

THE Itasca Vine

WINTER EDITION 2025

MAGAZINE



PARTNERS IN VINE PAGE 4

THIS SEASONS PERFECT PAIRING PAGE 31

DISCOVER CRANBORNE LODGE PAGE 36



PENN CROFT A CHRISTMAS WORTH TOASTING TO

"Here's to Christmas moments that sparkle, memories that linger, and wines worth celebrating."

– Malcolm Walker

From crisp whites to sparkling Rose, Penn Croft wines are crafted to elevate every festive moment.

This season, enjoy 15% off a case of 6 bottles - ideal for gifting, hosting, or simply savouring.

15% OFF
WHEN YOU BUY A CASE



Order direct simply scan the QR Code or visit penncroftvineyards.com and celebrate in style.



THE ITASCA VINE MAGAZINE

THE ITASCA VINE MAGAZINE

Studio 5, The Old Kiln
Penn Croft Farm, Itchel Lane
Crandall, Hampshire
ENGLAND, GU10 5PX
01252 279830

EDITORIAL, CONTENT & ADVERTISING

Editor: Katie Best
katie@nathanbest.co.uk

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Nathan Best
NB Design Studio Ltd
nathan@nathanbest.co.uk
01252 851624

ITASCA WINES PLC

Studio 5, The Old Kiln
Penn Croft Farm, Itchel Lane
Crandall, Hampshire
England, GU10 5PX

www.itascawines.com

CONTENTS

- 4** Partners in Vine: Malcolm Walker and Simon Porter on the Making of Penn Croft Winery and Itasca Wines
- 11** One vision, many hands: The Winemakers Shaping Itasca's Future
- 18** Alec White: Growing Excellence
- 19** Strengthening the Path Ahead: The Team Supporting Itasca's Next Chapter
- 20** John Dunlop: Guiding Governance Through Itasca's Next Chapter
- 22** John Wilkins: From Hospitality to Grapevines - A Director's Story
- 24** "Calendars within calendars": A conversation with Katrina Cran-Crombie
- 26** A Q&A with John Simmons, Head of Itasca Technical Services
- 29** Spotlight On Lasma Stacey
- 31** This Seasons Perfect Pairing
- 32** Closing the Circle: Debbie Reid on Essex, Itasca and the future of English still wine
- 36** Cranborne Lodge The New Heart of English Wine & Hospitality
- 38** Sealed with Nature: The Story of Cork and Sparkling Wine at Penn Croft and Itasca
- 40** 2025: A Year of Growth, Renewal & Recognition

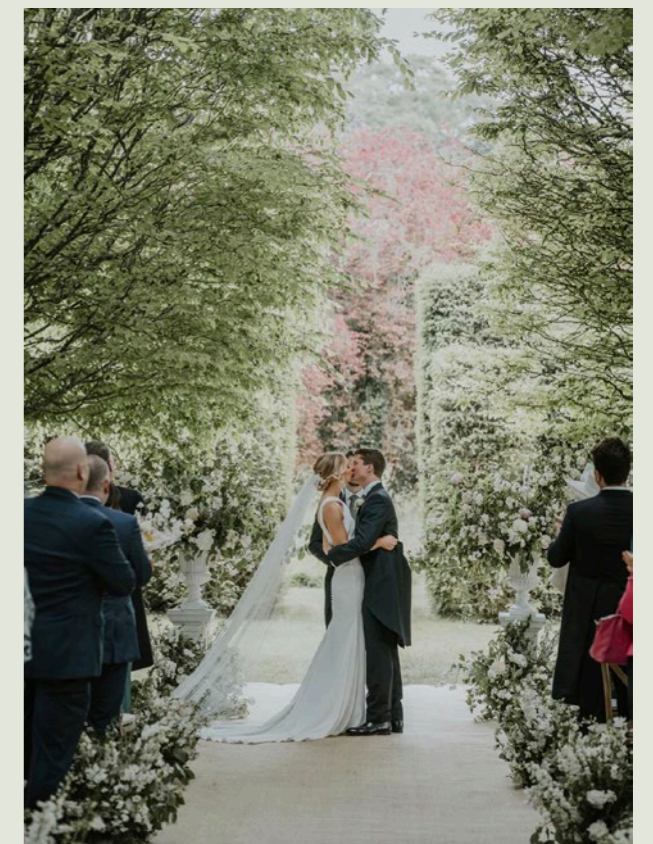


CRANBORNE LODGE

Where your story begins and beautiful memories are made.

Whether a wedding, milestone weekend or private house party, Cranborne Lodge offers complete exclusivity and **effortless elegance** in the heart of beautiful Cranborne Chase.

To arrange a viewing contact Julie on 07787 327221 www.cranbornelodge.com





DISCOVER AUDLEYS WOOD

Step into Audleys Wood, where every visit becomes a memorable experience. Enjoy a delightful Afternoon Tea, freshly prepared and served with charm in our characterful country house.

Planning a get-together, meeting, or special event? Our versatile rooms and friendly team make hosting effortless.

From relaxed treats to professional gatherings, Audleys Wood is the place to be.

AUDLEYS WOOD
HOTEL

Alton Road, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG25 2JT
01256 817555 handpickedhotels.co.uk/audleyswood

EDITORS INTRO

Welcome to the inaugural edition of *The Itasca Vine Magazine*.



It is with great pride - and no small measure of excitement - that we share this first issue with you, Itasca's valued investors. This publication marks an important milestone for Itasca, offering a deeper look into the people, places, and principles shaping their journey.

Inside, you will discover how it all began: the vision that sparked Itasca's early days, the ethos that continues to guide Itasca's winemaking, and the passion that fuels every bottle they produce. We are delighted to bring you exclusive insight into the remarkable plans unfolding at their new Essex Winery and the beautiful Cranborne Lodge, that is set to become 'the' wine destination - two projects that embody both Itasca's ambition and respect for craftsmanship and heritage.

This issue also offers a fascinating look at the artistry of cork production, a process often overlooked yet essential to the integrity of every bottle of sparkling. And as we enter the festive season, we are pleased to share a delicious pairing suggestion featuring one of our favourites: the Penn Croft Sparkling Rosé, a tippie we hope will accompany many of your celebrations this Christmas season.

A heartfelt thank-you goes to everyone who contributed their time and voice to the featured articles. Their stories - honest, thoughtful, and inspiring - form the backbone of this first edition.

We hope you enjoy exploring these pages as much as we enjoyed bringing them to life. Here's to the beginning of a new chapter for Itasca, and to the shared journey ahead.

Wishing you all the joys of the season!

Editor, Katie Best
The Itasca Vine Magazine

P.S. If you would like to contribute to the magazine, please contact: katie@nathanbest.co.uk



MALCOLM WITH HIS WIFE KAREN

WELCOME TO THE FIRST EDITION OF *The Itasca Vine Magazine*

We have created this publication to keep you - our investors, partners, and supporters - closely connected to everything happening across Penn Croft, Cranborne, and the growing Itasca family.

The past few years have been a remarkable journey: from the first vines going into the ground, to the creation of our winery, the expansion of our technical services, and the opening of both our cellar door and Cranborne. None of it would have been possible without your belief in what we're building.

This magazine is our way of sharing the story from the inside - the people, the ideas, the challenges, and the successes that are shaping Itasca today. English wine is evolving at extraordinary speed, and we intend to remain at the forefront of that change. There is much more to come, and this truly is just the beginning.

Thank you for your faith in Itasca. There is a great deal ahead - and I'm delighted to have you with us as we write the next chapter.

Malcolm Walker

*Boutique Country Inn
in the heart of Odiham*

BEL & THE DRAGON
Boutique Country Inns

*Present this for a 15% discount off
any dining bill. Valid until the
12th February 2026*

T&CS APPLY

100 HIGH STREET, ODIHAM,
RG29 1LP

Partners in Vine

Malcolm Walker and Simon Porter on the Making of Penn Croft Winery and Itasca Wines

When filmmaker Malcolm Walker and regenerative farmer Simon Porter bumped into each other in a car park at Penn Croft Farm, neither expected the conversation that followed to change the landscape of English wine.

One came from the world of cameras, creativity and global travel; the other from decades of soil-first farming shaped by ecology, patience and observation. But between them, an unlikely partnership sparked - a blend of narrative instinct and regenerative ethos that would become Penn Croft Vineyard, Penn Croft Winery, and ultimately the Itasca Wines group.

What began as a joke between friends evolved into one of the most innovative ventures in modern British viticulture: a winery built on precision, storytelling, and environmental responsibility, and a vineyard rooted in soil biology, biodiversity and respect for the land. This is the story of the two men behind it - told in two parts, each illuminating the distinct talents that, together, shaped the Itasca vision.

From Film Sets to Vineyard Visionary: The Story of Malcolm and the Making of Itasca

On a pale Hampshire morning, long before visitors drift into the cellar door for bacon sandwiches and sparkling wine, Malcolm can often be found outside, sleeves rolled up, steam-cleaner in hand, washing the winery yard. It's the kind of sight that surprises newcomers - the founder of a fast-growing wine group scrubbing concrete at dawn - but to anyone who knows him, it makes perfect sense.

"I lead from the front," he says. "If they see me do it, it energises the whole team."

Meticulousness has always been part of his nature. It began long before vines lined the fields at Penn Croft, before stainless-steel tanks and reed-bed water

systems, before the cellar door, before Cranborne. It began, unexpectedly, in the world of film. And that is exactly where Malcolm's story - and the story of Itasca - truly begins.

The First Frame

Malcolm grew up not among vines but among cables, cameras and the wild, electric atmosphere of creative sets. After leaving school in the mid-1970s, he found himself working on productions that have since become cinematic legends - Star Wars, Alien, some of the UK's most iconic TV dramas. Film shaped his early adulthood; the discipline of it sharpened him.

But years later, after a decade directing drama at the BBC, he found himself restless - worn down, strangely, not by the pressure of production, but by cookery shows. "Every channel, every country, it was endless," he laughs. His wife Karen nudged him back to what had always brought him joy: wine.

He had been drinking wine since his late



teens - cheap bottles in the early years, better ones as his career progressed - and the fascination had never left him. So he did what he knew how to do best: he made a programme about it.

The series was called Cellar Rats, and it took Malcolm around the world: Australia, Spain, Portugal, South Africa, New Zealand, and inevitably - fatefully - back home to England. Filming English wine for the series opened his eyes. "I hadn't really drunk much English wine before," he admits. "But the industry had come alive. The quality was extraordinary."

And somewhere between the rolling camera and the rolling hills, he began to feel that familiar tug - the one that says you could build something here.

A Conversation in a Car Park

One early morning, Malcolm happened to bump into Simon Porter - farmer, landowner, and, as it turned out, someone already quietly exploring the idea of planting vines at Penn Croft. They were standing in the car park at Penn Croft Farm, where Itasca Films then had a unit, when Simon asked how filming at Hadrian's Wall had gone - the episode exploring the Roman legacy of vines in Britain.

"It went well," Malcolm replied. Then, almost in passing, he mentioned that he'd been looking for a farmer interested in planting a vineyard.

Simon didn't hesitate. He told Malcolm he had already been discussing the idea with another potential partner, had brought in a consultant, and had even identified the ideal field for vines.

That brief exchange - unexpected, perfectly timed - was the moment the Itasca story truly began. Not with a formal plan or strategy, but with two people whose separate ideas suddenly aligned: a filmmaker searching for the right land, and a farmer who had already begun laying the groundwork. Standing on a patch of Hampshire gravel, a shared vision took root.

The Name That Came Before the Vineyard

The name Itasca wasn't born of wine at all. It arrived decades earlier, in 1982, when Malcolm imported an American Winnebago for film shoots. The model name on its side: Itasca. Unusual. Striking. Unclaimed.

Years later when he needed a name for his film company, he checked Companies House - Itasca was available. So Itasca Films was born, followed by Itasca Locations, Itasca Music, and eventually, inevitably, Itasca Wines.

"Simon liked the name," Malcolm recalls. "He said it would be unusual for a winery. So it stayed."

The Vineyard That Was Never Supposed to Be a Business

The first vineyard at Penn Croft began modestly: 9,500 vines across four hectares of chalk-rich soil. Simon, with decades

of farming experience, led on the land. Malcolm, with years of global wine exposure, guided the choices: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Bacchus.

At the time, they pictured nothing more glamorous than a small shed-turned-winery producing wine for family and friends. They had even discussed filming the process in time-lapse - a combine harvester cutting corn, the vines being planted, the first grapes, the first harvest.

But vineyards have a way of creating their own momentum.

A journalist friend wrote a feature on "the mad film producer planting a vineyard in Hampshire." Within days the calls started: vineyards wanting their grapes made into wine.

At the time there were around 820 vineyards in the UK - but only a handful of wineries offering contract winemaking. Most growers had nowhere to take their fruit.

Malcolm instantly recognised the gap.

"Contract winemaking became the obvious next step," he says. "A necessity, really."

And so the sheds, once imagined only as a backdrop for a time-lapse film, became the seed of one of the country's most forward-thinking contract wineries.

The Leap No Bank Would Touch

Vision is one thing. Capital is another. And Malcolm had been in this position before. In film, he had struggled to secure funding time and again.

"No bank will lend you money for a winery," he says. "They want security. Your house, your life. It's almost impossible."

So he and Simon opted for equity investment. "If you're coming on this journey, it's a passion investment," Malcolm told early supporters.

A thousand pounds here, five thousand there, ten thousand from others - enough momentum built that the Penn Croft family saw the potential and borrowed the initial funds to build the winery. It was, by any measure, an enormous leap of faith.

Looking back, Malcolm laughs softly.

"If I had to do it again, I'm not sure I could. I don't know where the energy came from.



But I had this gut instinct - this certainty - that it would work."

It was instinct, drive, and something else: the willingness to think entirely outside the box. To build something that didn't yet exist.

Four Metres Between the Vines

There is something quietly revolutionary hidden in the Penn Croft vineyard: the four-metre spacing.

In most vineyards, vines are planted two metres apart. But Simon had ideas - regenerative ideas. Better airflow. Better exposure to sunlight. Less chance of disease jumping from row to row. And crucially, the ability to use standard farm machinery rather than specialist narrow tractors.

It was a bold break from tradition. And it worked.

"The quality of the grapes speaks for itself," says Malcolm. "Ben, our winemaker, says they're consistently some of the best fruit coming in."

