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SURREY LIFE

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THIS month, my insatiable quest to discover Surrey's many treasures, took me to the Denbies Wine Estate, in Dorking. Family owned and run since 1984, Denbies vineyard was planted in 1986, and has become one of the largest wine producers in the UK.

Competing on an international level, Denbies have won multiple gold awards for sparkling wine production. Not adverse to a bit of sparkle, I wanted to know more about what's being produced with such flair, on my doorstep.

On this occasion I ditched my family (my husband is teetotal) and invited three friends along for a day out. My friend, Sam, kindly offered to drive, undoubtedly the short straw when heading off to a wine tasting experience and I doubt she was much amused by the constant and keen repetition of the question, "Are we nearly there yet?"

While we are not ladies who lunch on a regular basis, we took up this opportunity with notable enthusiasm. The chance to sample some English sparkling wine can induce severe keenness, I find.

We were booked on the indoor wine tour, although outdoor tours are offered when the weather is more clement; I'm certainly keen to go back in autumn when there's the possibility of picking fruit. The vine and dine experience offers a snapshot of the working day at a winery. As the work is no doubt backbreaking, a snapshot seems suffice!

Our tour started in the winery's flat screen cinema, where we watched an interesting film, *The Vineyard Through the Seasons*. We learnt about the geology and history of the estate and were given some idea about the changes (and challenges) that the vineyard faces. I learnt a lot and surprised myself by cultivating a genuine appreciation of the wine making-process – from vine to bottle – previously I've been more concerned with bottle to glass, to mouth.

While walking through the working winery, we were given a guided commentary regarding



Bottoms up!

Despite being the first to admit she enjoys a glass or two of wine, bestselling author Adele Parks has never visited the vineyards on her doorstep. This month, she sampled some award-winning home-grown wine at Denbies Wine Estate in Dorking



Don't forget to drop by Denbies Wine Estate from Monday January 29 to Sunday February 4, when the winning snaps from Surrey Life's Beautiful Surrey Photography Competition will be on display in the gallery.

Above: Adele with her friends at Denbies
Left: Some of the vineyard's sparkling wines

the equipment used in the wine production. The aroma was wonderful, yeasty, fruity and promising. I was proud of my friends who asked questions. Their intellectual curiosity disguised my sharp desire to get to the tasting part!

That took place in the atmospheric cellars, where we sampled three different wines; Demi-Sec, Whitedowns Brut and Greenfields. Gently opening the bottles with a hiss, our marvellous guide effortlessly gifted us phrases that we can all use at future dinner parties to impress our guests. We know a bit about the size of the bubbles, where the taste happens on the tongue and can now speak with some confidence about the grace, the liveliness and the intensity. Sipping was encouraged, spitting was optional.

Denbies has a small art gallery, a comfy café, a village green farm shop and a gift shop, but we chose to finish our day in the third-floor Gallery Restaurant, which offers spectacular views reaching over Box Hill and the North Downs. The seasonal menu was impressive, delicious, we didn't want to leave. Sam's big tip, leave your car at home. ♦