originality and innovation from us,” Dermot says. “I took risks with Sugrue wines that I wouldn’t have with more commercial projects, and that just continues. People buy us; they buy the producer. We’re very serious about what’s inside the bottle, but we show a sense of humor on the outside. We always get asked how the wines got their names. And then you just start talking about your life.”

Ana agrees. “The new world asks people what they want to drink, then makes it. We make the wines that we want to make and even if they’re niche, even if they’re not very easy to understand, we will find customers for them.”

I wonder also how they view the present boom in English sparkling wine, Dermot having seen it unfold almost in its entirety. “We see a lot of people from London with money coming down to Sussex and planting a vineyard because having one is cool,” Ana says, “but sometimes these people have never actually

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Four Sugrue wines to try



**CROUCH VALLEY
PINOT NOIR 2022**
Released October 2025, \$87

Dermot describes the first Sugrue still red as a “Pinot Noir for Claret lovers,” and it is extraordinary how much depth, spice and tannin are packed in this supposedly cold-climate wine. My fellow taster was almost moved to tears — not only by its quality but also the fact that you can taste climate change in it. The wine’s exceptional fruit, grown by farmers who have switched to grapes, is bought in from the Crouch Valley in Essex; one of the UK’s warmest, driest regions, it sits on the same clay type as Bordeaux’s Right Bank. Only 1,200 bottles were released, with only 500 of those for retail, limited to two per customer.



BONKERS V2
Released November 2025, \$39

The Financial Times’ Jancis Robinson described the first release of Bonkers as “a new chapter in English winemaking,” and it sold out fast. It’s made on the “solera” system, with 2024 Chardonnay now added to the 2022 and 2023 of the first release. We tasted it early, and Bonkers V2 displays much of the same nutty, toffee notes and burnished unctuousness that led critics to compare it to Grand Cru Chablis, but with greater acidity that lends freshness, and will repay laying down for a decade.



**THE TROUBLE WITH DREAMS,
MAGNUM 2020**
Released Q1 2026, price TBC

Just 600 bottles of the 2009 The Trouble With Dreams in magnums were released in late 2025, and despite being limited to just one per customer, at \$247, they sold out almost instantly when it won Best in Show at the Decanter World Wine Awards. So expect similar demand for the 2020 magnums when 250 bottles (of the 1,000 being made) are released in early 2026. That particularly long, warm, Covid-19 spring and summer have produced wine that is fruitier and slightly more open and generous than the restraint that is more typical of Trouble.



ROCK STORY
Released Q1 2026, \$52

This multi-vintage white sparkling wine was intended for the hospitality trade and single pours, but its success means it will soon be offered to retail buyers. Made with two-thirds Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier to one-third Chardonnay, it draws on reserve stocks going back to 2011, and wine made on the incredible multiplicity of terroir that Sugrue is fortunate to have access to: chalk, limestone, sandstone and clay. Dermot describes the result as “dramatically different.” This is a fruit-forward, celebratory wine that is more affordable and perhaps more accessible than other Sugrue wines, but which leans on the label’s history and variety.



Dermot is expecting to double Sugrue’s production

worked in a winery. They romanticize this industry, but it’s agriculture and it’s tough.”

So, does that triumph of optimism and opportunism over experience affect the wine, or the businesses producing it? “Both,” says Dermot. “Some brands are doing well, but more are struggling. There aren’t enough winemakers, and lots of vineyards have nowhere to process their grapes. And if we look at English wine in general, sparkling and still, there really are some shockers out there.”

The rapid increase in English winemaking may be slowing now as the industry matures, but huge opportunity remains for the best of the bunch. Sales have stabilized around nine million bottles per year over the past four years, but may leap again as the huge harvest of 2023 comes to market. Export sales remain anomalously low by comparison with other regions and are another likely source of growth: Brits drink 91 percent of what they produce. Sugrue doesn’t currently have a US importer; that’s likely to change, but in the meantime US readers will have to source it from the few US retailers who hold stock, import it themselves or just enjoy it in Europe.

So, what’s the limit of the Sugrues’ ambition? The couple expect production to double to around 60,000 bottles of sparkling each year, but that’s only a reflection of the five vineyards they now manage directly. No more will be needed, and selling that wine won’t be difficult. Those 600 magnums of 2009 Trouble With Dreams sold out almost instantly when released late last year at £185 (approx. \$247) per bottle, and they and other vintages of Trouble are commanding £500 to £1,000 (approx. \$670 to \$1,335) per bottle now on the secondary market. The Crouch Valley Pinot Noir will be limited to just two bottles per retail customer, even at £65 (approx. \$87) per bottle. These might be the first signs that English wine is not only being lauded but becoming investable too. But if you want the best of Dermot and Ana’s work, you might find yourself behind His Majesty in the queue. ■