It's no small thing that other vineyards have already copied the system.

The Ecosystem Approach

When Malcolm describes Itasca as an "ecosystem," he isn't being poetic - he means it literally.

The winery reuses every possible output.

Five to seven litres of water are needed for every litre of wine produced. Rather than waste it, Itasca built an elaborate system of reed beds, chalk filtration, and 26 water-cleaning plant species. By the time water returns to the earth, it is as clean as nature can make it.

Grape skins are composted and spread on the fields. Nothing is wasted; everything cycles back.

"We're not perfect," Malcolm says, "but we're always thinking about how every decision affects everything else. Vines, soil, water, community - it all connects."

The Cellar Door: A Place People Feel

If the winery is the engine, the Cellar Door is its beating heart. It began simply - just a couple of scaffold boards draped with a cloth, tastings held among barrels and forklifts. But Malcolm had visited enough cellar doors in New Zealand and Australia to know what they could become: places of warmth, welcome, and belonging.

So he designed his like an alpine log cabin - wood, glow, and gentle charm - built cost-effectively, but with real intention. Today, it hums with life. Cyclists gather here on Sunday mornings; parents meet after the school run; neighbours drift in to unwind at the end of a long day. Visitors finish their vineyard and winery tours by settling in for tastings, charcuterie boards, and conversations that stretch unhurriedly into the afternoon. Dogs doze under tables, log fire blazing in winter, and the scent of toasted sandwiches drifts into the courtyard.

The Cellar Door has also become a quiet source of local employment, offering part-time and seasonal roles to students from the nearby villages and in doing so, strengthening the very community that has embraced it.

When Malcolm leads tours - often at a moment's notice, stepping in when the



team is stretched - guests eventually realise he's the founder.

"It's the only time I stand back and think, Wow. I actually created this."

Cranborne Lodge: Custodian of History

Where Penn Croft is earthy and agricultural, Cranborne is atmospheric, elegant, and steeped in time.

Malcolm took it over on 1 April 2025, inheriting nine weddings and several corporate bookings - Mercedes, Porsche, private events. But Cranborne is not meant to become a conveyor belt wedding venue.

"We want it to be a boutique wine hotel," he says. "Relaxed, beautiful, rooted in history - but never stuffy."

He calls himself a "privileged custodian" of the 1730 house and its extraordinary 800-year-old black walnut tree. His aim is simple: if you can pay for a room, whether you arrive in a Ferrari or a muddy work van, you're welcome.

No judgement. No pretension. This theme runs through every part of Itasca: excellence without elitism.

Itasca Technical Services: The Engineering Mindset

The technical side of Itasca began - as many good things do - with frustration.

Malcolm refused to deal with a UK importer who dismissed his plans. So he went straight to the manufacturer. The manufacturer, as it turned out, had heard the same complaints about the importer from others.

They agreed to work directly with Itasca.

With stainless-steel equipment already installed, the winery became a showroom where other vineyards could see machinery in action, touch it, watch it operate. What began as necessity evolved into Itasca Technical Services, now helping to raise standards across the UK industry.

Malcolm attributes his obsession with cleanliness and precision to his early years in Formula One engineering teams.

"You never saw a spanner left out of place. No dust. No oil on the floor. Everything had to be perfect - because details win."

He has carried that mindset into wine.

The Team That Makes It Possible

Among the many people who shape Itasca, few are as integral as Lasma, who Malcolm credits with holding the organisation together.

"She's dealing with lawyers, investors, contracts, Companies House - everything. She drives an hour each way, is never late, and doesn't want to leave at night. She's dedicated."

He laughs. "I can't get through a week without her."

This humility - the constant crediting of others - is one of Malcolm's unspoken core traits. He sees the whole organisation as a sum of parts, not an expression of a single founder.

Climate, Change, and the Future of English Wine

In Malcolm's youth, November meant frost, snow, bare branches. Now he looks out of his window in mid-autumn to see trees full of leaves and mild air.

The shift troubles him personally - but as a vineyard owner, he admits the warmth has expanded what English wine can become. Still wines flourish in Essex. Reds may not be far behind.

"The industry is still very young. It has so much growing still to do."

Itasca has ambitions - big ones

Own-brand sparkling wines are already in production, with 300,000 bottles from the 2024 vintage resting for release in future years. The long-term plan includes exports to California, Scandinavia, Canada, Asia.

But growth is never the final goal. Quality is.

"Itasca should be a leading light," Malcolm says. "In methodology, in standards, in innovation. We're setting our stake in the ground."

The Pride Behind the Scenes

When asked what he's proudest of, Malcolm doesn't talk about awards, tonnage, or investor numbers.

Instead he talks about evenings when the cellar door closes, the staff gather

for a drink, and he stands in the corner unnoticed for a moment - watching them laugh, relax, enjoy what they've helped build.

"They're only there because of this thing we created," he says. "That's what gives me the best feeling."

But pride comes paired with responsibility.

"The wages, the mortgages, the families behind every pay cheque - that sits on my shoulders. That part is heavy."

Still, he loves what he does.

A Final Word: Leadership as a Long Story

"I've learned something over the years," Malcolm says softly. "To lead a company, you must be a team player - but you also have to be ready to stand alone and make the hard decisions."

It is perhaps the truest essence of his story:

A filmmaker who saw narrative everywhere - in vineyards, in water systems, in old barns and new tanks - and who followed a feeling long before there was proof.

Today, Itasca is no longer just a vineyard, a winery, a cellar door, or a hotel. It is a story and Malcolm is still writing it.

With soil under his boots, steam-cleaner in hand, and a team behind him who understand exactly what they are building, the next chapter is already taking shape.

And just like all good stories, it is impossible not to want to read on.



Simon Porter: Rooted in Regeneration at Penn Croft

Long before vines were planted at Penn Croft, the farm was already undergoing a quiet revolution. While others chased bigger machinery and heavier inputs, Simon Porter turned his attention downward – to the soil beneath his boots and the life that flourished in it. His shift to regenerative agriculture transformed Penn Croft into one of the most ecologically vibrant landscapes in the region, and his philosophy laid the foundation for a vineyard unlike any other in the UK. Simon's chapter is one of stewardship, patience, and the conviction that good wine begins with healthy earth.

Walk across the slopes of Penn Croft Farm on a misty Hampshire morning and you'll notice something unusual for an English vineyard: long, wild grass swaying between vine rows, dotted with wildflowers and buzzing with life. Earthworms' castings break the surface like scattered jewels. To most, it looks 'scruffy'. To Simon Porter, it's perfect.

"Scruffy is good," he says with a grin. "Wild and unkept is perfect."

After more than forty years of farming on the Surrey–Hampshire border, Simon has become one of the UK's quiet revolutionaries in regenerative agriculture and, more recently, the country's first champion of regenerative viticulture. His journey from conventional arable farming to soil-first winemaking is as much about philosophy as it is about farming.

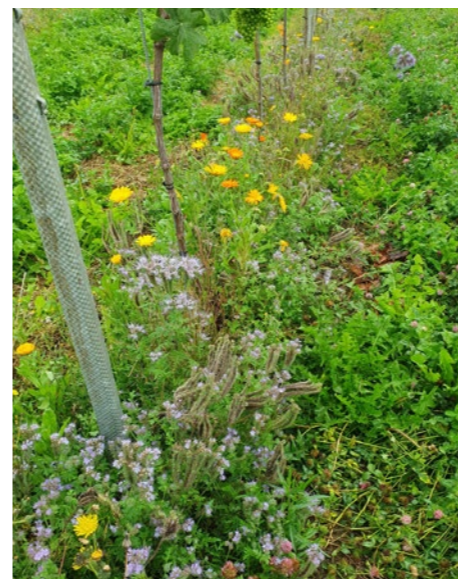
"I realised years ago that modern industrial farming was unsustainable," he says. "It was harming the beautiful world in which we live."

From Fields to Vines: A Regenerative Journey

Penn Croft Farms stretches across 540 hectares of gently rolling land near Crondall. For decades it was a conventional arable operation, ploughed, sprayed, and cropped in the modern industrial mold. But around two decades ago, Simon began to feel uneasy. "We were using more chemicals and bigger machines," he recalls. "And yet we were standing still. I knew there had to be a different way."

Inspired by regenerative pioneers such as Steve Townsend, Allan Savory, and Gabe Brown, Simon began experimenting with minimal tillage – then moved entirely to no-till farming. Over the years, he watched his soil come back to life. "The darker colour of the soil, the way it crumbles and fractures naturally – it's a living thing again," he says.

Today, organic-matter levels at Penn Croft reach as high as 7-10 percent, and the farm hosts 85 species of birds. The humble earthworm, in Simon's eyes, is the true livestock of the land. "They turn over 52,000 tons of soil a year," he jokes, "and you don't have to milk them, pay the vet, or hire relief labour."



The Birth of Penn Croft Vineyard

The idea for the vineyard came, as many good ideas do, by chance. One morning, Simon was chatting with his tenant, filmmaker Malcolm Walker, as Malcolm loaded his trailer for a day's shoot. Both confessed they'd long harboured dreams of planting vines. That casual conversation became Itasca Wines and the birth of Penn Croft Vineyard.

Planted in 2018, the 5.5-hectare site was established on regenerative principles rarely seen in the wine world. Simon refused to plough the land, planting vines entirely by hand into undisturbed soil. Wide 3.5 - to 4-metre rows allowed cover crops – phacelia, oil radish, peas, and legumes – to thrive between the vines. "We wanted to feed the soil biology, not fight it," he explains. "Healthy soil means healthy vines, and healthy vines make better wine."

The wider spacing also allows more sunlight and air to flow through the canopy, reducing disease pressure. To offset the lower planting density, Simon chose the Scott Henry trellis system, which doubles the productive canopy per vine.

A New Model for English Viticulture

Penn Croft is the first vineyard in the UK to be certified as regenerative. His approach is now being watched closely by WineGB, whose research teams are exploring how regenerative and low-input systems could shape the future of British viticulture. "We're learning every season," says Simon. "It's exciting that others across the country are beginning to see soil biology as the foundation of great wine."

Most vineyards, he argues, are still too tidy. "Mown grass does little for the soil or the environment. Grass roots are only as long as the leaf, so they don't deposit much carbon or feed soil fungi. We want a vineyard alive with insects, worms, and microbes."

He isn't dogmatic, however. Regenerative farming, for him, is about balance, not rules. "If we have to use a modern fungicide, we'll use the safest one available. The point is to think through every decision: what does the least harm while still producing a healthy crop?"

That pragmatic approach extends to Penn Croft's business model. Co-founder Malcolm Walker has grown Itasca Wines into a full contract-winemaking and technical-services hub – built in record time during the 2020 lockdown. The winery now supports dozens of growers while maintaining the same environmental ethos that drives the vineyard.

"Right from the start, Malcolm and I insisted that the winery had to reflect our farming philosophy," Simon says. "We care for our environment, even if it costs a little more."

Soil, Soul and the Web of Life

Simon talks about soil with an evangelist's conviction. "One teaspoon of healthy soil contains a million living organisms," he says. "They're the real workforce. They make nutrients available, structure the soil, and even help regulate carbon."

His regenerative mindset now influences every part of Penn Croft – from inter-row cover crops to hedgerow restoration and wildlife stewardship. In the last few years he's seen a resurgence of skylarks,

lapwings, starlings, and woodcock across the estate. Wildlife surveys now guide management decisions, and bat and owl boxes have been installed following a specialist bat survey – part of a broader project exploring how vineyards can coexist with native species. "It's not just about worms and microbes," Simon notes. "We're restoring a whole food web."

The work has even attracted academic attention: researchers are beginning to study how vineyard biodiversity, including bat activity, responds to regenerative practices – an emerging field of British ecological research.

Harvest 2025: Regeneration in Practice

If Penn Croft's philosophy lives in the soil, its proof lies in the harvest. The 2025 growing season, Simon says, was "a blessing after the wet, difficult 2024." Days of steady sunshine and only light spring frost brought the healthiest crop the vineyard has seen to date.



"Mildew and SWD fly are always a challenge," he admits, referring to the spotted wing drosophila - a tiny pest that can turn grapes to vinegar. "We monitor closely and only intervene when absolutely necessary. The aim is always to avoid spraying if we can."

True to his experimental spirit, Simon has even planted a new pyracantha hedge upwind of the vineyard. "It acts as a 'dead-end host' for SWD flies - they lay eggs there, but the larvae can't hatch," he explains. "It's too soon for results, but it's exactly the kind of nature-based solution we want to test."

The 2025 harvest began early, on 10 September, with volunteers hand-picking the Bacchus before commercial crews finished the Chardonnay and Pinots. The result was Penn Croft's largest and cleanest crop yet - a milestone for the team and for Simon's belief that regenerative systems can deliver both quality and resilience.

"Another year passed, another harvest gathered," he says. "And maybe a little more proof that healthy soils do produce healthy vines - and good wine."

Resilience, Research and the Future of Wine

Penn Croft's soil-first philosophy aligns with a wave of innovation across the UK. WineGB and university researchers are trialling new PIWI (fungus-resistant) grape varieties that promise fewer chemical sprays and greater climate resilience - an approach that resonates with Simon's own goals. "They fit with the regenerative idea," he says, "but the wine still has to be great. The wine leads everything."

As climate change reshapes the map of English wine - with new Chardonnay plantings flourishing in Essex and along the coasts - Simon sees regeneration as a form of insurance. "The climate is shifting fast," he says. "Healthy soils and diverse cover crops are our best defence against drought, frost, and disease."

Even as he steps back from day-to-day operations, Simon's influence endures. He continues to mentor the Penn Croft team, guiding vineyard manager James and others to deepen the regenerative ethos. "If there's one legacy I want," he says, "it's that the land is in better heart than when I started."

Falling in Love with Nature

When asked what advice he'd offer to the next generation of farmers and vigneron, Simon's answer is simple:

"Fall in love with nature. Work with it, not against it."

That philosophy has transformed Penn Croft from a conventional arable farm into one of Britain's most forward-looking vineyards - where earthworms, microbes, vines, and people all thrive together.

Today, visitors can tour the vineyard, watch biodiversity in action, and taste wines that quite literally grow out of living soil. For Simon, it's proof that farming can nurture both soil and soul - and that sometimes, the best thing a farmer can do for his land is simply to let it live.



