In the spring of 1952, a bare sixty years ago, the first commercial vineyard of modern times in the UK was planted in Hampshire. Since those small beginnings, the industry (yes, that's what those who work and invest in it consider it to be) has grown from that initial one acre (0.40 ha) to today's total of over 1,500 ha producing an average of 2.5 m bottles of wine a year. In the early decades, the varieties of choice were the German cross-bred varieties Müller-Thurgau, Reichensteiner, Huxelrebe, Madeleine Angevine 7672 and Schönburger, together with the hardy French-American hybrid, Seyval Blanc. Although these could produce interesting and enjoyable wines (this was in the days when Blue Nun, Golden Oktober and Black Tower were the wines of choice), their acceptability by both the wine trade and the wine-buying public was limited and in the mid-'90s the area under vine in the UK started to decline, falling by almost 30% in ten years. Then – following the *über*-warm year of 2003, things started to change.

The change has been dubbed (by me) the 'Nyetimber effect', although in reality it perhaps ought to be called the 'climate change' effect. In 1988, just as the plug was being pulled on the UK-Liebfraumilch lake, two Americans started planting a substantial (for the time) area of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier solely for the production of bottle-fermented sparkling wines. Whilst most of us then happily growing and making still wine thought they were mad, when in 1997 they released their first wine – the *1992 Nyetimber Première Cuvée Blanc de Blancs* – which won an IWSC Gold Medal and the English Wine Trophy, we started to change our views. When in 1998 their second release, the *1993 Nyetimber Classic Cuvée* (a true Champagne blend) went one better, winning not only an IWSC Gold Medal and the English Wine Trophy, but also the Bottle Fermented Sparkling Wine Trophy, many of us realised that the game was up for German-variety based still wines.

Whilst the bravery of the American couple, Stuart and Sandy Moss, cannot be denied, the change in the grape varieties, facilitated by a change in the climate, made this possible. Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Meunier had already been tried in several different UK vineyards and found wanting. With the summer temperatures between 1952 and 1988 seldom rising above 30ºC (1976 being a notable exception) the UK fell well inside the accepted definition of 'very cool' (and therefore marginal) for viticulture. However, in the eighteen years between 1989 and 2006, there have only been four years when the temperature didn't rise above this magic figure. In addition to these higher day-time temperatures, night-time temperatures have also been rising (ask retailers how many high-Tog duvets they sell these days) which mean that the vines warm up more quickly to the point where photosynthesis starts, giving us longer ripening hours and – along with seemingly the rest of the vinegrowing world – higher natural sugar levels.

In the 1970s and '80s, natural alcohol levels of 6-7% weren't unusual (if this seems very low, please bear in mind that until quite recently, grapes for Champagne only had to reach 7% to be harvested), whereas over the past few years, many UK winemakers have been producing unchaptalised wines with 11-12% alcohol. In other words, the amount of actual sugar being produced by our vines has doubled. Apart from saving us bagged sugar, climate change has led to two major changes: the ability to make wines from recognisable international varieties and a huge rise in quality, especially for our sparkling wines. Of the absolute quality of our sparkling wines, there is no doubt. The old Punch Magazine's cartoon which asked: *How many men does it take to drink a bottle of English wine?* Answer: *Four - the victim, two to pin him down and the fourth to pour the bottle down his throat* can finally be laid to rest. Far from forcing people to drink it, the best wines are on allocation and even Jancis Robinson MW commented after my March 2012 tasting of ninety English and Welsh sparkling wines: 'the sad fact is that most producers are too young or too cash strapped to be able to afford to give their wines more bottle age.' I don't wholly agree with her that the youth of many sparkling wines is due to cash-flow, but much more likely due to demands from the market.

