

THE WINE MERCHANT.

An independent magazine for independent retailers

Issue 161, September 2026



Cat of the month: **Basil**
Basil's of Reigate

Footfall has declined – but indies can play to strengths

Report produced by Liberty Wines says merchants have reasons to be positive despite seeing customer numbers fall

Independent wine merchants are being urged to maintain their focus on recruitment, retention and premium positioning after new research found that falling customer numbers – rather than lower spend per visit – are the main drag on sales.

Liberty Wines' 2026 independent off-trade report, based mainly on card-spend analysis covering more than 120 leading independents as well as its own insights, shows overall spend in indies fell 5% between March 2024 and March 2026, although it remains 20% above 2019 levels.

Performance varies sharply by business: more than 40% of merchants increased sales over the past two years, while 26% achieved growth of more than 10%.

The report identifies customer loss as the most pressing problem facing the channel. Shopper numbers fell 9% over the two-year period, although spend per visit increased.

It argues that the merchants achieving the strongest results are generally those adding customers, and that growth depends on giving shoppers more reasons to visit through range, service, events, tastings and communication.

Liberty warns against responding to the downturn by competing more aggressively with supermarkets on price. Its analysis suggests independents are retaining a



Greek wines may not yet have hit the mainstream but indies like Kirsty McEwan of Bludge Wines in Edinburgh are doing their best to make it happen. Read about some of their favourites and bestsellers, starting on page 52.

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NEWS

Falling sales – but grounds for hope

► stronger quality proposition even as wine prices rise.

The report says customers in the independent sector are “getting better wine in the bottle”, with more of the increase in retail price feeding through to the wine itself once duty, EPR, margins and exchange rates are taken into account. It concludes that a quality-led strategy offers better prospects than chasing low-price volume.

There are encouraging signs in the profile of the independent shopper. The average customer has become younger since 2019, while spending power has remained broadly stable. The report highlights an opportunity to increase frequency and spend among lower-

spending customers, many of whom have similar income profiles to those spending substantially more each month.

Spain and South Africa have gained share in still wine, the report says, with smaller advances for Greece, Georgia and Germany, while Champagne, English sparkling wine and Provence rosé remain strong. Liberty says this supports the case for broad, distinctive ranges rather than more conservative selections.

Liberty Wines CEO Tom Platt says: “The report gives us huge confidence for the long-term future of indies. We know there are challenges, but the fundamentals are strong: competing on quality is proving far more resilient than competing on price, indies continue to attract a younger, engaged consumer and there are affluent consumers visiting indies who can be persuaded to spend more.”

• Analysis: pages 14-15

Wood steps down after sex conviction

Douglas Wood, who set up WoodWinters – the Scottish wine wholesaler with shops in Edinburgh, Inverness and Bridge of Allan – has resigned his directorship of the company, having been found guilty of sexual assault.

Wood has not been given a custodial sentence but will do 250 hours' community service and has been added to the sex offenders' register for two years.

WoodWinters will continue its wholesale, import and retail operation

under the current management team.

Director Rodney Doig says: “WoodWinters Wines & Whiskies can confirm that Douglas Wood has resigned from his position as director with immediate effect.”

He says the team is “fully focused on maintaining the high standards of service, expertise and professionalism upon which the business has built its reputation”, adding that “a management buyout process is currently underway”.

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winermerchantmag.com 01323 871836 Instagram/Bluesky: @WineMerchantMag

Unit 52 Newhaven Enterprise Centre, Denton Island, Newhaven, East Sussex BN9 9BA

Editor and Publisher: Graham Holter graham@winermerchantmag.com

Assistant Editor: Claire Harries claire@winermerchantmag.com

Reporter: Jacob Stokes jacob@winermerchantmag.com

Advertising: Sarah Hunnisett sarah@winermerchantmag.com

Accounts: Naomi Young naomi@winermerchantmag.com

Admin and reader liaison: Charlotte Gingell charlotte@winermerchantmag.com

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A TALE OF TERROIR

Louis Jadot Bourgogne Côte d'Or



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NOVA SCOTIA

Broadway Cellars expanding already

Broadway Cellars has opened in Oundle Wharf, in a unit previously occupied by Amps Wine Merchants. This is the second shop for the company which launched just last November in St Ives, Cambridgeshire.

Broadway Cellars is part of Stephen James Inns, which brings together a small group of independent venues including The Elm at Abbots Ripton and The Pheasant at Keyston.

Jack Baldock oversees the wine buying for the group and has managed the expansion into the new shop.