ONE VISION, MANY HANDS: The Winemakers Shaping Itasca's Future

HOW EXECUTIVE WINEMAKER BEN SMITH AND OPERATIONS WINEMAKERS ANNAMARIE FOURIE AND DEN'E LOUW ARE GUIDING ITASCA'S CRAFT ACROSS TWO COUNTIES - WITH ONE SHARED COMMITMENT TO QUALITY.

As Itasca enters its most ambitious chapter yet - expanding into Essex while continuing to strengthen its foundations in Hampshire - the heart of the journey lies in the people shaping its wines. Executive Winemaker Ben Smith guides the overall winemaking direction across both sites, supported by Annamarie Fourie and Den'e Louw, who each play a pivotal role in how Itasca's wines take shape. Together, they form a unified team driving Itasca's growth with clarity, confidence and a shared philosophy rooted in excellence. Ben's story begins this trio of voices.

Thinking on His Feet: How Ben Smith Is Guiding Itasca Into Its Next Chapter

Ask Ben Smith, Head Winemaker at Itasca, what a 'typical day' looks like and he'll tell you there isn't one.

"Today's a good example," he says. "I'm in Essex this morning for a site meeting on the new winery, then back in Hampshire

this afternoon for another meeting. I'm between the two sites now."

As Itasca grows, Ben's responsibilities have expanded with it. While he continues to set the style, taste with the team and oversee quality, the structure around him has evolved to support the winery's increasing scale. In the cellar, a strengthened operations team ensures that the practical, day-to-day work is carried out with precision.

"All of the winemaking is still under my direction," Ben explains. "We invested early in bringing Annamarie and Den'e into senior operational roles so they could learn our system before we expand. When Essex opens, Annamarie will move there and Den'e will oversee Hampshire. The big risk when businesses grow is that quality and processes slip - we want to avoid those growing pains."

By building the senior team ahead of time, Itasca can expand later by adding more junior roles, rather than scrambling for leadership. It's a deliberate, long-term approach that mirrors Ben's philosophy in the cellar.



Quality First, Even As Styles Evolve

If the role has evolved, the core philosophy has not.

"Our position in the market is as a quality, premium contract winemaker," Ben says. "That's why our clients come to us. As long as I'm here, that commitment to quality doesn't change."

What has changed is the range of wines Itasca is making. The Hampshire winery

was originally designed with traditional-method sparkling wine in mind - the style the region is best known for. But demand for English still wine has surged.

"We're making more still wines every year, and the new Essex facility will really help facilitate that," he notes.

There's innovation in packaging too. "We're doing a canned wine for a client this year," he adds. "That's a completely new concept for us as winemakers." Same philosophy, broader canvas.

The part of the process that still gives him the greatest buzz is the point where all that early work comes together. "We do a lot of hard work at harvest, probably more than most, with our quality approach," he says. "Seeing that come through at blending - that's a real highlight."

Gut Feel in a World of Extremes

For Ben, winemaking is as much instinct as it is analysis. "A lot of my winemaking is based on gut feel," he admits. "That's quite hard to codify or put down on paper."

The last two vintages have underlined why that instinct matters. "2024 was probably the most challenging harvest in the last ten years - very wet, we didn't really have a summer. Then 2025 was one of the driest and earliest growing seasons on record."



In 2025, Itasca started harvest on 5th September - a full month earlier than in 2024, when picking began on 5th October.

"In an agricultural cycle, a month is huge," Ben explains. "The growing season started at a similar time in spring, but the phenology was so advanced that we effectively gained a month. Even starting on the 5th of September, some grapes were nearly overripe - we were scrambling to start that early."

There was no breather either. "We finished bottling the day before we started harvest. Normally we'd allow a month so the team can rest and we can take a measured approach. This year, we rolled straight from one period into the next - no downtime whatsoever."

The contrast with the previous year could not have been starker. "In 2024 everything was late and more on the under-ripe side. In 2025 it was the ripest vintage we may ever see. It was unprecedented."

He's careful not to declare victory too early - "my ethos has always been to under-promise and over-deliver" - but he's quietly optimistic. "The potential is there for one of the best vintages of the last decade. We'll see how the wines evolve, but it looks very promising."

Climate change, he says, isn't just about things getting a bit warmer. "We're seeing more extremes. The driest year on record

followed by one of the wettest. It's no longer about a 'typical' growing season - it's unusual now to see what we used to think of as average. You can't just say, 'We've always done it this way.' You have to be extremely responsive to what's in front of you."

Tech, AI and the Human Factor

In a world of extremes, technology is becoming increasingly important - but never at the expense of human judgement.

"Itasca is probably one of the earlier-adopting wineries in terms of tech," Ben says. "We've embraced winery software and monitoring tools to streamline processes. And building a new facility in Essex means we can integrate modern automation from the ground up."

The aim is to increase efficiency, reduce labour pressure and free the team to focus on the fine details of winemaking. But Ben is clear about where the line sits.

"This year we had clients using AI to try and make picking decisions," he recalls. "We had to push back a little. You can plug numbers into a model, but it still needs a human to sum up all the details."

Over the next four to five years, he expects more automation in the winery - not to replace the winemaker, but to help them make "quicker, more accurate decisions."



A Tale of Two Counties - and a Global Stage

The 2025 harvest has left Ben particularly excited about the still wines from Essex, especially a new own-brand Pinot Noir currently in the works. At the same time, Hampshire remains the beating heart of Itasca's sparkling wine programme.

One especially significant project is the estate's first single-vineyard sparkling wine, made from the Penn Croft Vineyard and bottled over the summer. "It's showing a huge amount of potential," Ben says.

That wine will follow in the footsteps of another star: Itasca's single-vineyard Bacchus, which recently received a glowing review in Robert Parker's Wine Advocate. In the publication's first ever report on English wine, only a handful of producers made the cut - and Itasca's Bacchus was singled out as England's best Bacchus.

"To even have a wine mentioned in that report is a huge deal," Ben says. "Wine Advocate has worldwide reach. Being featured is fantastic for our profile."

Looking ahead, readers can expect:

- ◆ A still Chardonnay 2023, due for release next summer, currently resting patiently in bottle.
- ◆ A still rosé under the Itasca brand, planned for release in May.
- ◆ The continued development of single-vineyard sparkling wines, which will be given the time they need on lees before release.
- ◆ And, of course, the opening of Itasca's second winery in Essex - a major milestone in the company's growth story.

"When we release a wine, that's when we're judged on it," Ben says. "We want people to taste it when it's at its best, not too early. A lot of our wines can age, but we focus on releasing them when they're in a really good drinking window."

Regenerative Roots and England's Place in the World

Sustainability isn't a new fashion at Itasca - it's been embedded for decades in the land

where the vineyards thrive. "We happen to have been regenerative because of Simon Porter's farming philosophy for the last 20 years," Ben explains. "He was following those principles long before it was even really a 'thing.'"

More vineyards across England are now adopting regenerative practices, but Ben stresses that it is not a quick fix. "It's a multi-year process. Hopefully, as more people adopt it, we'll see the benefits coming through in the wines in the years ahead."

Farming regeneratively, he believes, gives a site its best chance - but it's not the sole ingredient. "You could farm regeneratively on the wrong site and still not make great wine. It's about site selection, farming approach and everything you do in the winery."

On the global stage, he sees England as one of the most dynamic wine regions in the world.

"We're well positioned," he says. "There's good expertise in the country now, good people growing grapes, investment still coming in. There aren't many new vineyard regions expanding around the world. England is one of the fastest-growing sectors."

At the same time, he's realistic about the challenges ahead. "Wine sales globally are in decline. People are drinking less wine, and less alcohol in general. For me, the way forward is to stick to our quality guns. That's what makes England special, and we can't compromise on that."

Freedom to innovate is another advantage. "Here, people can plant whatever grape variety they want, wherever they want," he says. "In regions like Champagne, you're somewhat tied to specific varieties and rules. In England, we can experiment."

The Winemaker Behind the Wines

Asked which wines best express his own style, Ben doesn't hesitate.

"The still Chardonnays and Pinots we are making," he says. "That's where we have the most freedom."

He is quick to acknowledge the wider community of talented winemakers around him. "There are lots of really good, young, energetic winemakers in the UK at the



moment," he notes, pointing to the work of the Jackson Family and Itasca's neighbours in Essex at Danbury Ridge as examples of high-quality English winemaking.

His advice to aspiring winemakers is simple and very much rooted in his own journey:

"Work harvests. Get experience. You do have to do some of the hard yards first. The most valuable things I've learnt have come from working harvests with great winemakers. Formal education only takes you so far - you need to get out there and see what people are doing differently."

And if he could share a bottle with anyone, past or present?

"Nothing gives me greater pleasure than sharing wine with family and friends," he says. The bottle he would reach for is the 2018 Chardonnay he made at Oxney - the first English wine to receive a perfect score from a critic.

"I've only got about a dozen bottles left, so I open them very sparingly," he smiles. "I turned 40 during harvest this year, we had a big family celebration afterwards, and I still didn't open one. I'm planning to keep some of those bottles until my last days."

As Ben looks toward the opening of the new Essex winery, he does so knowing the site will be shaped by a winemaker whose approach aligns seamlessly with his own. Annamarie Fourie brings international experience, thoughtful craftsmanship and a steady, inquisitive mindset - well suited to leading the day-to-day winemaking in Essex while working in close partnership with Ben to bring Itasca's broader vision to life.

When South African winemaker Annamarie Fourie saw a job advert for Itasca in 2023, she was looking for a change - a new challenge and a new horizon. Less than two years later, she's preparing to lead the brand-new Itasca winery in Essex, working under Executive Winemaker Ben Smith.

Warm, thoughtful and quietly determined, Annamarie brings both international experience and fresh curiosity to her role. We caught up with her just after harvest to talk about her journey, her philosophy, and her hopes for England's still-wine future.

A Journey That Found Its Own Rhythm

Annamarie laughs when asked if she always knew she'd be a winemaker.

"Not at all. I only started studying winemaking when I was 26. Before that I worked in retail and even spent time in the US as an au pair. When I came back to South Africa, I did a harvest at Durbanville Hills - and absolutely fell in love with it. The next year I went to Elsenburg Agricultural College, near Stellenbosch. The rest is history."

After nearly a decade with her previous winery in South Africa, she began to crave change.

"I'd been there almost ten years and felt it was time for something new. I was looking at English-speaking countries - the UK, the US, Canada - and then I saw an Itasca ad and applied. I got the job, and here I am."

2025 marked only her second English harvest, but she's already immersed in the rhythm of the UK wine scene.

Learning Under Ben Smith

Annamarie joined Itasca without knowing Ben Smith personally, but quickly discovered a shared outlook.

"Ben and I have a very similar philosophy - minimal intervention, letting the terroir and grapes speak for themselves. England's climate can be challenging, but that's what makes it so interesting. You have to think differently here, and adapt without relying on additives. It really tests your winemaking ability."

Working at Itasca has also introduced her to sparkling wine production - something entirely new when she arrived.

"I'd never made sparkling before. It was a steep learning curve, but wonderful."

As the Essex project takes shape, she'll continue working closely with Ben:

"He's very used to the English way of doing things, while I come from a place where grapes are much riper. I'm still getting used to the acidity here! We complement each other really well - he's got a very refined palate, and we bounce ideas off each other constantly."

Building a New Winery, Building a Team

Leading the new Essex winery is both a huge challenge and an opportunity.

"I haven't really stopped to think about it properly," she admits with a smile. "But it's exciting. We're starting with a 600-tonne capacity and hoping to grow to around 1,400 tonnes. For now, we're focused on getting the cellar ready and preparing to make wine for our clients."

Her vision for Essex is rooted in quality and honesty.

"It's really simple - make the best possible wine from the grapes we receive. Managing client expectations is vital. If the fruit isn't good enough, don't sugar-coat it. Transparency and integrity are key."

Success, she says, will come down to people.

"A great team will make or break the cellar. In the new year I'll start recruiting. I'm looking for like-minded, passionate people who want to grow together."

Sustainability and Subtle Innovation

Itasca's regenerative ethos runs deep in her approach.

"We try to carry that environmental mindset into the cellar," she explains. "All our by-products go through a wetland filtration system, and we use as few cleaning products as possible - even on the floors. Pressure and water do most of the work. It's about minimising our impact in every way."

A Philosophy of Adaptation

"I love natural fermentations," she says, "but in England it's not always possible. You adapt - what's doable, what's best for the wine. Especially when you're working with fruit from different vineyards, you have to stay flexible. But I've never felt I've had to

compromise my integrity."

That adaptability extends to her creative side:

"Sparkling has to follow the traditional method, but there's still room for your own touch - longer fermentation, more lees stirring, little decisions that build texture and personality. With reds, it's a blank canvas. You just don't want to over-extract; let the grapes speak."

The Excitement of English Fruit

"I'm working with new grapes I've never touched before - that's exciting. England is such a young wine country compared to South Africa. There's so much room to grow, to experiment, to build something lasting. It's one of the few countries where people are still building cellars. That says everything."

Her current favourites?

"Chardonnay has always been close to my heart. And Pinot Noir - I'm falling more in love with it here. It's lighter, more focused, not overripe. You don't have to work hard to drink it."

Essex Terroir & The Future of Still Wine

"Essex has the most sunshine in England, so the grapes are quite different. The philosophy will be the same as in Crondall - same approach, same pursuit of excellence - but the scale will be larger. We'll also

be better equipped for mechanically harvested fruit, which helps with larger clients."

Beyond logistics, she sees real potential for English still wines.

"There's a big opportunity there. Everyone's focused on sparkling, but Essex has the climate to produce really good still wines if you plant the right varieties. Viticulture here is going in the right direction - there's great advice and research happening now."

Lessons and Inspirations

"Patience," she says immediately when asked about the biggest lesson of her career. "Wine has a life of its own. It doesn't always move at the pace you want. You have to give it time."

If she could make wine anywhere else for a season?

"Chile. They're doing wonderful things with Merlot, especially at high altitude. I'd love to experience that."

And when it comes time to celebrate her first vintage at Essex?

"Probably something sparkling. One of the most special bottles I've ever had was a 2013 Dom Pérignon - still fresh, very acidic, just beautiful. Something fancy like that feels right for a milestone."

