

# A taste of England in a wine glass

## At Three Choirs you don't just get to sample the product, you can stay the night too. Juliet Rix did both

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Through the French windows, the sun streams down on rolling green fields covered in vines. On our plates are beautifully presented seared scallops that melt in the mouth. The wine is crisp and fruity and we don't have to measure our intake as our room is less than 50 yards away. We are not in France or Australia but at the Three Choirs vineyard, in Gloucestershire.

Three Choirs is one of Britain's largest and most established vineyards and the only one to provide hotel-style (four-star) accommodation and an excellent restaurant (with two AA rosettes), as well as producing more award-winning wine than any other UK vineyard. The mantelpiece above the fireplace is full of award certificates while, just to show they don't take themselves too seriously, on the wall is a bacchanalian scene of caricature British winemakers at harvest time.

The vineyard gets its name from the Three Choirs Festival, the oldest choral festival in the world. For the past 300 years, the choirs of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester cathedrals have met once a year for a week of music. The vineyard is named after the festival because, until recent boundary changes, it sat at the joining point of the three counties - which means that it is surrounded by some beautiful and historic landscape.

The vineyard itself is set in 100 acres of attractive (now Gloucestershire) countryside and the owners encourage visitors to get out among the vines. A wine and nature trail has been marked out with boards explaining vine cultivation and local wildlife. Wandering between the planted rows, we discover a remarkable range of evocatively named ways of trailing a vine: "Goblet", "Heart", "Pergola" and, the most common system at Three Choirs, "Geneva Double Curtain".

Through a vine tunnel - lush with grapes in summer and autumn - we come to rows of vines labelled with the names of people who have "adopted" them, and a "Ladybird House". Ladybirds, the information panel tells us, are the wine-grower's friend because they eat vine-consuming aphids. To keep the ladybird population up, the vineyard provides hibernation shelters for them.

Foxes too are encouraged (because rabbits gnaw bark and kill vines) as are many different birds, hedgehogs, "Jacks and Jills" (hares) and badgers (in spite of their predilection for grapes!). Ducks populate the rush-edged ponds and a damson hedge attracts bees, bullfinches and fieldfares, helping, at fruiting time, to divert the birds from the crop.

The vineyard uses no pesticides, which is reassuring not only when drinking their wine, but also as we survey the swathes of vine just yards from our room. Each of the eight bedrooms (all ground floor) has its own parking space and front door. The rooms are bright, English country comfortable and a good size, the sense of space enhanced by the large French windows opening on to your own stone terrace with table and chairs and views across the vine-clad valley.

The vineyard grows 16 grape varieties (more evocative names) including Madeleine Angevine, Bacchus, Siegerrebe, Triumph d'Alsace, Rondo, Pinot Noir and Phoenix, a controversial modern cross engineered in a German lab to resist disease and cope with a northerly climate. Several of the vines are labelled, so in summer and autumn you can compare the grapes before tasting the wine made from them. The shop offers constant tasting and will open bottles of whatever you want to try. Personally, I liked the May Hill (£6.20 a bottle), a medium sweet, extremely fruity white made from a blend of three different grapes, and the Bacchus (£8.50).

Next stop the winery (just opposite our bedroom). A 10-minute video introduces the vineyard and shows the whole winemaking process from the 200-300 tons of grapes hand-picked by just 20 people, to the 250,000 finished bottles. Our guide explains it all in more detail as he shows us the trailer where the grapes are thrown in, the metal spiral that breaks the skins and the press that removes the juice.

From September to November visitors can watch all this in action, but we are here just as fermentation is coming to an end. Blending and bottling are beginning in earnest. One wine has already been available for

some time: "New Release", Three Choirs' Beaujolais Nouveau.

From the other end of the winery emanates a strong smell of yeast. This is the vineyard's micro-brewery. The Whittington Brewery, so called because Dick Whittington grew up just down the road at Pauntley Manor, produces Cats Whiskers bitter, Nine Lives Ale and seasonal beers.

Only small quantities of the beer are made so they are sold locally and in the vineyard's shop. The wine goes further afield, although some special wines are saved for the restaurant. It is into this warm, smart and welcoming room that we now repair for an exceptional dinner.

The chef sources as much as he can locally. Dishes range from seared fillet of gilthead bream to calves' liver with shallot and sage marmalade. With wine off the local vine, and a comfortable bed to retire to, what more could you want?

## **THE COMPACT GUIDE**

### **HOW TO GET THERE**

Three Choirs Vineyard, Newent, Gloucestershire (01531 890223; [threechoirs.com](http://threechoirs.com)) offers dinner, bed and breakfast for two people in a double room from £165 per night, minimum two-night stay. Guided tours of the vineyard for non-residents cost £4.50 (£3.50 for self-guided tours), children free. Lunch and a wine-tasting tour for two people costs £60 (Monday to Saturday). The Vineyard Restaurant is open daily for lunch (12-2pm) and dinner (7-9pm).

### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

This year's Three Choirs Festival (01452 381638; [3choirs.org](http://3choirs.org)) is in Gloucester on 4-12 August.