"We opened in Oundle on June 11," Baldock says, "and I've been there for the most part, but now we have my colleague Samantha [McKendry] on board, I can have a couple of days in the week to go over to the other sites."

Unlike the St Ives shop and bar, Oundle Wharf is strictly retail only, but Baldock says they have plenty of tasting events planned.

"We'll do one on the last Thursday of every month. We'll have different themes, hosted by myself or Samantha. They'll be informal – just a small group of people getting together to taste a few wines."

Over the past few months, Baldock says he has increased his supplier base to include Alliance and Mentzendorff. "We also work with a few local producers and we buy a rosé direct from Essex," he adds.

Amps continues to trade from its main branch in the Northamptonshire town.

• *A premises licence is being considered by Mid Suffolk district council for a wine shop and bar in Needham Market, Suffolk. The proposed business will trade as **The Wine Room** and set up shop in the high street premises currently occupied by Hamilton Smith estate agents.*



The Oundle site was previously occupied by a branch of Amps

Hastings Wine & Coffee closure

After 18 months of trading, Hastings Wine & Coffee closed in August.

Owners Darren and Rachel Tickner posted a statement saying: "Despite trying lots of different ideas, we've never quite hit the numbers we needed to make things work.

"The first heatwave this summer really brought that into focus, with our numbers dropping by almost half overnight and they've not recovered. Rebuilding from

here would require a huge amount of time and energy. It would almost feel like starting over again."

• *Following the closure of **Vino** wine bar and shop on the Isle of Man in May, the business now trades entirely online with a focus on home delivery across the island. Owned by hospitality and retail group Heron & Brearley, Vino opened in Douglas in 2015 under the management of Heath Craig. The company cited "ongoing challenges across the trade" and the end of its lease as the main reasons for the closure of the premises.*

Are you a shop? Yes, we are now

Importer Ealing Wine Cellars will enter the retail arena in October. Owner Caroline Brangé has secured a site on Bond Street, Ealing, which was home to City Radio Stores for almost a century.

Brangé has been waiting a while to reach this stage of her journey. "When I registered the business and came up with the name Ealing Wine Cellars back in 2020, my original idea was to open what we call a *cave à manger* – a sort of wine bar/shop where you can grab a bottle off the shelf, pay corkage and have it on site with cheese and charcuterie," she says.

"I couldn't find the right site, so I just parked it and continued doing what I knew best, which was selling wine to restaurants, because that's what I'd done for 10 years for Flint and for Armit, in various roles."

The current office, which will relocate to the new store, is very near Ealing Broadway and Brangé explains that, thanks to Google Maps and good SEO on her website, she receives several enquiries on a weekly basis from people thinking she is a retailer anyway.

"The concept was kind of proven before I even had a physical shop," she says, "so it makes a lot of sense to just pay a little more in rent than I was for my original office space and have a shopfront with a high footfall."

"I can sell with a bigger margin than other retailers might be able to because I have the advantage that I direct import most of the wines on my shelves."

"We have 25 wineries that we work with, mostly from France and Italy, though we are continuing to grow."

"I will need to use other UK suppliers, but most of my friends are salespeople and some of them have also started their own wine importing businesses."

Brangé says that 70% of her business comes from supplying fine dining restaurants and the rest is accounted for with private client sales and consultancy work. "We are a wine importer first and foremost and the shop is just bringing a fourth sales channel to what we already do," she adds.

Although she has licensing in place for both off and on-trade, she is keen to hold off on the *cave à manger* model for a while. "I anticipate that people will be asking me if they can drink on site, but I think it's really important to establish the retail part of it so that people come to us first rather than thinking about Waitrose or Majestic," she says.

"I will be running a series of events though and of course I'll have winemakers coming over in the winter, so we can do winemaker events."

**Caroline Brangé of
Ealing Wine Cellars**

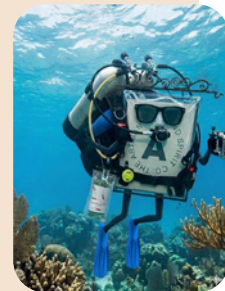


Bacchus

Signing off in the Maldives

When the hanging shop sign was stolen from The Artisan Wine & Spirits Company in Salisbury, owners Lizzie and Thom responded with a promotional series on Instagram. The "kidnapped" and newly christened "Hangy McSignface" was seen enjoying rum on a beach in Barbados, a bottle of Citadelle gin outside Château de Bonbonnet and a negroni in Rome. Then there was the scuba diving in the Maldives and the camel-riding in Egypt.