Looking Ahead

As we wrap up, Annamarie reflects on the months ahead - recruiting her new team, moving to Essex, and preparing the cellar for its first crush. There's excitement in her voice, but also calm assurance.

"It's a natural progression," she says. "We don't always know exactly what's coming - but that's what makes it exciting. The potential is endless."

Back in Hampshire, Den'e Louw continues to anchor Penn Croft with the same clarity, discipline and quiet confidence that have become hallmarks of her work. As Annamarie prepares for Essex, Den'e ensures the Hampshire winery continues to run with the precision and purpose that underpin Itasca's standards. Together, the two work hand-in-hand with Ben, carrying forward a shared philosophy while bringing their own strengths to each site.





From Science to Cellars

Despite her early surroundings, Den'e initially chose a different route, enrolling in molecular biology and biotechnology. She had a natural love of science and once imagined herself working in cancer research. But during her university studies, she began to feel a pull towards a field that blended science with creativity.

A turning point came during a physics lecture, when she noticed a pamphlet for the viticulture and oenology programme. The mix of practical learning, creativity, and the possibility of travelling the world as a winemaker captured her completely. After researching the degree further, she told her mother she wanted to become a winemaker. Her mother's immediate enthusiasm affirmed the feeling that she had found her direction.

Lessons from South Africa and Bordeaux

Working in South Africa taught Den'e resilience, precision, and humility. The competitive industry demanded discipline, attention to detail, and respect for every step of the process. Bordeaux, where ripening unfolds at a slower pace, brought different lessons. There, she learnt patience, balance, and the value of slowing down to listen to the wine. Both regions reinforced the importance of teamwork and celebrating small victories along the way.

A New Start in the UK

Moving to the UK was never part of her original plan. In fact, she chose winemaking believing it would keep her rooted in Stellenbosch. But when her partner received an opportunity in Britain, Den'e chose to follow her heart and build a life

with him. At the time, she didn't know wine was even produced in England.

Her first English role was in wine retail in London, where she considered working towards a career as a buyer. Then she tasted her first English wine: a sparkling Nyetimber. The quality surprised her. It was clear something exciting was happening in the UK wine scene, and she wanted to be part of it.

The transition to English viticulture, however, came with challenges. Disease pressure was far greater than she had experienced at home, and ripening windows were tight. Where South Africa allowed for decisive, rapid action, England required adaptability and calm under pressure. Staffing was another adjustment, with fewer hands available during peak periods. The shift demanded new strategies, sharper planning, and a willingness to rethink old habits.

Crafting Quality at Penn Croft

As Operations Winemaker at Penn Croft, Den'e's role spans every stage of production. She oversees fruit receipt, fermentation, maturation, blending, and bottling, while managing the cellar team, lab work, equipment, and logistics. Her days are a balance of hands-on winemaking, strategic planning, and constant sensory evaluation.

Working with a wide variety of growers and producers is one of Penn Croft's defining strengths, and Den'e emphasises the importance of communication and respecting the individuality of each plot. Every vineyard is unique, and she adapts her approach to express the character of each site while meeting the stylistic goals of each client.



The Itasca Vision

With Itasca expanding and new facilities coming online, Den'e sees her role becoming increasingly strategic. She is committed to building systems that function smoothly and intuitively, enabling the business to operate with precision and long-term stability.

What resonates most with her at Itasca is the absolute commitment to quality. The expectation is not merely to do things well, but to do them properly, thoughtfully, and without compromise. It's a philosophy that mirrors her own approach to winemaking.

A Philosophy of Purity and Patience

Den'e describes her winemaking style as timeless, classic, and focused on purity. Rather than chasing novelty, she strives to craft wines with elegance, balance, and quiet confidence.

Listening to the fruit is central to her approach. Each vineyard, each season, and even each tank behaves differently, and she adapts accordingly. In England, where vineyards naturally produce grapes with freshness and finesse, she favours gentle handling, minimal intervention, and methods that protect delicacy and clarity.

For her, patience is the most important factor in creating expressive English wines. The climate tests even the most seasoned winemaker, but rushing never leads to greatness. Giving the vineyard and the wine the time they need results in bottles that truly reflect their place and vintage.

Moments of Challenge and Reward

Some of her most rewarding moments come when people connect deeply with the wines she has crafted. Hearing someone say that a wine moved them or stood out at a tasting remains one of her greatest joys.

Her most humbling experience came during her time at Kanonkop in Stellenbosch, working long hours under intense pressure. The demands pushed her beyond what she thought possible, teaching her resilience and revealing strength she didn't know she had.

What Keeps Her Inspired

Den'e finds inspiration in the fast-growing, ambitious nature of the English wine industry. The chance to help define what English wine can be is both motivating and exciting. She hopes young winemakers entering the field today stay curious, work hard, and create their own opportunities. In a developing industry, initiative is everything.

Life Outside the Cellar

Away from Penn Croft, Den'e's passions are as varied as her winemaking skills. She loves hosting and cooking, sharing food and wine with friends, and experimenting with new recipes. Creativity runs through other areas of her life too, including drawing, painting, and home design as she renovates her new house.

She's also drawn to the arts and often finds inspiration in theatre and musicals. At the

same time, she values the outdoors, a love rooted in childhood camping and safaris, and enjoys staying active. This September, she even completed the Médoc Marathon, motivated, she admits, by the promise of wine along the route.

These interests enrich her work. Hosting teaches her to think about the experience a wine delivers. Creativity helps her solve problems and refine her craft. The arts sharpen her attention to detail, balance, and emotion. Time outdoors strengthens the patience and resilience essential to working with nature.

Together, Ben, Annamarie and Den'e embody the strength of Itasca's winemaking philosophy - a blend of vision, precision and trust rooted in Hampshire today and actively shaping the new Essex winery as it comes to life. Ben provides the overarching direction, ensuring consistency, quality and long-term strategy across the operation, while Annamarie in Essex and Den'e in Hampshire bring that vision to life through their own skill, insight and hands-on craft.

Each winemaker arrives with a different background, a different path and a different way of interpreting the fruit, yet all three are united by the same belief: that exceptional wine is built on patience, integrity and thoughtful decision-making.

As Itasca continues to grow, it is this collaborative partnership - one philosophy carried by three distinct voices - that will define its next chapter.

In their hands, the future of English wine looks not only promising, but profoundly exciting.

Crafting Clarity: The Winemaking Journey of Den'e Louw

For Den'e Louw, winemaking was never the result of one defining moment. Instead, her path was shaped gradually by the landscape, people, and quiet rhythms of her childhood in Stellenbosch. Growing up among vineyards, she absorbed the world of wine through countless small experiences that would eventually form the foundation of her career.

As a child, she was captivated by the neat lines of vines, the colours of the changing seasons, and the sense of purpose that permeated wine country life. She and her friends often played on farms and snuck grapes to stomp into makeshift juice, feeling like winemakers for a day. Her fascination grew when a friend's father, himself a winemaker, visited her primary school to explain how wine was made. Though she had no idea then that it would become her life's work, the seed had been planted.

By eighteen, wine had taken on a sense of sophistication and curiosity. Her first 'adult' outing was a wine tasting with friends, a hint of what was to come.





ALEC WHITE: Growing Excellence

How a board director at Itasca Wines brings entrepreneurial focus, financial discipline, and Chelsea Gold-winning precision to the journey of scaling an English wine company.

When you ask Alec White about his career, he doesn't offer a polished corporate narrative or a carefully rehearsed leadership philosophy. Instead, he gives you something far more revealing: clarity, honesty, and a deep commitment to building things that last.

Alec's journey spans horticulture, floristry, finance, beer, and wine. It sounds eclectic, but for him, there is a simple thread running through it all: "I'm interested in growing things and building things." Whether cultivating award-winning peonies or scaling modern wine businesses, Alec is driven by a builder's instinct - practical, grounded, and focused on creating strong commercial foundations.

A Career Rooted in Entrepreneurship

Alec is no stranger to starting, scaling, and steering businesses. He has established and run his own companies, supported founders through their most difficult inflection points, and helped transform ideas into viable, profitable operations.

His experience gives him a rare dual perspective: he understands the vision and creativity that define founders, but he also brings the financial discipline

required to turn ambition into long-term, sustainable success.

"Starting a business isn't linear," he explains. "You need flexibility, the ability to pivot, and the discipline to stay focused while still exploring opportunity."

This combination - creativity balanced with structure - is exactly what he brings to Itasca.

Chelsea Gold: The Unlikely Advantage

While Alec downplays his corporate background, there is one part of his story he knows readers will care about: his celebrated success at the Chelsea Flower Show.

With multiple RHS Gold Medals and a 10-year exhibiting history, Alec is recognised as one of the UK's leading peony growers. His commitment to excellence in horticulture reveals much about his work ethic.

Peonies, like great wine, require patience, observation, and precision. They are notoriously difficult to propagate. To grow them - and to grow them well - requires deep understanding, careful decision-making, and an obsessive attention to detail. Alec draws a direct line between this discipline and his business approach.

"In horticulture, you need to watch, listen, observe. And if you want to exhibit at Chelsea, you have to be willing to go above and beyond to deliver perfection. Those traits apply to any startup."

This philosophy - patience, excellence, and determination - shapes his leadership at Itasca today.

Joining Itasca: A Partnership Built on Vision

When asked why he joined the board, Alec's answer is characteristically straightforward: "Malcolm asked me."

Behind the simplicity lies trust, alignment, and shared ambition.

Alec sees his role as bringing financial clarity, operational structure, and strategic focus to help realise the company's long-term vision. His partnership with Malcolm is rooted in mutual respect for what each brings.

"Without Malcolm, there would be no company," Alec says candidly. "My job is to support him - help solve problems, find solutions, and make the vision happen."

That partnership is fundamental to the way Itasca now operates.

Leadership Without the Corporate Gloss

Alec is refreshingly outspoken about his views on leadership.

He dismisses corporate jargon and management trends, focusing instead on clear strategy, financial discipline, and the reality of running a fast-moving scale-up.

"You can't have big corporate types in a startup," he says. "You have to move fast. Sometimes you knock things over along the way."

For Alec, effective governance isn't about frameworks or buzzwords - it's about:

- ◆ robust financial controls
- ◆ clear budgeting and forecasting
- ◆ building a talented, aligned team
- ◆ delivering on commitments to shareholders
- ◆ ensuring long-term sustainability through profit

Profitability, he emphasises, is not just a financial outcome: it's the foundation for environmental responsibility, for supporting colleagues, and for creating a business that endures.

Seeing Opportunity in a Shifting Industry

Alec is clear-eyed about the challenges in English wine.

"The industry is going backwards. Many growers and wineries are going bust," he notes. But for Itasca, this environment presents opportunity - space to lead, consolidate, and innovate.

He is particularly excited about:

- ◆ the expansion of still wine, with exceptional vintages emerging from 2026
- ◆ the new Essex facility, positioned to become the UK's largest and most scalable contract winemaking site
- ◆ the Cranborne hospitality project, which elevates Itasca beyond production into experience

Together, these developments create a future he describes as "very bright, very encouraging."

Focus, Discipline, and the Drive to Build Something Great

Alec sits on several boards and maintains oversight across multiple sectors. Yet, he insists that true governance means deeply understanding the detail of a business, not just reading the spreadsheets.

This is why he spends so much time with Malcolm and the team: learning the intricacies of the operation, understanding the terroir - business and literal - and ensuring decisions honour both the company's foundations and its future.

What Comes Next

As Itasca grows, Alec's blend of entrepreneurial instinct, horticultural precision, and financial discipline will help shape its next chapter.

Whether nurturing peonies to gold-medal perfection or guiding a modern wine business through a transforming industry, Alec's philosophy is consistent:

- ◆ Be patient.
- ◆ Be observant.
- ◆ Be disciplined.
- ◆ And above all - deliver excellence.

Strengthening the Path Ahead: The Team Supporting Itasca's Next Chapter

As Itasca continues to grow and define its place within the English wine industry, the business has reached a natural point where strengthening commercial and brand capability becomes essential.

To support this next phase, a dedicated team has been brought together under the strategic direction of board director Alec White, whose focus is on guiding the company through a thoughtful and sustainable transition.

This evolution builds on years of commitment, craft and operational focus. Itasca's progress has been shaped by the people who have built the business from the roots up. For the company to seize new opportunities, future growth must honour that foundation while bringing fresh expertise to the table.

Joining the business with this steady and considered approach are Chris Connor, Director of Marketing and Brand, and James Lambert, leading Sales and Distribution. Both bring deep experience from the drinks and wine sectors, but equally important is the way they have approached their roles: taking time to understand the business, the teams who drive it and the heritage that defines Itasca today. Below is an introduction to the two.

Chris Connor – Director of Marketing and Brand

With more than a decade spent advising wine, beer and spirits companies on strengthening their marketing capabilities, Chris's arrival comes at a pivotal moment as Itasca begins to shape how it presents itself to new markets.

With a considered, insight-led approach to evolving Itasca's brand, his early focus has been on listening and gaining a clear understanding of the company's heritage, the people who have shaped it and the touch-points that carry its identity – ensuring future brand development

remains authentic and grounded in the business's real strengths.

Chris has a nuanced grasp of how consumers make choices and what influences purchasing behaviour. His expertise spans the full marketing mix, including brand identity, communications and commercial planning. As Itasca looks to build recognition and create longer-term resonance, Chris will help guide how the company tells its story and connects more closely with the people who enjoy its wines.

James Lambert – Sales and Distribution

James brings extensive experience from the English wine sector. During his nine years as Managing Director at Lyme Bay Winery, he helped shape one of the UK's notable producers, overseeing commercial growth, distribution expansion and new revenue streams.

Playing a central role in supporting Alec's transition roadmap, James's first priority has been understanding existing routes to market, established systems and the teams whose work underpins the business. Known for his strong industry relationships and sharp commercial eye, he offers valuable insight into the UK distribution landscape as Itasca seeks to expand its reach.

Working closely with Chris, James will help shape portfolio strategy, build distribution pathways and ensure the company's commercial ambitions align with its long-term vision. His hands-on experience strengthens Itasca's ability to turn strategy into sustainable market presence.

Looking Ahead

The appointments of Chris and James represent an important moment for Itasca. Together with Alec's strategic leadership, they bring complementary expertise and a shared commitment to understanding the business from the ground up. Their steady, aligned approach ensures that Itasca's evolution remains ambitious, authentic and built for long-term success.

