

UK sparkling wines

In the early '90s winegrowers in the UK were facing a crisis. Buoyed by the success of their wines in the previous fifteen to twenty years, growers had kept on planting and by 1993, the area under vine had reached 1,065 ha (2,632 acres). The main varieties were German cross-breeds – Müller-Thurgau, Reichensteiner, Huxelrebe, and Schönburger – plus the hardy French-American hybrid, Seyval blanc. The problem was that prices were low, sales were falling and the UK's winedrinkers were getting tired of *ersatz*-Liebfraumlisch. The tide had to turn, and it did. Between 1993 and 2004 the area under vine fell by almost 30% to 761 ha (1,880 acres) and many quite substantial vineyards and wineries disappeared. However, unknown to most growers and winemakers, something startling was happening in the Sussex hills.

Stuart and Sandy Moss, two Americans who had come to Europe to buy antique oak furniture, had fallen in love with an Elizabethan house called Nyetimber and in 1988 had planted Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Meunier and had started to make bottle-fermented sparkling wine. Their first two wines – the 1992 *Nyetimber Première Cuvée Blanc de Blancs* and the 1993 *Nyetimber Classic Cuvée* – released in 1996 and 1997 respectively, both won Gold medals and trophies and stunned everyone. Many UK winegrowers realised that the game was up for German-variety based still wines.

Since those early days of UK sparkling wine, the changes have been huge. The area under vine has more than doubled to almost 1,550 ha (3,830 acres), Chardonnay and Pinot noir are the two most widely planted varieties and together, these two varieties plus Meunier and Pinot blanc, account for almost 50% of the planted area. The only varieties to survive from the old days are Bacchus, a still wine variety capable of making excellent Sauvignon blanc-style whites and Seyval blanc and Reichensteiner, both of which growers find very good for both still and sparkling wines.

Nyetimber, now under its third owner, is today the biggest wine producer with 151 ha (373 acres) and others such as Ridgeview and Chapel Down (both of whom have their own vineyards, 'partner' vineyards plus other vineyards under contract) and newcomer Rathfinny, who have started to plant what will become a 160 hectare (395 acres), are – or will be – very substantial businesses. There are also a number of smaller, but high-profile, high quality sparkling wine producers: Breaky Bottom, Camel Valley, Coates & Seely, Furleigh, Gusbourne, Hush Heath and Tinwood. Altogether, there are at least 200 UK producers who make sparkling wines.

For the consumer, English and Welsh wines are sometimes confusing. Whilst many of the major growers are firmly following the styles found in Champagne, others are successfully making wines using other varieties: Seyval blanc and Reichensteiner are commonly found, plus to a lesser extent Pinot blanc, Pinot gris, Rondo and other minor varieties. The other factor for wine drinkers to contend with is that the majority of wines are vintage wines and will vary according to the UK's inconsistent climate. This means that growers will judge each wine and each cuvée and will make

adjustments to the acidity, the length of time spent *sur lie* and the final sweetening dosage as the wine develops and matures and according to the wine itself and the style they want for their customers.

The prices of most UK sparkling wines follow those of Champagne with the majority in the £18-£30 region and a few of the rarer wines in the £30-£50. Most growers consider their wines to be firmly the equal of Champagne, a view many consumers and wine writers also share, and price accordingly.