Wiltshire police caught the culprits and a replacement sign was commissioned and in place by the beginning of June.



Are you taking the turbo?

Presenting wines by style can often be more problematic than simply arranging them by country of origin. Where does "rich and smooth" end and "full and juicy" begin? Dan's, the Dalston retailer and bar, can offer a little inspiration. It simplifies its chalkboard with headings including "textural white", "easy red", "elite red", "serious skinsy" and "turbo piss". It goes down well in Hackney. Anyone want to give it a go in the Cotswolds?

Wonky and fragrance-free

Our friends at Vino Gusto in Bury St Edmunds deserve credit for telling it like it is in their T&Cs for tasting events. "We adore our wonky old building," they warn customers. "All we regret is that the staircase to our first floor WC and tasting room is not forgiving and as such rules us out from being accessible." Then, an even more important announcement: "We kindly ask attendees not to wear strong aftershave or perfume. This sounds like a silly request, but we try and keep our tasting room as a controlled environment so that only the wine fumes invade our nostrils." Quite right!



THE INDEPENDENT ADVANTAGE

A monthly column from **Alliance Wine/H2Vin** exploring practical, creative ways independents can sell smarter – covering everything from fine-wine offers to pricing tweaks and experiential events

We have talked about consolidation before: fewer orders to place each month, fewer deliveries to chase, fewer invoices to pay and less stock to put away – without giving up price, service or quality.

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It works the same elsewhere: Prosecco and Pinot Grigio arriving with Gavi and Valpolicella from Italy; Rioja and Albariño with Cava, Verdejo and even Mendoza Malbec or New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc from Spain.

This service saves considerably against shipping from producers directly – not by compromising on quality or price point, but because the efficiencies stack: lower per-bin stockholding, improved cash flow, reduced shipping costs, and fewer suppliers to administer. None of which asks you to narrow your range – our portfolio is broad and deep enough to cover it, whatever your shelves need.

To learn more, please contact Alex Baudouin, head of independent off-trade: alex.baudouin@alliancewine.com.

Ned Llewellyn

Alliance/H2Vin sales director – off-trade



Restaurant now takes top billing

Hometipple in Walthamstow has welcomed the Macchina restaurant as a permanent fixture following chef Hayley Meredith's kitchen residency.

"We kept being asked for more food, to be open later, that sort of thing, and so we've moved much more now towards being a restaurant with a wine shop rather than a wine shop with a restaurant," says owner Mikey Studer. The new sign says Macchina at Hometipple.

"I think that a straight-up wine shop with just pure retail probably only really works in certain areas. When you're in a large city with lots of different places that you can go, you need to have another revenue stream.

"We found that people's budgets have got smaller. We've definitely lost custom to supermarkets and multiples. Where people would come in and buy two or three bottles of £15 wine, they've now reduced that budget and decided that they might as well just be buying it from a supermarket.

"A friend of mine said to me the other day: 'If I was going to buy a £10 bottle of wine, I probably wouldn't go to a wine shop anyway because I'd want to go there for something a bit more special.' So even though we do sell wine at that price, customers are not necessarily thinking of us for that sort of purchase. If it's just a bottle of £10 wine, they might as well get it with their grocery shop."

The refurbishment has expanded seating capacity to 60 covers, which meant condensing the wine range and reconfiguring the shelving.

"We changed the construction of the shelves, which allowed us to fit more wine into a smaller area," says Studer, "and we culled quite a few lines that weren't necessarily selling quite as well as some of the others, but without being too brutal and while still trying to maintain a kind of appropriate range."

Diners have the advantage of selecting any wine from the shelves to drink with their meal without paying the usual restaurant mark-up.

"It's just a £15 drink-in addition. We don't call it corkage, but effectively that's what it is," says Studer.

"It's difficult to explain to customers the value for money that they're getting because you don't want to start calling out your neighbours or other people within the industry for the really big margins they work with because everybody's got to do what they need to survive.

"We have a bottle of rosé on the shelf at £13, so that's £28 to drink-in. I know for a fact that it's in a restaurant in west London for £60 a bottle. But you can't really point that out, because the restaurant industry is struggling enough as it is."

Kettering gets a Bhatnagar boost

Sufficiently Suffonsified Cheese & Wine is set to open in Kettering next month.

This may be the first shop for Tracy Bhatnagar, but she has previous experience working for an indie wine retailer.