JOHN DUNLOP:

Guiding Governance Through Itasca's Next Chapter

When Itasca Wines took the significant step of becoming a PLC and preparing for a new phase of growth, one of the quiet but essential appointments behind that transition was John Dunlop, Company Secretary. Though not often in the spotlight, John plays a central role in ensuring that Itasca's evolution - from a pioneering contract winery in Hampshire to a multi-site, nationally significant wine business - rests on strong governance, clarity, and confidence for investors and stakeholders alike.

John brings with him many years of strategic finance and commercial leadership experience, having held senior financial roles across a range of sectors including retail, manufacturing, leisure, and fast-moving consumer goods. Most recently, he served as Finance Director at Haskins Garden Centres Ltd, where he provided strategic financial oversight and contributed at board level to help guide the business. His deep grounding in accountancy and corporate finance provides a strong foundation for his work at Itasca, ensuring that governance and reporting frameworks robustly support the company's long-term ambitions.

A steady hand at a pivotal moment

John joined Itasca Wines at a time when the company was formalising its structure, expanding operations, and shaping its long-term funding strategy. As Company Secretary, his remit is broad but precise:

ensuring that the organisation's legal, regulatory, and administrative foundations are as robust as the wines it produces.

From maintaining statutory records to supporting the board's decision-making processes, John is the person who ensures that every structural change - from share allotments to new project approvals - is accurately documented, compliant, and aligned with Itasca's ambitions. His role forms a vital link between the leadership team, investors, regulatory bodies, and the expanding operational footprint of the company.

Honouring the roots as the company scales

As Itasca forges ahead with major developments - new vineyard partnerships, expanded production, and an ever-growing national presence - an important part of John's role is helping the organisation stay grounded in its founding principles.

The company was built on a belief in low-intervention winemaking, regenerative agriculture, and a close relationship with the land at Penn Croft. These values shaped its early identity and remain central to its long-term strategy. In fast-growing businesses, it can be easy for operational momentum to eclipse the quieter principles on which the organisation was built. John's work ensures that those roots remain visible in the company's governance, communications, and formal commitments.

Whether coordinating board practices, ensuring transparency for investors, or supporting new structural initiatives, John helps keep the organisation aligned with



the ethos that inspired Itasca's creation - the blend of craft, care, sustainability, and long-term vision that first set it apart.

Supporting Itasca's foundation story

The story of Itasca and Penn Croft Vineyard is one of vision, experimentation, and a determination to elevate English wine. As the business grew from a single site at Penn Croft Farm into a dual-winery operation spanning Hampshire and the Crouch Valley, its organisational demands grew in parallel.

John's contribution is woven into this next stage of the foundation story:

- ◆ ensuring the company's transition to PLC status runs smoothly,
- ◆ supporting new capital activity needed for expansion,
- ◆ coordinating governance as the board diversifies, and
- ◆ helping shape the structures that will carry the company through the next decade.

While the winemakers build the craft and the operations teams expand the physical capability, John ensures that the company's internal architecture keeps pace - the framework that allows innovation to flourish safely and sustainably.

Championing transparency and investor confidence

The investor community behind Itasca Wines has been a cornerstone of its progress. John's work directly supports that relationship by ensuring that communications, filings, and corporate actions are timely, clear, and compliant. In a sector where growth is capital-intensive and long-term, this clarity helps maintain the trust needed for Itasca to continue building its capabilities - whether that's new winery construction, equipment investment, vineyard partnerships, or future hospitality ventures.

As sustainability and stewardship increasingly shape investor expectations, John also plays a role in helping the company express its commitments consistently across its governance framework - ensuring that Itasca's regenerative ethos is not just practised in the vineyard but also reflected in how the business reports, records, and grows.

Quiet leadership at the centre of a dynamic organisation

It is characteristic of the Company Secretary role that much of the work is unseen - not outward-facing, not celebrated, yet absolutely essential. John's contribution sits at the heart of how Itasca operates: methodical, dependable, and deeply aligned with the company's future direction.

As Itasca Wines moves into 2026 with expanded production, strengthened board leadership, and new ventures on

the horizon, John continues to provide the calm organisational structure that underpins every decision. His work ensures that the next chapters of the Itasca story - from Penn Croft's winemaking philosophy to the company's growing national footprint - rest on the firm ground required for ambitious, sustainable growth.

Oeuf DE BEAUNE
Cuvées à vin sur mesure

www.oeufdebeaune.com
info@oeufdebeaune.com

JOHN WILKINS: From Hospitality to Grapevines - A Director's Story

When John Wilkins recounts the moment he stood in the corner of the car park, looking back at barns and vines and thinking "I can't believe this is what we've created", you sense a rare blend of surprise and pride. He was reflecting not on the usual trappings of business success, but on something more elemental: the vines, the soil, the bottles, and the small-but-growing legacy of Penn Croft and Itasca Wines.

A journey from hotels, sports and hospitality

John's path to viticulture didn't begin in a vineyard- it began with hospitality, training and a marked curiosity. Prior to joining Itasca, he spent years in training roles, after which he ran a business that touched on sports, leisure and hospitality - working with clients including The Royal Ballet, The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Marriott Hotels and several football clubs.

Before that, after his apprenticeship, he even worked on the Costa del Sol in four different hotels- so hospitality and travel were in his DNA. And wine? Well, that's always been there too: "From about the age of 18, if I wasn't going out on a Friday night, I would share a bottle of wine with my mum," he says.

Eventually, he did a Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) course, rediscovered the textbooks he'd had for years, did his research and cultivated a fascination for how wine comes into being. That fascination, combined with his experience in training and mentoring apprentices, prepared him for something new: a role in the wine business that would evolve fast.

Joining the team and the moment when things got real

John's entry into Itasca (and by extension Penn Croft) came via a conversation with the company's founder, Malcolm Walker (sometimes mistakenly referred to by John as "Malcolm Triggs" in articles)

about vineyard land planted in 2018. When he viewed the vines in 2019, Malcolm reportedly told John: "this is your mission should you accept it." "I thought, yeah, when he offers, it'd be great," John says.

What followed was intense early work - especially during the COVID-19 lockdown era. John remembers May 2020 as a turning point: "He said to me, you better start now... the first thing I said to him is, have you registered the vineyard? He said, what? And I said, we better start there then, because that should have been registered a year ago." It was a crash-course in compliance, licences and making things real.

But the moment that really defined things? According to John: "When you see the first bottle of wine ... that was an incredible moment. Trying to sell a bottle of wine that didn't exist." That first bottle - labelled and real - became more than a product. It became proof that Penn Croft and Itasca could belong in the wine world.



Scaling up: the big vision and the challenge

John reflects on when he realised this business had real potential to scale. "When we had our first bottle of wine... The likes of the Four Seasons at Hampshire was my first client. They took it on board and then you think... 'we're going to continue to grow in that respect.'" He adds that one key challenge was trying to sell something "that didn't exist" and then going on to compete with imported wines sold at much lower margins.

Today, Itasca is positioned as a major contract-winemaking business in the UK: it offers full services, and with its new facility in Essex (Crouch Valley) it aims to process up to 2,000 tonnes of grapes per year. John describes his role these days as more of an overview, "a helicopter view," rather than doing everything: "It's gone from doing absolutely everything to having a more of an overview on things and also getting involved in special projects."

Sustainability, people and place

One of the recurring themes in John's outlook is the connection between the land - soil, in his words - and the wine. He speaks, for example, of viticulturist Simon Porter digging the soil, sniffing it, noting it "should smell like new potatoes" and seeing that it did. He also emphasises recycling water through a half-million-litre pool, wetlands with 30 different plant species, solar panels on the roof - measures undertaken at Penn Croft and set to be expanded in Essex. "We're all for it," he says of regenerative farming.

His leadership style? Simple: "I try to treat people how I want to be treated," he says. "Without a doubt, positive reinforcement... I always responded better to a pat on the shoulder... Nobody goes to work to be bawled at and ranted at." His earlier sporting life - captaining a football team, he says - helped shape his approach.

Looking ahead: ten years and beyond

What does John hope the next five-to-ten years will look like for Itasca and Penn Croft? He's candid: "In ten years' time the winery and the Essex winery are full all the time. People are aware of Penn Croft ... maybe any other brands that we've created. And we've become a well-known, respected and established name within the... wine industry." He emphasises global scale. Export remains "in the pipeline for the future."

With the Essex facility designed mainly for still wines (less riddling cages, more tanks), and with a UK contract-winemaking business growing fast, the ambitions are clear.

Personal pleasures

When asked how he recharges outside of work, John has two simple pleasures: wine and golf. His favourite wine region? Spain - especially Rioja. "It's got to be a Reserva or a Gran Reserva," he says, and preferably paired with something meaty. His choice of a dinner-guest? Either the legendary footballer Pelé or Spanish golfer Seve Ballesteros - both linked to his love of sport.

Why this matters

In an era when English wine is still carving out its place in the world, figures like John Wilkins are proving what ambition, careful craftsmanship and clear purpose can bring. Penn Croft describes its winemaking as "small batch, low intervention... to allow the fruit to shine through." Penn Croft Itasca, meanwhile, blends high-technology contract services with vineyard hospitality and tours - and is steadily raising the profile of the industry.

John's story brings together hospitality, training, land, vines, vision and complexity. He doesn't just talk of growing wine; he talks of growing people, systems, a business and a brand. And that car-park moment, looking back at what was built, sums up both the astonishment and the pride: "I cannot believe this is what we've created."



"Calendars within calendars": A CONVERSATION WITH Katrina Cran-Crombie

Former Head of Operations



across the UK. You learn fast."

So what is Head of Operations?

"On paper: compliance, health and safety, scheduling, planning, site management," she says. "In practice: being the glue. Our job is to make sure the winemakers can be the best winemakers – safe environment, right kit, the right information, everyone talking to everyone."

As the company grew, the operations team took form: Ops Manager Alex Holton keeping "boots on the ground", Operations Assistant Catherine Barrett managing the finer details, and Kat steering the bigger picture.

When you ask people what they remember about harvest, they'll say the scent of freshly pressed juice, the hum of the riddling cages, the ache in the legs after twelve-hour shifts. Ask the Itasca team and many will add: Kat had a plan.

From the early days of Itasca's growth to her final harvest with us, Katrina "Kat" Cran-Crombie helped knit together the moving parts: growers, trucks, presses, tanks and people. Her role was to make sure the cellar could do what it does best: make outstanding wine. Though Kat has now moved on, her fingerprints remain on the systems, standards and culture she helped build.

A serendipitous route to wine

"I didn't grow up in wine," Kat says with a smile. "I studied French and Spanish, spent a year abroad, and helped at a harvest in the south of France. That was the spark."

Back in London she took work experience with wine retailers, completed WSET qualifications, and gathered a kaleidoscope of roles: auction houses, a Hampshire wine-tour company, even her own virtual tasting business during the lockdowns.

What drew her to Itasca? "The ambition and the eco credentials: the wetlands, the solar, doing things properly. And the variety. As a contract facility we see fruit and wines from



Calendars within calendars

Kat describes operations as "juggling multiple dinner parties at once". There is the seasonal calendar – grapes arrive through September and October; by end of August the following year, juice must be safely in bottle to free tank space for the next harvest.

Then there is the ad-hoc calendar – disgorging campaigns that run on a four-week cycle: transfer, riddle, rest, disgorge.

"During harvest I make no social plans," she laughs. "For four to six weeks it's twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. It's farming – the grapes don't stop because you're tired."

Pressing decisions, not just pressing buttons

How does Itasca decide when to press and what to make? With data, taste and honest conversations.

"We ask clients to send in weekly maturity samples – ten representative bunches. In the lab we track pH, total acidity, sugars and bunch weights. Over three or four weeks you see acids falling and sugars rising. That's when we can say, yes, a still rosé is on the cards – or this wants to be sparkling."

Sometimes hopes and chemistry diverge. "You can't shoehorn a wine," Kat says. "Blending is where you see the truth. There are plenty of tools in the toolbox, but you still need the right raw materials."

SOPs & the art of the possible

With close to thirty client projects in motion – many with multiple components – discipline is everything.

"We live by SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures). A clear framework means the team can act autonomously, and we only escalate when something genuinely

unusual happens – a lorry breakdown, a faulty sensor, something unexpected."

Weather: partner and adversary

Asked about the biggest challenge, Kat answers instantly: "Weather. Climate change isn't tidy; it's chaotic. Disease pressure, frost risk, pests. You can replace a tyre; you can't replace a vineyard's terroir."

People, morale and momentum

Keeping spirits high through long nights is its own craft. "Food, coffee, music – at a sensible volume," she grins. "Clear briefings, regular updates – 'we're 50%, 75% through' – and permission to feel tired. Harvest is tough, especially for newcomers, but the sense of achievement is huge."

And when the season ends? "A proper party. You've earned it."

Sustainability you can see

Itasca's regenerative ethos shaped Kat's operational lens.

"We try to minimise impact everywhere – our constructed wetlands for winery by-products, limited chemical use, pressure-and-water cleaning. And the local footprint is amazing. Pouring Penn Croft Bacchus grown a mile away, made and bottled here, then served in the Cellar Door – you can't get much more sustainable than that."

Smart tools, better decisions

Innovation matters when it sharpens quality. Kat highlights the use of aphrometers during tirage to model pressure build-up in real time.

"It means fewer interruptions, fewer guesses, and more confidence the wine is where it needs to be."



Growth at speed

If one arc defines Kat's time at Itasca, it is pace. "Seeing the intake climb year on year – then this season filling every tank inside and out – has been incredible. It mirrors how ambitious English wine is becoming."

Her favourite surprise for visitors? "How long contract-winery harvest is. Many estates finish in two weeks. We were pressing for six because we handle the first fruit and the last fruit."

Looking ahead

Before moving on, Kat helped set foundations for Itasca's next chapter in Essex.

"Making wine in-region matters: fresher fruit, shorter journeys, lower emissions. And it opens the door for more Essex and Kent producers to join."

The last word

Ask Kat for her favourite moment in the winemaking year and she offers two.

"One is the quiet hinge between finishing bottling and the first grapes of the new season – a moment to breathe and reflect. The other is February, when clients taste. Their faces light up. It's wonderful."