Those early Nyetimber competition successes have been followed by many more, none greater (in my opinion) than RidgeView's triumph at the 2010 Decanter World Wine Awards when their *2006 Grosvenor Blanc de Blancs* won the International Sparkling Wine Trophy beating Champagnes (mostly costing four to five times as much) from Charles Heidsieck, Taittinger, Moët & Chandon. And these are still early days. It's been almost 350 years since Dom Pérignon waved his magic wand and created Champagne and just think how variable a product that is today, even with the total power the CIVC wields over both growers and producers. English bottle-fermented sparkling wine is undoubtedly a challenger in the global sparkling wine market.

Since the early successes of Nyetimber, many others have followed their format and the area under vine of the three Champagne varieties has gone from 27 ha in 1988 (which did not include Nyetimber's vineyards) to today's (2011) figure of around 700 ha or almost 50% of the total planted area. The major specialist sparkling wine producers who have proved themselves with award-winning wines include Bluebell Estates, Breaky Bottom, Camel Valley, Chapel Down, Coates & Seely, Gusbourne, Hush Heath, Plumpton College, and RidgeView with newcomers Furleigh, Hambledon, Hattingley Valley, Henners, Marden Organic, Meonhill, Redfold, Tinwood, Upperton, Wiston Estate and Wodetone having just launched (or about to launch) debut wines.

The $64,000 question on everyone's lips – or at least everyone who has an involvement with UK-grown sparkling wine – is 'where will all this wine sell?' The real answer to which is 'nobody knows' but it has got people scratching their heads none the less. Although the UK's planted area of sparkling wine varieties has more than doubled since 2003, for a variety of reasons the amount available for sale is still quite small. Most new vineyards (but certainly not all) start cropping in their third or fourth year. The UK's cool climate, even taking global warming into account, still produces grapes high in natural acidity and this means that most sparkling wines, especially those where Chardonnay dominates, can take several years of *sur latte* ageing to mature and be at their best. Also, if you are a relatively new producer, when you first start marketing your maiden vintages, volumes are by definition small and you can probably find a ready market (local and farm-gate) for your wines. There is also a really important difference between still and sparkling wines. With still wines, trade buyers all want wines from the most recent vintages and if you cannot sell them easily, the pressure to empty your tanks before the next harvest and take any offer gets closer as vintage approaches. Sparkling wines, however, are different. Once the wine is in a bottle, in a riddling crate and stacked in a temperature-controlled store, why sell it (a) before it is at its best and (b) until you can find someone willing to pay what you perceive to be the right price. With sparkling wines, bottle-age is seen as a plus: two years good, four years better, six years even better. This places the decision to sell firmly back in the producer's hands and although stacking up wine creates havoc with the cash-flow, at least it means that the temptation to cut and run towards an easy sale at a low price is lessened.

In terms of volumes, accurate figures are impossible to obtain. The Wine Standards Branch collects annual production figures, but doesn't split them between still and sparkling (it being a producer's choice as to what actually happens to the wine they produce), so 'best guesses' are all that we can go on. Taking a four to five year time lag from planting to bottling and adding on another 3-4 years for ageing, the number of 75 cl bottles of UK-grown sparkling wine currently available for sale is probably around the 1 m mark, and that includes wines being sold by producers direct to the consumer. Looking ahead, my projections point to available volumes of sparkling wine reaching 2 m by 2015 and, assuming planting continues at around 10% a year, volumes might rise to 4 m by 2020. To put this in perspective, the UK currently consumes around 100 m bottles a year of sparkling wine of which around 35 m is Champagne, so 1 m bottles doesn't go far. Fast forward to 2020, when Champagne sales might have increased to say 40 m bottles, UK producers either have to steal 10% of that market (and it's a far greater proportion if you want to sell into the £25+ sector) or – and this is what I believe will happen – a combination of growing the market for English Sparkling Wine as a SKU of its own, plus much larger volumes sold from the farm-gate and to private clients (all those weddings and parties where English Sparkling Wine is seen as chic) and the holy grail – exports (which are only just starting, but are looking hopeful). Taken together, these multiple avenues to market add up to a wealth of opportunity for the quality-minded producer.