"I took my WSET Levels 2 and 3 a few years ago, and I remember decades ago joking about having my own cheese shop, so that's always been in the back of my mind," she says.

When relocating from St Leonards, East Sussex to Kettering for her husband's work, Bhatnagar became increasingly frustrated with the job market and a friend suggested she start her own business.

She was also inspired by the success of Mark Plummer's cheese and wine shop, Salon, in St Leonards. "I just thought, 'yes, now is the time'. I worked for Mark when he had his previous shop on Kings Road in the town, around the time I was doing my WSET, so that connection goes way back," she says.

Bhatnagar got the keys to the premises



Tracy Bhatnagar will open Sufficiently Suffonsified Cheese & Wine in October

in early August and is busy kitting it out. “I want to make it look nice, but I don’t want to spend thousands and thousands,” she says. “I’ve just had a quote in for a serve-over counter display unit, which I think will be about 1.5 metres long – that’s a decent size, but not crazy, and I expect that will dictate the amount of cheese that I’m carrying at any given time.”

The wine range will have a Spanish emphasis. “I’ve decided I want to be Eurocentric,” Bhatnagar says. “It won’t be exclusively Spanish, but I do spend a lot of time in Spain and I love Spanish wine, particularly Ribera del Duero wines.

“I’m excited about introducing people to some regions and grapes that don’t seem to make it across the Channel really.”

So far Bhatnagar plans to work with Indigo as well as A&A Wines. “They have an almost exclusively Spanish portfolio –

they have some long-standing relationships with some of the growers and they have a good range of wines priced at the lower end as well. I really don’t know what the sweet spot is going to be for people here, so I want to make sure I have wines at a price point for everybody.

“My plan is to offer wines by the glass and cheese boards as well as monthly tastings.”

Bhatnagar notes that while the town centre is currently “not very vibrant,” she is optimistic that change is on the way.

“Two weeks before we moved here a really nice coffee shop opened on Market Street and they’ve done very well and already opened another place around the corner, in Market Square. That has queues to the door. It makes me think that there are people willing to come into the town centre if there’s something to come for.”

COMING DOWN THE LINE

Hot topics that could impact independent wine merchants

By WSTA chief executive
Miles Beale



Extra revenue must not come from duty

As I write, MPs are preparing to return to Westminster for the resumption of Parliament on September 1 after an unusual summer. New prime minister Andy Burnham has had a busy six weeks, making a series of policy announcements while the Commons has been in recess.

The autumn budget will take place on October 28, earlier than last year, but against a similarly difficult economic backdrop. Conflict in the Middle East is keeping energy prices high, fuelling inflation and putting pressure on interest rates and government borrowing costs.

Combined with increased defence spending, a VAT cut on electricity bills and business rate support for pubs and live music venues, new chancellor John Healey is likely to need extra revenue – despite commitments not to raise income tax, VAT or employees’ NI.

Alcohol duty must not be the answer. Government policy is to increase excise duty annually with inflation, yet receipts have fallen since the 2023 reforms, despite duty rising by at least 20% for most wines and 18% for spirits and beer.

Businesses have absorbed enough extra costs. If the government wants to maximise revenue and stimulate growth, cutting duty is the sensible course. The WSTA will shortly be asking members to contact their MPs.

Meanwhile, the Welsh government has appointed Exchange for Change to run its Deposit Return Scheme. That is welcome, but Wales still intends to include glass from launch on October 1, 2027. Businesses have little time to prepare, while costs, labelling arrangements and interoperability remain unclear. Some companies warn they may have to delist products in Wales. Much still needs resolving.

Find out more at wsta.co.uk

St Vincent digs a little deeper

St Vincent in Shrewsbury has opened a separate shop underneath its original bistro and wine bar.

Alexis Hill, who opened the business in 2024, says the decision to expand was easy. "It's the same landlord, and at some point in time they had converted the cellar into two separate retail units," he says.

"Hospitality is very difficult at the moment and we have had good weeks and bad weeks – it's been a crazy couple of years.

"So with the property being directly underneath the restaurant, it was a bit of a no-brainer to take it on. Once we've closed the shop for the day we can still sell wine to people from the restaurant and bar."

While access to the newly named Vin's Cellar Shop means descending steps leading underneath the building, the shop is far from dingy. The well-lit, modern and positively airy space is now home to a range of 500 wines.

"It's been lovely this summer," says Hill. "It doesn't get any natural light and it stays at a constant 10 or 12 degrees, so it's been perfect."