She leaves Itasca with characteristic modesty. "I've loved this chapter – the team, the learning, the pace. Operations is about making space for excellence. I'm proud of the space we built."

EDITOR'S NOTE: With Kat's departure, client communications are now led by Harriet Elder (Client Account Manager), while recruitment is underway for a Senior Operations Manager focused on compliance, H&S and site management. The ethos Kat helped establish – rigour, transparency, and that calm in the crush – continues.



A Q&A WITH John Simmons, Head of Itasca Technical Services

THE NEW ESSEX WINERY
IS COMING TOGETHER



Background & Origins

Q: John, let's start at the beginning. How did you end up running Itasca Technical Services?

John: It was a slightly roundabout route. I studied chemical engineering at uni - useful for the drinks world - then spent a few years in France, which gave me a real love of wine. I eventually came back and worked in equipment supply for wineries, and that's how I first got involved with Itasca. I supplied most of the original presses, tanks, pumps and temperature control when the Itasca winery was being set up in 2020. I got to know Malcolm well, we both live locally, and through COVID we kept talking about doing things better on the technical side. That turned into, "Why don't we build our own technical services arm?" and in May 2022 we did.

Q: So the idea was always that Technical Services would serve more than just Itasca's own winery?

John: Exactly. It made sense to look after our own kit, but we could see the whole UK wine industry needed proper support - installation, training, maintenance, not just buying the machine. So we thought, if we've got the contacts and the engineers, why not offer it to everyone?

The UK wine industry is growing fast - more vineyards, more tanks, bigger harvests - but there still aren't many people who know how to install, maintain and fix the specialist kit behind it all.

That's where Itasca Technical Services comes in. We sat down with John Simmons, who set up and now runs the division, to talk about why it was created, what UK wineries struggle with most, and the tech that's making remote winemaking possible.

What the Division Actually Does

Q: For a winemaker reading this who just wants it in plain English - what do you do?

John: Very simply: we source, supply and fit winery and beverage equipment. That could be a small pump or fitting, or it could be big stainless tanks, pneumatic or basket presses, full temperature-control systems, bottling and packaging kit. And we don't just drop it off - we install it, commission it, train the winery staff and then look after it.

Q: Who do you work with? Is it just wine?

John: Mostly wineries, big and small. But we also work with cider, juice, some dairies, and we're starting to do more in spirits and the odd brewery. It's basically the beverage industry.

Q: What's the bit people don't realise you do?

John: The boring-but-essential stuff: dealing with customs and shipping from Europe. Since Brexit that can be daunting for wineries. We take that on. And during harvest we run a 24-hour breakdown service - not many people do that.

Why the UK Needs It

Q: You said the UK wine industry "needed" this. What's missing at the moment?

John: Trained people. Most of the equipment is made in Europe, and for a long time there wasn't proper UK-based support. So wineries would buy a very clever press or temp-control system and then... not really have anyone to service it. Our engineers are factory trained, and we will even help wineries with equipment they bought elsewhere. That's unusual, but it's what the industry needs.

Q: Is that the main challenge your customers talk about?

John: That, and timing. People delay ordering because it's expensive or the building isn't finished - and then everything arrives just before harvest. So our projects overrun at the exact same time the grapes arrive. That's tough on engineers. But if you plant more vineyards, you need more wineries, and if you have more wineries, you need more technical support. We're just catching up with that reality.

Fitting into the Wider Itasca Vision

Q: How does Technical Services fit into what Itasca as a group is doing - especially with the new Essex winery?

John: Essex is a great example. That winery will be about 2.5 times bigger than Penn Croft. Someone has to specify, install and maintain all of that equipment. That's us. And at the same time we're working all over the UK - Wales, Devon, Norfolk, the southeast - because more vineyards are

being planted and those grapes need processing capacity. Our job is to make sure the kit is there, installed properly, and supported afterwards.

Projects & Tech

Q: You've done quite a few installs this year. Which ones are you most proud of?

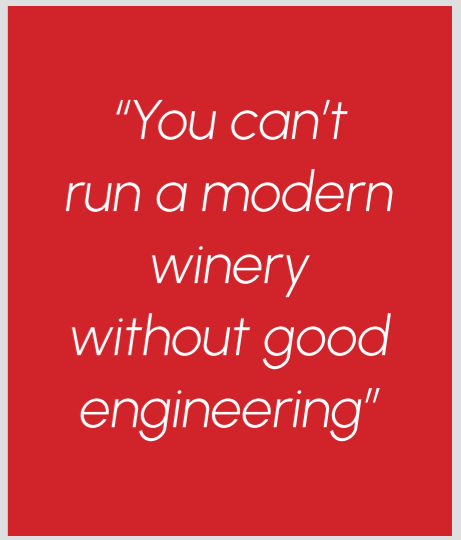
John: Three stand out. First, a full fit-out for Reynolds Estate in Hampshire. Second, a number of temperature-control installations around the country that gave wineries real confidence over harvest. And third, Flint Vineyard in Norfolk - they came to us in May, quite late, asking for help with their expansion. We supplied the press, tanks, temperature-control system and got them running for a very early harvest in late August. That was a real achievement.

Q: You talk a lot about remote monitoring. What are you actually installing?

John: We're the exclusive UK distributor for a system called VINPILOT. In simple terms, it lets you monitor and control your tanks, temperatures, stirring, even density, from anywhere in the world. A great example is the Royal Albert Docks custom winery we fitted - they want guest winemakers from Italy or Australia working on English grapes in London, but monitoring their wines from home. With this system, they can.

Q: That's pretty modern for UK wine

John: It is. And it's sustainable in a practical way - if you can check the tanks from home, you don't need to drive in. Plus, it warns you of problems before they become expensive.



The Team

Q: Who's actually doing all this work with you?

John: We've got a really good, compact team.

- ◆ **Martin Smith** is our lead engineer - loads of food-industry experience, and he ran kit like the disgorging line at Chapel Down.
- ◆ **Maddy Nippard** is Plumpton-trained, has worked in UK wineries for about 10 years, so she knows how the equipment is actually used, and she also runs Enartis for us.
- ◆ **Mike Downing** is a mechanical engineer, spent 20 years in South Africa with bottling machines, so he's brilliant on production and packaging - half sales, half engineering.
- ◆ And **Maria Smith** keeps us sane on admin and fulfilment.

We all wear a lot of hats, but that's the nature of a growing division.





The Pain Points

Q: What's the hardest part of the job right now?

John: Honestly? The bunching of work. Because of cost, building delays, customs, people don't always order when they should - so we get a funnel of projects right before harvest, at the exact time breakdowns happen. That's when our engineers are doing 14-hour days. If we can educate wineries to plan earlier, everybody wins.

Q: That's useful for readers - what's the ideal?

John: Talk to us early. Even if you're not ready to buy, we can help you specify the right kit and plan the install for a quieter period. It's cheaper and less stressful.

The Future

Q: Where do you see the UK wine industry going in the next few years?

John: Vineyard planting says it all - the fruit is coming, so the wineries have to grow. With that growth, the industry will need more engineering expertise than it currently has. We intend to be the people who supply, install and support that equipment.

Q: And what's next specifically for Itasca Technical Services?

John: Growth on three fronts:

1. **More presence** - more time on the road visiting sites.
2. **E-commerce** - we're building an online way to buy the smaller, essential items: Enartis products, fittings, pump spares, seals, air tubes. A proper one-stop shop.
3. **More engineering capacity** - because with Essex coming online and more wineries expanding, there's going to be a lot to install.

Advice for New or Upgrading Wineries

Q: If a new or upgrading winery is reading this, what's your one piece of advice?

John: Don't just look at the purchase price. It's tempting to buy second-hand or direct from abroad, but if you don't have good backup - installation, training, commissioning, after-sales - you can end up spending more. Pay a little extra to get the right equipment from a company that will support it for years.

SPOTLIGHT ON Lasma Stacey

EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO MALCOLM WALKER
ITASCA WINES, PENN CROFT WINES & TECHNICAL SERVICES



If you have ever wondered how everything at Itasca runs so smoothly, from board meetings and investor paperwork to legal complexities and coordination between departments, chances are Lasma Stacey is right at the heart of it.

As Executive Assistant to CEO Malcolm Walker, Lasma supports not only him but also directors and senior managers across the business. Known for her calm efficiency, adaptability and resilience during a year of significant change, she is one of the people who help keep the Itasca engine running. We spent some time with Lasma to find out more about her work, what motivates her, and how she unwinds outside the office.

A role where no two days are ever the same

"I support Malcolm and the wider leadership team with everything from admin and meetings to shareholder support and follow-up actions," Lasma explains. "It's a varied role. Some days I'm on the phone constantly, other days I can catch up on paperwork. No two days are ever the same."

Managing priorities across Itasca Wines, Penn Croft Wines and Technical Services means she is always adapting. "I'm constantly looking at what's urgent, talking to directors and colleagues, and adjusting as things change. Good communication is essential, and the team is always supportive."

A year of challenges and growth

This year has been one of the busiest in Itasca's history. "So much has happened it's hard to narrow it down," she says with a laugh. "But the change to becoming a PLC was huge. I had never been involved in that process before, so it was a steep learning curve, complicated but fascinating."

She has also been closely involved in complex legal matters. "It's complicated, time-consuming and sometimes all-consuming. But it's taught me a lot about the legal world and about myself. These situations really build resilience. Thankfully, everyone pulls together. We have a strong team and we support each other."

The beating heart of Itasca

Lasma is far too modest to accept the "kingpin" label often attributed to her. "I find that hard to believe," she smiles. "I couldn't do my job without the people around me. Malcolm's support is incredibly important, and having colleagues like Alec White, who provides exceptional strategic insight, Elaine Maskelyne, whose finance expertise is invaluable, and Debbie Reid, always ready to guide key projects, makes a huge difference. It's very much a team effort."

"Malcolm is brilliant at recognising hard work across the whole company," she adds. "That creates a really positive culture."

From new beginnings to natural fit

Surprisingly, Lasma did not originally envision herself in the wine industry. "It wasn't something I thought I would ever get involved in," she says. "It was actually Karen who mentioned the opening, and I decided to apply. My background was in different sectors, but the skills were transferable. I jumped at the chance, and I'm glad I did."

Her previous roles prepared her well for the pace at Itasca. "I've never really had a calm job," she laughs. "Fast-paced environments helped me develop resilience, patience and adaptability."

Lessons from leaders and life

Throughout her career, Lasma has supported a wide range of personalities. "You learn something from everyone," she explains. "In one role, I had a manager who really shaped how I think and work. I still catch myself asking what she would do in a situation. You take something valuable away from each person."

And working with Malcolm? "Never dull!" she smiles. "He is incredibly entrepreneurial. He sees opportunities others do not and isn't afraid to take risks. It's inspiring and it keeps you on your toes."

Teamwork, trust and togetherness

When asked what makes Itasca unique, Lasma immediately points to the people. "We are still relatively small, so

EXCLUSIVE PARTNERSHIP

Itasca Technical Services are delighted to announce their exclusive partnership with the UK's bestselling Grape Press Supplier Scharfenberger



EUROPRESS
1971-2021 MADE BY SCHARFENBERGER

Itasca Technical Services / Contact: John Simmons
Tel: 01252 279834 / Email: john.s@itascawines.com
www.itascawines.com

S Scharfenberger
Maschinenbau

everyone knows everyone. There is strong collaboration across all departments, whether it's working with Alec on strategic planning, Elaine in finance, Debbie on major projects, or the winery and Technical Services teams. Everyone looks out for one another."

This sense of unity is what keeps her motivated during busy periods. "It's the team, the results and feeling recognised and appreciated, which I always do. Having that support around you is everything."

Beyond the office

Outside of work, Lasma enjoys the peace of her countryside surroundings. "I spend a lot of time outdoors, walking, hiking, gardening. I also do ballroom dancing with my partner. We started during Covid. It's beginner level, but it's fun and a great way to switch off."

Music is also a lifelong passion. "I grew up with classical music. My grandparents and parents all played instruments. I still play piano when I visit my family in Latvia. I love Beethoven, Bach and piano concertos like Tchaikovsky's First. Music has always been part of my life."

Her perfect day off? "It depends how I'm feeling. Sometimes reading or pottering in the garden, other times a long hike. I enjoy simple things."

Looking ahead

With so much happening across the company, there is plenty for Lasma to feel excited about. "I'm looking forward to seeing where the own-brand side of the business goes, and how Cranborne Lodge develops. With the new winery in Essex progressing, there are a lot of big things ahead. The company is expanding. It's

exciting, and there will be challenges, but that's part of growing."

Her advice to others? "Be flexible and adaptable. In a young, evolving company, you get involved in all sorts of things. That's what makes it rewarding."

Closing Note

Lasma's warmth, resilience and steady determination make her an integral part of Itasca's story. Whether navigating complex processes, supporting senior leadership or keeping the rhythm of the business steady, she does it all with calm confidence and a deep commitment to the people around her.

Here's to Lasma, a true cornerstone of the Itasca family.

Let the Festivities Sparkle...

with this Season's Perfect Pairing... Penn Croft's 2020 Sparkling Rosé

With its shimmering copper-pink hue, this sparkling rosé opens with inviting notes of wild strawberry, fresh red berries, and bright citrus zest, all gently underpinned by a delicate shortbread richness. Impeccably pure and effortlessly balanced, it showcases the finesse and vibrancy at the heart of Penn Croft's winemaking – a captivating sparkling wine that complements our expanding wine portfolio.

Elegant Cranberry and Brie Puff Pastry Roses

A beautiful, seasonal appetiser that brings a sense of occasion to any festive gathering – and one that pairs perfectly with a chilled glass of Penn Croft Sparkling Rosé.

INGREDIENTS

- ◆ 1 sheet puff pastry
- ◆ 4 oz Brie cheese, rind removed and thinly sliced
- ◆ 1 jar whole-berry cranberry sauce
- ◆ 1 egg, beaten (for egg wash)
- ◆ Hot honey, for drizzling
- ◆ Rosemary sprigs, for garnish




EQUIPMENT

- ◆ Baking parchment
- ◆ Muffin tin
- ◆ Pizza cutter
- ◆ Pastry brush

METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 375°F (180°C) and lightly grease 8 muffin cups.
2. Roll out the puff pastry on to baking parchment and cut into 4 equal sections.
3. Spread each piece with cranberry sauce and top with thinly sliced Brie.
4. Roll each section widthways into a log, then slice in half, using a pizza cutter to make 8 spirals.
5. Shape into rose-like pinwheels and place into the prepared muffin tin.
6. Brush with the egg wash and bake for 20–25 minutes, until golden and bubbling.
7. Let cool briefly, then ease any melted cheese back into place and loosen edges.
8. Transfer to the parchment paper to finish cooling.
9. Drizzle with hot honey, add a little cranberry sauce, and garnish with rosemary.

