

Through a glass, darkly

There is no doubt that Nyetimber produced the UK's first world-class wines, but under the ownership of the Dutch entrepreneur Eric Heerema its vineyards have expanded from 14 to 152ha (35 to 375 acres, planted). The question now is: Has the quality, which was once attributed to the very special terroir at Nyetimber itself, been maintained?

All the following wines were tasted at Nyetimber in June 2013 with Cherie Spriggs and her husband Brad Greatrix. The residual sugar readings encompass both the *dosage* and the sugar left after the second fermentation, which often amounts to 2 grams of unfermentable sugar. If these *dosage* levels appear high, bear in mind that the acidity of English sparkling wine today is as high as Champagne was in the early 1950s, when 75 percent of its production had more than 15 grams of residual sugar, and more than half of those were *doux*.

The Nyetimber Rosé is a predominantly Chardonnay blend to which a little red Pinot Noir wine has been added. Retasting the 2007 (13g RS, disgorged January 2011), its lovely high acids have kept its intense fruit fresh, with hints of Seville orange, raspberry, and cherry on its long and lingering finish. The 2009 (11g RS, disgorged January 2013) was the first vintage that Spriggs blended using black glasses in order not to be influenced by color. Since this had a much deeper hue than the first two vintages, I asked if she was concerned about the inevitable variation in color, but she said, "Not at all; the color of a rosé is unimportant." I disagree. The first thing that almost everyone does when poured a glass of effervescing rosé is hold it to the light and remark on its color. As the variation in color is bound to attract comment, it would be prudent for Spriggs to explain her use of black glasses on the back label, declare color to be *less* important than taste or quality, and claim the variation in color to be a distinctive point of difference.

The Classic Cuvée is a blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Meunier



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in proportions that vary each year. The 2007 (14g RS, disgorged October 2011) had rich, tangy, creamy-biscuity fruit and was fresh yet developed, while the 2007 in magnum (14g RS, disgorged April 2013) was so fresh and youthful that it was chock-a-block full of floral autolysis. The 2009 (9g RS, disgorged April 2013) needed time for the *dosage* to integrate, but a different disgorgement of 2009 (9g RS, disgorged December 2012) was perfectly integrated. It just needs time. A preview of the 2010 (11g RS, disgorged January 2013) showed lovely structure of very young, nicely delicate fruit. However, the real scoop was the 2011-based NV Classic Cuvée (11g RS, disgorged January 2013), which contains 30 percent of reserve wines, has impressive intensity without being weighty, and promises to develop gracefully. Not yet launched, this new cuvée is a masterpiece in the making.

The lineage of Nyetimber's Blanc de Blancs extends back to the 1992, which was selected to toast the Queen at her Golden Anniversary lunch. It is not produced every year—there was no 2008 or 2011, for example. And perhaps the 2007 (14g RS, disgorged October 2012) should not have been made either, from its furry aftertaste. However, there is no doubting the quality of the 2009 (11g RS, disgorged January 2013), with

its creamy Chardonnay fruit and gorgeous, almost exotic finish. So smooth and silky. What finesse! The 2010 (11g RS, disgorged January 2013) is lovely in its own potentially toasty way, but more about character than finesse.

The new 2009 Tillington Single Vineyard (11g RS, disgorged January 2013) stole the show for many at an English sparkling-wine presentation in Franciacorta in October 2013. A blend of 79 percent Pinot Noir and 21 percent Chardonnay, it is the expansive fruit of the Pinot Noir that dominates, unsurprisingly, but there is a core of lead-pencil intensity that will blossom into complexity and some finesse.

Of all the prereleases I tasted and promised not to mention, there is one that I can get away with because it was not only superb, it was also unnamed. All I know about it is that it was a 2009 blended from the best selections of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Meunier (11g RS, disgorged January 2013) and shows the most extraordinary intensity for an English sparkling wine, with a mousse to die for. I adored the wine, but we'll all have to wait and see what it is.

In my last column, I wrote that Cherie Spriggs had done something that will change sparkling-wine production throughout the world. Since the 2009 vintage she has switched to almost black bottles (they are actually very dark amber) for the entire range. Studies have shown that UV light can degrade methionine into DMDS after just 60 minutes' exposure to fluorescent light (and much, much quicker in a glass at a reception in the sunshine!), while other research has shown that carbonic gas has a magnification effect on the detection of this compound. Every producer who cares about quality and reputation should drop clear glass, and in time I believe that even those using green or lighter amber bottles will consider going black.

Heerema is not just an astute businessman, he is a cultured, good-fun guy who has assured the future of the UK's first and most famous world-class sparkling-wine estate. ■