Four decades of wine tourism at Kent’s oldest vineyard

NFU Mutual, the UK’s leading rural insurer, has worked with Biddenden Vineyards for the last 29 years, supporting the award-winning producer as it has grown and diversified into tourism.

This article delves into how the Barnes family has successfully managed that diversification, and how it has adapted over the years to appeal to more visitors, while also managing the risks and challenges.

The Barnes family has owned and managed Kent’s oldest vineyard, Biddenden, since 1969. It was also among the early UK winemakers to diversify into agritourism.

“Mum and dad opened the shop around 40 years ago,” says Tom Barnes, who represents the third generation of the family to work on the vineyard. “As a child I remember vividly seeing coaches turn up every day, and people coming in for their ploughman’s, a cream tea or a glass of wine,” Tom says.

About fifteen years ago, realising that the people pouring off coaches were spending little and crowding out other visitors, Tom’s parents decided to switch tack. “We needed to cut down on the coach loads of people that were turning up just for a single glass of wine or a coffee and never really buying anything else – and instead focus on visitors wanting to spend money.”

A new approach to tourism

The family now takes a different approach to tourism. Smaller groups have replaced coachloads at the vineyard, which spans 25 acres.

Tom, who is general manager at Biddenden, says that self-guided tours have become the most popular way to visit the estate: “You can come along and walk around at your own pace,” he says.

These tours are particularly popular among visitors who are less knowledgeable about wine, but nonetheless enthusiastic about visiting and trying it out. Tom says: "It appeals to people that may not be confident in a fully tutored tasting. It's a welcoming experience into wine and a snapshot into what we do as a family."

"We make it really relaxed. You can go for a walk around the estate, see the varieties, see how we grow, see the bottling process, and then have a tasting."

Other visitors may join private guided tours, comprising of groups of up to 12 people. 'Meet the Winemaker' tours are also popular, which are designed for groups looking for an in-depth, personalised experience with an opportunity to discuss the wines with the people who make them, including Tom and his father Julian.

A trusted partnership

Doug Jackson, a Senior Agent and viticulture specialist at NFU Mutual, has worked with Biddenden for nine years. He says that, along with the quality of their drinks, much of the estate's success lies in the family's strong reputation and relationships in the local community: "Even before I started working with them, I was well aware of the strength of their business and brand in the Kent rural community, and the loyalty it attracted."

Tom says: "We have had a very good relationship with NFU Mutual for a long time. Doug understands our business."

"NFU Mutual certainly deliver when something goes wrong," Tom adds. "I think that's what's so valuable about NFU Mutual."

Doug, for his part, is proud of the partnership: "Having worked together for many years, it's about being partners. I know the family, I know the people running the business."

Wearing many hats

As NFU Mutual has seen many times working with busy farming businesses that have diversified – in the case of Biddenden, into producing ciders and juices, alongside wines and agritourism – the Barnes family find themselves juggling a wide range of roles and responsibilities.

Tom says: "It's not just winemaking. We are sales, HR, logistics, marketing, ecommerce, and all other aspects that come with running a family business."

He says his parents Julian and Sally have been trying to slow down and step back a little, but "as the business grows that becomes more challenging as we grow the team around us".

A desire to maintain high levels of service keeps the pressure on: "Call me old-fashioned, but if you're paying for an experience, we must deliver which in turn sets a high bar," Tom says.

Tour guides require a broad knowledge, he adds: "They need to be able to cover all bases, from the most basic to the most technical. You never know who's going to turn up on a tour."

Finding the right people to help maintain those standards is among Tom's biggest challenges. He says: "We are very good at what we do, but we are fully reliant on members of our team having the same passion. We could make the most amazing bottle of wine in the world, but if the greeting the customer gets or the staff in the retail space don't carry the same passion, then all the work before is completely irrelevant. It's the single most important bit of the business."

Having strong staff and detailed training is essential to achieving that, he says. This is a common challenge NFU Mutual has seen while working with winemakers and vineyards.

Managing risk

Another challenge, which NFU Mutual supports with, is to keep all estate visitors safe from harm. Tom says: "Agritourism is more than just tourism. You've got people walking around our estate where there are numerous hazards and it could be a health and safety nightmare. When you open your doors to the public, you're taking responsibility for them."

Tom says operating a working agricultural site as well as a hospitality business magnifies the challenge. "Rather than walking into a coffee shop, add a tractor mowing to it and it becomes a whole other beast," he says.

This means that Tom and team must always be on the look-out for everyday vineyard hazards, from trailing wires to vehicles working nearby. "NFU Mutual Risk Management Services Limited help us with this," he says.

NFU Mutual's Doug says: "For a farmer going into wine production and tourism, it changes the risk profile of the business. You need to be proactive around managing the risks".

Doug gives an example: "Biddenden had a recent claim on their insurance after a sprayer struck a telegraph pole accidentally. Tom picked up the phone to me. We got the claims team mobilised and literally within days it was sorted."

He adds that the team at Biddenden takes a "really positive approach to health and safety and appreciate it can actually enhance the business".

That is no mean feat on such a busy estate. Behind the busy tourism business, wine production at Biddenden has grown to around 80,000 bottles per year. All vine work on the estate is still carried out by hand, including pruning, canopy management and picking.

Looking ahead

Some forty years after Tom's parents welcomed the first tour coaches to Biddenden, Tom is clear about the impression he aims to give visitors: "I think we work really hard and hopefully that carries over into the experience that the customers get."

It is important for Tom that visitors get the chance to see the vineyard as a working agricultural business – not just a place to taste wine. "It's not all glamorous, it's agriculture," he says.

He adds: "We want to make it enjoyable, memorable, and give them a reason to come back."

> “The visitor experience has become a really valuable part of the business. It supports our brand and wine sales.”

NFU Mutual continues to support the Barnes family as they navigate their business’ evolution. Doug says: “We understand the viticulture business and the challenges. We can talk to vineyard owners about issues like cyber risks, product contamination and recall, hail and frost risks, machinery breakdown, engineering insurance with expertise.”

This extends beyond simply offering insurance. Doug says: “We help vineyards and winemakers identify their risks, as well as understanding which ones they want to insure and which to mitigate through other practices. It’s about being a risk partner rather than a transactional insurer.”

Tom says: “We aim to be real and hands on, not just a shop front.”

If you’re looking for tailored support for your vineyard, NFU Mutual’s expert regional viticulture Agents have deep experience supporting customers through every stage of the production process, from grape-growing and winemaking to retail and wine tourism. Ask them about NFU Mutual’s specialist Risk Management Services and insurance solutions, including cover such as Business Interruption and Public Liability.

To find out more about how NFU Mutual can support you with your viticulture business, visit nfumutual.co.uk/viticulture or contact your local agency office today.

Find out more ›

NFU Mutual
INSURANCE | PENSIONS | INVESTMENTS