Enjoy the holidays – and this perfect pairing!








Moon Roast is an award-winning small batch specialty coffee roastery in Alresford with a unique family heritage in the trade. We create exceptional taste profiles not found anywhere else.

Operating from a working farm in the heart of the Hampshire Countryside, we strive to produce exceptional coffee leaving a minimal ecological footprint embracing a farm to cup ethos.

Visit our Roastery Kiosk on site Monday - Friday 9am to 4pm.

Moon Roast
Award-winning. Sustainably sourced. Perfectly crafted.
www.moonroast.co.uk
@moonroastcoffee
17 Great Taste Awards
Established 2012.

THE RED LION
PUB, INN & DINING

Discover Odiham's independent pub with rooms and dine on quality seasonal food, sip on a great selection of drinks at the bar, and stay in one of the charming boutique bedrooms.

102 High Street, Odiham, Hampshire RG29 1LP
01256 701145 | redlionodiham.co.uk



CLOSING THE CIRCLE

Debbie Reid on Essex, Itasca and the future of English still wine

When you speak to Debbie Reid, you very quickly realise two things: she does not waste words, and she absolutely knows what she's talking about.

There's a farmer's practicality to her, wrapped around a deep, quietly impressive understanding of both the land and the numbers. It's a combination that makes her the ideal person to be overseeing the build and installation of Itasca's new Essex winery - and she's doing it with skin in the game as a grower and investor.

"I feel my involvement in the winery now completes a circle," she says. "I'm a grower, I sell grapes, we look after vineyards and now I'm involved in the winery. I understand the pinch points for both sides."

This "whole-circle" perspective is exactly what sits behind Itasca's bold move into Essex - and why Debbie is such a pivotal figure in the story.

From farmer's daughter to vineyard owner

Debbie's route into wine didn't begin in a cellar. It began, as she puts it, "because we are farmers."

She grew up on the family farm, but her early career took her elsewhere: a call centre, project management roles in London, then account management for an IT recycling company working across the UK and Germany. It was only in her early forties, when her father began to slow down, that she returned to the family business.

Recognising that farming is as much about finance as fields, she retrained, qualifying as an AAT accountant so she could properly understand the numbers behind a modern agricultural business. She then led the succession process and ultimately took over the family farm herself.

"When I look at businesses - agriculture,

viticulture, winery - I always look at the financial setup as well as operations," she explains. "I'm not just looking at farming; I bring a rounded view."

That rounded view turned out to be invaluable when viticulture arrived on the scene.

Crow's Lane Estate - a family vineyard with big ambitions

Debbie's entry into wine started close to home. Her ex-husband, Simon, decided to plant vines on land neighbouring Martin's Lane, an established Essex vineyard.

"He thought, 'If they can do it, so can I,'" she smiles.

In 2018 he planted eight acres. Debbie could see what was happening in Essex - more sunshine hours, lower rainfall and an emerging reputation for high-quality



still wine - and recognised the potential. Despite no longer being together as a couple, they chose to invest jointly in the project, creating Crow's Lane Estate, a genuine family business.

The shareholding says it all: Debbie, Simon and their two children, Millie and Mikey, each own 25%. And they haven't stood still.

- ◆ Initial 8 acres planted in 2018
- ◆ A further 16 acres in 2020
- ◆ Around 40 more acres in 2022
- ◆ The final 23 acres of Chardonnay in 2024

Today, Crow's Lane Estate stands at 88 acres, planted predominantly to Pinot Noir, with a little Sauvignon Blanc and 23 acres of Chardonnay.

As the vineyard grew, so did the services around it. The family diversified into a mechanical viticulture contracting business, with her son operating a grape harvester and looking after other people's vines as well as their own.

And it was in a meeting about that machine harvester that the idea which changed everything finally crystallised.

The lightbulb moment: "We need a winery in Essex"

Looking at the sheer volume of grapes the harvester could pick in a day, Debbie walked out of that meeting with a stark realisation.

"It was just so plain to see that we could have as many harvesters as we wanted, but if we didn't have any wineries in the locality, there was no point."

At the time, large volumes of Essex grapes were being hauled out of the county to be processed elsewhere. In an emerging still-wine hot spot, it simply wasn't sustainable - financially or environmentally.

That was around four years ago. From there, Debbie began pursuing the idea of a local, scalable winery. When Itasca Wines emerged as a partner - with its technical depth, winemaking track record and ambition - the pieces fell together.

She is now not only the director overseeing the Essex build, but also an investor in Itasca.

"I have skin in the game," she says, matter-of-factly. "I live in the area, I see the huge potential of having a contract winery embedded in an emerging premium grape-growing area."

Why Essex - and why this site?

Debbie is clear-eyed about why Essex is the right place for such a major investment.

The county has the highest density of vineyards in England, particularly along the north side of the River Crouch, where sites almost run into each other. It also enjoys more sunshine and lower rainfall than most of the UK - conditions that have made it one of the country's most talked-about regions for still wine.

But it's not just the climate. The location of the new winery gives it reach far beyond Essex. Around 30 minutes from the M25, it is well-placed to serve north Kent, Suffolk, Norfolk and Hertfordshire as well as its home patch - a proper east-coast hub.

Then there's the planning permission.

"The fact we've achieved planning permission for such a large-scale operation in England has huge value," she notes. "A number of other large vineyard organisations cannot get planning permission. That shouldn't be underestimated."

Crucially, the site has built-in scalability. The current building represents only about two-thirds of what has already been approved, with space for further investment and expansion as demand grows.

Built as a factory, not a folly

Anyone expecting a quaint, timber-clad showpiece in Essex will be disappointed - and that's entirely deliberate.

"Lots of wineries are very pretty," Debbie says. "This one isn't. For the volume and capacity we're doing, and for the pure cost of it, it had to be built as a factory. It's fit for purpose."

The design of the new winery is based on hard-earned experience from Itasca's Hampshire site. Winemaker Ben Smith, working with Apex and Itasca Technical Services, essentially asked: What works in Hampshire? What doesn't? And how do we make it better?

The result is a single, enormous, purpose-built building with a clean, logical flow: grapes in at one end, wine out at the other.

Key features include:

- ◆ Capacity for around 650 tonnes of grapes inside in year one
- ◆ Future expansion to roughly 1,300 tonnes with external tanks



◆ A receiver hopper that allows continuous intake of grapes, even when presses are already running

◆ The ability to receive fruit in bins, "doughnuts" or trailers, giving growers full flexibility

The receiver hopper is particularly important. Machine-harvested grapes can go straight from harvester to trailer and into the winery, where they are tipped into the hopper and fed to the presses. The trailers can then return immediately to the vineyard to pick more.

"It enables scalability," Debbie explains. "If the presses are fully operational, we can still receive grapes. That saves significant processing costs for vineyard owners."

It's exactly the kind of quiet, practical innovation that underpins the entire project: focused not on theatrics, but on efficiency, volume and value.

Sustainability in practice, not just on paper

For all its industrial scale, the Essex winery has been designed with the environment firmly in mind.

First, simply being local matters. Grapes grown in Essex will no longer need to be trucked long distances to be processed, saving both money and emissions. As mechanised harvesting becomes more common, those savings multiply.

Second, the site itself is a sustainability asset. The area enjoys some of the highest sunshine hours in the country, making it ideal not only for ripening grapes but for generating electricity via planned solar panels on the building.

Water, meanwhile, is treated as the precious commodity it has become. The winery will have its own environmental

treatment plant - essentially a series of planted pools that naturally filter and clean wastewater on site, in the same best-practice style as Hampshire.

"All wastewater will be processed through the treatment plant," Debbie says. "Nothing will be taken off site. And we're investing in technology that uses water more efficiently - because it's no longer a cheap commodity."

Scaling English still wine - and making it competitive

Debbie is very clear about the role the Essex winery needs to play in the evolution of English wine.

"The future of English wine is scalability," she says. "We have to be able to process significant volumes at the correct price point."

Right now, she notes, English wine is still often perceived as "too expensive" by many consumers. The goal isn't to chase the lowest price on the shelf - "we're never going to compete purely on value" - but to move closer, so that shoppers can realistically pick up a bottle of English still wine instead of something French, Spanish or Portuguese.

That means:

- ◆ Growers becoming more economical and efficient in how they produce grapes
- ◆ Wineries becoming more mechanised and scalable in how they process them
- ◆ Facilities like Itasca Essex reducing haulage, handling and overheads through smart design and location

Add to that the simple fact that Essex sits on the doorstep of London, one of the world's most dynamic wine markets, and the opportunity becomes obvious.

"I personally think this project will expand the English still wine industry in England," Debbie says. "We're in exactly the right place to do that."

The focus in Essex will be firmly on still wines - particularly rosé, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay - with the winery built to support the volumes and styles the region is already proving it can do so well.

People, families and the "in-between" role

For all the talk of tanks and tonnes, Debbie returns again and again to people.

"You don't just invest in bricks and mortar," she says. "You invest in people - their energy, their vision, their emotional involvement in it all."

Her own position is unusually multifaceted. She is:

- ◆ A grower, selling grapes and running a vineyard
- ◆ A viticulture contractor, helping manage other people's vines
- ◆ An investor in Itasca
- ◆ And, through Crow's Lane, part of the landlord family for the Essex winery site - her daughter and ex-husband are the landlords; Itasca is the tenant

That structure might sound complicated, but in practice it has fostered a culture of collaboration and transparency.

"It's not 'landlord versus tenant' - we work together to make sure it's fair for both parties," she explains. "I have insight into things like building regs from both sides, and I see impacts that others might not appreciate. It's quite a unique situation."

As for her own leadership style, Debbie underplays it, but it's easy to read between the lines.

She describes herself as a multitasker ("being a woman, I multitask every day"), a lifelong project manager, and above all inquisitive.

"Every day is a school day," she laughs. "I ask lots of questions. And I'm always looking at the bottom line to see what things are costing and whether we're getting value for money."

The road to first harvest - and beyond

The immediate priority is simple: get the winery built, commissioned and ready for its first harvest - without losing sight of the long-term vision.

Debbie is realistic about the challenges.

A new site means a new workflow for staff who know Hampshire inside out but must now learn how Essex runs. Weather, as always, will be the master. A hot, early year will demand rapid mobilisation; a slower, more gradual harvest will be easier to manage.

To prepare, the plan is to allow around a month of training for staff on site before harvest begins, and to be realistic about what can be processed in year one.

"Bad news hangs about," she says candidly. "We need to get it right from the start."

Beyond that, she expects the winery to grow as people see it in action.

"With anything new, people are cautious until they see it working," she says. "But once we've got a couple of good years under our belt, demand will build. Larger brands buying surplus grapes in Essex won't want to haul them out of county - they'll come to a modern, efficient winery that's right here."

She also hints at future possibilities: Itasca potentially acting as a pre-processing hub for other producers, "sweating the assets" by pressing and settling juice for smaller wineries who then finish their wines elsewhere. It's a model borrowed from the US that could further strengthen Essex as a still wine centre.

"You've got to have a vision"

Asked what advice she gives to would-be vineyard owners, Debbie doesn't hesitate.

"You've got to have a vision of what you're going to do with your wine before you plant your vines," she says. "A lot of growers haven't really thought about what they're going to do with their grapes. That's one of the big challenges for the English wine industry - and also a big opportunity for Itasca, because we have scalability."

Vision is a word that comes up often when people talk about Itasca. What Debbie brings to that vision is something quieter but equally vital: discipline, realism, experience and a deep understanding of both sides of the equation.

She may describe every day as a school day, but from the outside, it's clear that many in the industry will soon be looking to Essex - and to Debbie - as an example of how to build English still wine for the long term: grounded, scalable, fair to growers and firmly focused on the future.



Cranborne Lodge

The New Heart of English Wine & Hospitality



Itasca Wines is delighted to introduce Cranborne Lodge - a historic Dorset estate whose name and identity have been restored to honour its original roots in the heart of Cranborne Chase.

This remarkable Georgian manor now begins a new life as part of the Itasca family: a place where English wine, heritage and hospitality meet in a setting shaped by centuries of craftsmanship and landscape. As the home of Itasca's evolving wine vision, Cranborne Lodge stands poised to become a flagship destination for gatherings, celebrations and the future culture of English wine.

Set within the village of Cranborne, the Lodge is enveloped by 28 acres of ancient woodland, gardens and orchards. There is a rare sense of timelessness here - the kind that encourages guests to slow down, breathe deeply and feel, almost immediately, at home. On the lawn stands a majestic black walnut tree, believed to be six, perhaps even eight centuries old,

whose immense presence reminds us that enduring beauty is born of time, care and patience. It is, in many ways, the perfect symbol for Cranborne Lodge itself: deeply rooted in history, yet blossoming with potential.

A House with Centuries of Story

Cranborne Lodge is woven into the wider story of Cranborne Chase, a landscape that has drawn discerning visitors for over a thousand years. Medieval kings rode through these forests to hunt. Nearby Cranborne Manor was a favourite royal lodge of King John in the 12th century. Over the centuries, the powerful Cecil family shaped the greater estate, leaving a legacy that influenced British politics from the Elizabethan era through the Victorian age.

Writers and artists have long been captivated by this part of Dorset. Thomas Hardy drew inspiration from its rolling chalk downlands and atmospheric skies; Cecil Beaton created some of his most iconic works only miles away; Lucian Freud

and Elisabeth Frink found themselves repeatedly drawn to its quiet drama. Today, Cranborne Chase is officially recognised as an International Dark Sky Reserve, where the evenings remain unusually clear, peaceful and star-filled.

It is this extraordinary combination - heritage, landscape and atmosphere - that gives Cranborne Lodge its unmistakable sense of place.

