

## An English icon

If not for Nyetimber, there would be no English sparkling-wine industry today—only a few crude fizzy wines made from hybrid grapes and German crosses. Yet Nyetimber's first vintage, a 1992 Chardonnay, was not released until the end of 1996.

Americans Stuart and Sandy Moss, the founders of Nyetimber, should be knighted for their services to English wine. Had they not ignored the advice of German-trained English winemakers and consultants who told them that Chardonnay would not ripen and Pinot Noir would just rot on the vine, English wines would still be something of an embarrassment. Now we have a world-class product, but to our shame there has been no official recognition of the debt owed to its pioneers.

In 2001, the Mosses sold Nyetimber to songwriter Andy Hill, who in 2006 sold it on to Dutch entrepreneur Eric Heerema for a reputed £7.5 million. A wine lover and Anglophile, Heerema had already been resident in England since 1999, when he purchased Cold Harbour Farm and planted a vineyard of his own just 5 miles (8km) from Nyetimber. The Dutchman has since spent a fortune on restoring the manor house itself and expanding Nyetimber's vineyards from 14ha to 160ha (35 to 395 acres) spread over eight locations in two counties. He has also moved the winery to an industrial park in Crawley, though that was not part of his original plan. He had always envisaged a winery that would be surrounded by vines and open to the public, but the very narrow lanes around Nyetimber made it a nightmare for commercial vehicles servicing the original 100-ton winery.

Crawley started out as a stopgap, but unsure how long she would be there, the current winemaker Cherie Spriggs ensured that every aspect of the new 1,200-ton facility would work efficiently for as long as would be required. With the growth and spread of Nyetimber's vineyards, its location became an asset, and Heerema soon realized it would be foolish to scrap a perfectly functional winery only to



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spend millions on building the iconic winery of his dreams—especially since it could never be built at Nyetimber itself. He has plans for a pressing center at his Tillington vineyard and hopes that he could encompass a visitors' center there, but he has finally accepted the inevitability of Crawley. And why not? It's the largest, best-designed winery I've seen in the UK.

All this is small change for someone who has just sold one of his cars (Stirling Moss's 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO) for the world-record sum of \$35 million. I find it puzzling that a 50-year-old car can be worth three times as much as a Grade I-listed country manor mentioned in the *Domesday Book* and whose previous owners include Thomas Cromwell and Anne of Cleves. Yet that is what the car sold for, and since Heerema paid "only" \$8.5 million for it ten years earlier, you could say he has not had to fork out a penny for Nyetimber; its renovation, the expansion of its vineyards, or equipping the largest winery in the country.

I have followed Nyetimber from the beginning and well remember the day Kit Lindlar brought a trial disgorgement of the very first vintage, the 1992 Chardonnay, to my home. He had said that all he wanted was an honest opinion about whether the wine was ready to be disgorged; and I said fine, as long as he realized that I did not ascribe to a

"the longer, the better" school of thought. I told him that some Champagnes should be disgorged earlier, so the odds were that I would not be recommending any English sparkling wine to remain longer on its lees. But as soon as I tasted the Nyetimber, the potential for further development was so obvious that I recommended at least another 12–18 months on yeast. I wondered why Kit did not look too happy when I congratulated him on England's first world-class wine. It was only later I discovered that his contract paid his fee in three equal amounts: on signing, on bottling, and on disgorgement, and I had just delayed his paycheck by more than a year!

I have tasted at Nyetimber with the Mosses; with Peter Morgan, who was the winemaker under Andy Hill and now teaches at Plumpton College; and with Dermot Sugrue, who replaced Morgan and is now the winemaker at Wiston Estate. But the first time I tasted with Spriggs, it had to be at my home in Gloucestershire. The lady packed all the wines pre-chilled into her car and drove three hours to taste with me. As we discussed each wine, I saw that Spriggs was a mightily determined and hugely impressive woman who does not suffer fools gladly. That tasting was meant to be a litmus test to see how the quality and typicity of Nyetimber had been affected by such an unprecedented expansion of source material. I confess that I had doubts, but after tasting from pure Nyetimber-Nyetimber, through the partial influence of new vineyards to full-blown expansion, I came away thinking the opposite: that although there had been a meandering in the typicity of some wines, the quality of future releases is, if anything, superior to what has gone before; and some new typicity, such as Tillington, is beginning to emerge. Spriggs is clearly the most naturally talented winemaker to take the helm at Nyetimber. Furthermore, she has just done something that will change sparkling-wine production throughout the world—but if you want to find out what that is, you will have to read my next column. ■