A Home for Gathering, Celebration and Connection

Far from being a preserved relic, Cranborne Lodge is a warm, welcoming house designed for people to gather and reconnect. Its rooms carry an effortless elegance: two dining rooms, two relaxed drawing rooms, a spirited billiards room, a playful children's playroom and a cinema-style snug. Eleven bedrooms, each individually styled, offer comfort and grace. Beyond the French doors lies a loggia warmed by a firepit, leading to broad stone

terraces overlooking magnificent gardens. And down in the cellar, a lively micro-club waits for late-night dancing.

Weddings spill out across terraces and woodland glades. House-party weekends flow from breakfast in the loggia to cocktails at sunset. Corporate retreats find quiet focus in the morning light, with conversations continuing by firelight or under the expanse of the Dorset sky.

Cranborne Lodge is available exclusively, giving guests the freedom to make the estate entirely their own. The house, the gardens, the flow of the day - all become part of their experience.

The Itasca Vision: Where Wine Meets Place

For Itasca Wines, the acquisition of Cranborne Lodge represents a natural and compelling evolution. **At the heart of this decision was the desire to create a true home for English wine - a destination where the craft, culture and values behind Penn Croft wines could be experienced more immersively and meaningfully.**

Here, wine is not a feature but a foundation. Tastings, seasonal feasts, winemaker-led events and curated wine experiences will become integral to the rhythm of the house, each designed to deepen guests' connection with English wine and the land that shapes it.

The surrounding countryside holds real promise for the future planting of vines. Its chalk-rich soils, gentle elevations and temperate climate echo characteristics that have already proven successful in southern England. While the journey from soil to bottle takes time, the long-term aspiration to cultivate a Dorset vineyard adds a significant dimension to Cranborne Lodge's purpose - strengthening the bond between place and product.

Penn Croft's philosophy - sustainable, low-intervention winemaking that gives back to the natural world - aligns naturally with the spirit of Cranborne Lodge. Together, they form a partnership defined by authenticity, stewardship and respect for land.

Supporting this vision is an accomplished creative team: renowned country house interior designers, RHS award-winning landscape designers and experienced hospitality leaders from some of Britain's most admired destinations. Their work is thoughtful rather than hurried - an unfolding that honours both the estate's

history and its role in the future of English wine.

The 2025 Summer Soirée marked the first expression of this new direction. Guests gathered in the gardens for Penn Croft wines, live music and the launch of the Peony Bar - a warm and convivial space that now anchors many evenings. It was a celebration not just of the estate, but of its promise as a centre for wine, culture and community.

A Landscape Full of Promise

The grounds of Cranborne Lodge possess a unique natural rhythm. Woodland paths lead to quiet, contemplative corners. The lawns sweep toward the orchard and wilder pockets of grassland that speak to the agricultural story of Dorset. The ancient black walnut tree - a rare and awe-inspiring specimen - serves as a natural gathering point, perfect for outdoor ceremonies or intimate storytelling moments.

Plans are underway to enhance the gardens with a focus on biodiversity, seasonality and an interplay between cultivated and natural spaces. In years to come, the landscape may also support vines, bringing the story of Cranborne Lodge full circle by allowing guests to experience wine in a place where it is not only celebrated but grown.

For Itasca, this is not a project rushed by short-term aims. Like winemaking itself, it is a long-term endeavour - one built on care, craft and patience.

Plans are already underway to enhance and reimagine the gardens with a focus on biodiversity, seasonality and harmony between cultivated and natural spaces. In



time, the broader landscape may support vines, offering the possibility of a distinctly Dorset expression of English wine.

A Destination with Soul and Purpose

Cranborne Lodge stands at the meeting point of heritage and creativity, of timeless English charm and modern vision. It is a place for celebration, reflection and shared experience. A place where wine is not only tasted, but felt - in the warmth of a dining room, the hush beneath ancient branches, the laughter echoing across a terrace at dusk.

For guests, for partners and for the Itasca community, the Lodge represents more than a destination. It is a symbol of what English wine and hospitality can be when rooted in authenticity, craft and deeply held values.

The story of Cranborne Lodge is only just beginning. And like the finest wines, it will deepen, expand and grow more remarkable with every passing season.



SEALED WITH NATURE:

The Story of Cork and Sparkling Wine at Penn Croft and Itasca

From ancient temples to the vineyards of Hampshire, cork has sealed our past - and our future. At Penn Croft and Itasca Wines, this remarkable material connects sustainability, craftsmanship, and celebration in every bottle.

A History Rooted in Time

Cork is one of humanity's oldest natural materials, with a history stretching back over 5,000 years. Archaeological evidence suggests that ancient civilisations such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans were among the first to use cork - not for wine at first, but for its lightness, buoyancy, and resilience.

- ◆ Around 3000 BCE, the ancient Egyptians used cork to seal jars, make fishing floats, and even craft sandal soles.
- ◆ The Greeks (circa 500 BCE) valued cork for its sacred and medicinal qualities, using it in temples and for buoyant fishing equipment.
- ◆ The Romans refined its uses - employing cork to seal amphorae of wine and olive oil, insulate buildings, and craft stoppers for medicinal jars. Pliny the Elder, the Roman naturalist, even wrote about the cork oak tree, describing how its bark could regenerate - a marvel to early observers.

However, it wasn't until the 17th century that cork truly became synonymous with wine. The French Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon (of Champagne fame) is often credited with popularising the use of cork stoppers for sparkling wine bottles, replacing the less effective wooden pegs wrapped in oil-soaked rags that had been used before.

That long history of versatility and regeneration continues today - especially in winemaking, where cork's natural properties make it irreplaceable. From that moment onward, cork and wine became inseparable: partners in preserving the delicate balance of aroma, pressure, and time.

Nature's Perfect Closure

When a bottle of sparkling wine is opened, the gentle pop of the cork is more than a festive sound - it is the result of centuries of craftsmanship, natural harmony, and sustainability. At both Penn Croft and Itasca Wines, the use of natural cork for



our sparkling wines is not merely a nod to tradition, but a deliberate choice grounded in ecology, performance, and respect for the environment.

Cork comes from the bark of the Quercus suber, or cork oak tree, which grows primarily in the Mediterranean basin - especially Portugal and southern Spain. Unlike other trees, the cork oak's bark regenerates naturally after harvesting, allowing it to be stripped every 9-12 years without harming the tree. A single cork oak can live for more than two centuries, locking away carbon from the atmosphere throughout its life.

The cork forests, known as Montados, are vital ecosystems. They provide a home to endangered species such as the Iberian lynx and black stork, while supporting thousands of rural farming families. In fact, studies show that cork forests absorb up to five times more CO₂ when harvested regularly - meaning that every cork used helps sustain a living, breathing carbon sink (ie. forests, oceans and soils).

The Science of the Sparkle

Beyond its ecological virtues, cork performs a unique technical role in sparkling wines. Its natural elasticity and micro-cellular structure make it the only material that can securely contain the pressure of fine bubbles while allowing the wine to age gracefully.

When a sparkling wine is sealed, a natural cork is compressed and inserted into the bottle's neck, held in place by the wire cage, or muselet. Over time, as the cork expands slightly, it maintains a perfect seal, protecting the wine from oxidation while allowing the slow, subtle exchange of gases that contributes to complexity and depth in mature wines. This is something synthetic closures simply cannot replicate.

For sparkling wines made at Penn Croft and Itasca, where precision, purity, and longevity are cornerstones of the winemaking philosophy, cork remains the natural choice.

From Bark to Bottle: How Sparkling Wine Corks Are Made

The journey from the cork oak forest to bottle neck is a fascinating one - part tradition, part precision engineering. It all begins in the sun-drenched cork forests of the Mediterranean, where the bark of the Quercus suber tree is carefully stripped by hand during the summer months. Skilled cork harvesters, known as descortixadores, remove the outer bark with small axes - a delicate art that requires years of training to ensure the tree is never harmed.

After harvesting, the cork planks are stacked and seasoned in the open air for up to six months, allowing them to stabilise naturally. They are then boiled in hot water to clean, soften, and increase their elasticity - the very property that allows cork to form a tight, resilient seal.

For sparkling wines, corks are made differently than those used for still wines. Instead of being cut from a single piece of bark, most sparkling wine corks are constructed from a high-grade agglomerate core (granulated cork pieces pressed under pressure and steam) topped with two or three natural cork discs. These discs form the part that comes into direct contact with the wine, ensuring purity, flexibility, and a perfect seal.

Once shaped and assembled, the corks are washed, dried, and mechanically compressed to fit the bottleneck. Before compression, the cork is gently softened with warm water or steam to make it more pliable. It is then passed through

a specialised corking machine where a conical or iris-like mechanism squeezes it evenly from all sides, reducing it to a fraction of its original diameter. The compressed cork is pushed swiftly into the bottle neck, where it begins its slow expansion. Over time, it takes on the familiar 'mushroom' shape - formed naturally by the internal pressure of the wine and the wire cage, or muselet, that holds it securely in place.

The entire process - from forest to final cork - can take up to a year, and every step is guided by sustainability standards and quality control. It's an extraordinary blend of craftsmanship and natural science, ensuring that each pop you hear is the sound of meticulous care from tree to table.

Closing the Loop

In keeping with our environmental commitment, corks used at Penn Croft and Itasca are sourced from certified sustainable producers, ensuring that each bottle supports responsible forestry and fair labour practices.

Even after opening, corks continue their green journey - they're biodegradable and recyclable, often repurposed into flooring, insulation, or creative craft projects - such as suitably festive wreath adorning the cover of this magazine.

There is a quiet ritual in easing a cork from the neck of a bottle - that satisfying pop is the culmination of centuries of craftsmanship and the promise of shared moments. So next time you hear that familiar sound, remember: it's not just the start of a celebration, but the echo of nature, heritage, and craftsmanship in harmony.

CORK IN NUMBERS

- ◆ 70% of the world's cork comes from Portugal and Spain
- ◆ 100% renewable and biodegradable
- ◆ Each natural cork stores approximately 300g of CO₂
- ◆ A cork oak can be harvested up to 15 times in its lifetime
- ◆ Cork forests support over 200 species of wildlife



2025: A Year of Growth, Renewal & Recognition

Taking over the vineyard at Jenkyn Place - a new chapter begins

2025 saw the official handover of Jenkyn Place vineyard into the Itasca family - a pivotal moment signalling the next phase in our mission: to combine heritage land with forward-thinking viticulture. With fresh energy, we've begun plans to integrate Jenkyn Place into our broader vineyard portfolio, setting the scene for expansion.



Building the new Essex Winery - from vision to reality

Ground was broken this year on our planned Essex Winery - a cornerstone for our ambition to craft wines closer to London and the East. The new facility will support production, tastings, and hospitality. Establishing this winery represents our commitment to accessibility, quality and bringing English wine to a wider audience.

Critical acclaim: Bacchus triumphs at home and abroad

Our flagship white, Penn Croft Bacchus - produced via Itasca Wines - continues to turn heads. Reviewers have praised its combination of crisp acidity, minerality and bright fruit. We were humbled to be singled out by the globally influential wine critic Robert Parker (Wine Advocate) - an endorsement that helps underline our potential to compete at the highest levels.



Investors' Event in May - sharing our story and ambitions

May's Investors Event brought together visionaries, early supporters and new backers to present our 5-year roadmap. From regenerative viticulture to expanded production and experience-led wine tourism, it was a chance to align on values and growth - and to toast a future grounded in sustainability and excellence.



Hart District Council Civic Day at Penn Croft - a historic final gathering

In March 2025, Penn Croft Winery and the Cellar Door had the honour of hosting Hart District Council Civic Day, led by the Chairman of Hart District Council and his Consort, Councillor Dermot Smith and Mrs Sandra Smith. Distinguished guests from neighbouring counties - including mayors, mayoresses, chairmen, vice-chairmen and their consorts - spent the day touring the vineyard and winery before enjoying a curated charcuterie lunch and wine tasting at the Cellar Door.

What made the occasion particularly poignant was its timing. With the forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) - part of the wider English Devolution framework - many of the visiting civic leaders will not continue in office once the changes take effect. Hosting this year's Civic Day at Penn Croft became, symbolically, a final gathering for longstanding public servants: a celebratory farewell set among the vines.



Acquiring Cranborne Lodge & hosting the Summer Soirée - welcoming friends old and new

With the acquisition of Cranborne Lodge we gained more than land: we gained a home to host community, friends, partners and wine lovers. Our Summer Soirée - the first under the new owners - was a joyful introduction to our vision for Itasca: blending traditional English countryside warmth with contemporary wine culture. Guests raised glasses to what's ahead.

First vineyard in England certified regenerative by A Greener World (AGW)

In November 2025, our estate - Penn Croft Vineyards - was formally recognised as the first vineyard in England to receive AGW's Certified Regenerative accreditation. This certification affirms what we've practised for decades: healthy soils, biodiversity, cover crops, rotational grazing, wildlife corridors, and soil-friendly vine spacing. It's not just a badge - it's proof our wines spring from land cared for with intention, respect and ecological integrity.



Looking ahead: 2025 lays the foundation - 2026 will build the legacy

With vineyards growing, facilities expanding and recognition coming in, 2025 has been about establishing roots. As we move into 2026, our sights are set on scaling production, deepening sustainability, broadening distribution and sharing the essence of English terroir with more wine lovers than ever.

PENN CROFT THE CELLAR DOOR

PENN CROFT WINERY ROOTED IN NATURE, GROWN WITH PURPOSE

Nestled in the rolling Hampshire countryside, Penn Croft Winery is a pioneering vineyard committed to producing exceptional English wines through sustainable and regenerative practices.

From grape to glass, every step is guided by a deep respect for the land and a passion for crafting wines that reflect the beauty and character of their surroundings.

RELAX AT THE CELLAR DOOR

There's a little magic about our Cellar Door, with its delightful atmosphere, that simply envelopes you with a feel good factor.

So why not relax over a morning coffee with breakfast, meet friends for lunch and enjoy a cheeky glass of something, or unwind at the end of the day with a beverage over dinner... it's a place you'll want to keep coming back to!

OPENING HOURS

Wednesday - Sat: 9am-5pm
Sunday: 10am-3pm

BOOK A TOUR AND DISCOVER OUR WINES

Treat yourself or loved one to a truly memorable experience and explore our state-of-the-art facilities followed by an in-depth wine tasting paired with a charcuterie board.



To find out more information about any of the above simply scan the QR Code or visit penncroftvineyards.com