QR codes will tell story of the wines

Graze & Grape is set to open its doors in Stevenage Old Town this month.

It is the latest venture for The Stevenage Hospitality Group which already has a traditional pizzeria, a tapas bar and a smokehouse in the Hertfordshire town's high street.

A spokesperson for the group says that alongside the 130-strong range of wines from around the world, Graze & Grape will be specialising in British cheese and charcuterie.

"We are championing local farmers and produce and we'll have some English wines as well," he says.

"There will be six wines of the month available by the glass, and customers can choose any bottle from the cellar room to drink in and take home what they don't finish.

"We don't really see the need for a corkage charge – the idea is if you're going to sit there and drink the wine, then you're probably going to order some charcuterie as well, so we're not going to lose out.

"We won't know what the retail and on-trade split will be until we open," he continues, "but the dream is: come in and pick up a takeaway charcuterie box and grab a bottle of wine and take it home and share it with your partner.

"We're going to offer a full takeaway service on the charcuterie and the cheeses, and pair it with the wine.

"We're also going to launch a wine club, which will again pair with the cheeses and meats, delivered monthly, with a magazine."

Manager Maddie, armed with WSET Level 3, will be on hand to talk about the wines, but customers will be free to explore for themselves as every wine will have its own QR code which can be scanned to reveal more information about the wine, the grower and the region.

Many of the 30-second videos will be supplied by the producers, but the rest will be put together by Maddie.

Every bit of space is being utilised, including the roof, which will be planted with herbs and edible flowers and house beehives so the company can sell its own honey.

In addition, the business has two mobile horsebox bars ready for private hire and to attend Christmas fairs, craft markets and food events in the surrounding areas.



Alexis Hill opened St Vincent in Shrewsbury in 2024

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Harvest 2026: Our Earliest Harvest Yet

by Rob MacCulloch MW
Head Winemaker at Hattingley Valley Wines

Harvest 2026 is underway at Hattingley Valley, marking our earliest start to a vintage to date.

After several vintages of increasingly early picking dates, the 2026 growing season has pushed the calendar forward once again, giving us an exciting start to harvest across our Hampshire vineyards and with our vineyard partners throughout Southern and Eastern England.

This year's story really began two seasons ago. A challenging summer in 2024 resulted in poor flowering, a smaller crop and reduced growth going into 2025. Then came a very different season. A warm spring and exceptional growing conditions in 2025 brought both flowering and harvest forward, with the smaller crop ripening quickly. The long spell of photosynthesis after harvest also gave the vines valuable time to build up their reserves for the season ahead. Combined, these conditions have continued to accelerate the growing cycle, bringing us to our earliest harvest on record.

So far, the vineyards are looking incredibly healthy. The fruit is clean, the canopies are strong and veraison has progressed well ahead of schedule. Our Hampshire chalk soils have also played an important role during the prolonged dry weather, with the deep chalk bedrock acting as a natural water reserve and helping the vines through the driest periods.

Yields are expected to be moderate. Some of our partner vineyards experienced frost losses earlier in the season, while the dry conditions have produced smaller, more concentrated berries. Chardonnay is looking particularly exciting at this stage, with plenty of flavour and concentration developing in the fruit.

Of course, an early harvest comes with its own challenges. With vineyards across the South and East reaching ripeness within a much tighter window, the pace in the winery quickly steps up. Efficient grape reception and processing become more important than ever, and this year our new Dolav picking bins and dedicated grape reception area are already helping us manage the intensity of the season.

There is still plenty of harvest ahead of us, and it is too early to make any firm predictions about the final wines. But with healthy fruit, promising Chardonnay and an exceptionally early start, the first signs from the 2026 vintage are certainly exciting.

The first grapes are now coming through the winery doors, and we can't wait to see what this remarkable season has in store.

Cheers!



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Relocation allows for new kitchen

Via Vigna in Gorleston-on-Sea, Norfolk, has relocated and rebranded.

The southern Italian wine specialist, opened in 2023 by Tim Edwards, closed its doors in August and will reopen in Norwich next month as Emilio's.

"I was looking for a bigger space so that I can add a kitchen," says Edwards.

"I have evolved the business from being a merchant and a bar to being a café, bar and merchant, bringing more food into the mix.

"As well as antipasti boards and zucchini and burrata sandwiches, I'm going to be doing a partnership with the pizza guy around here – and we can use one of the outbuildings in the garden to host."

Named for Edwards's great-grandfather, Emilio's will have a range of around 60 Italian wines, with 80% of those focused on southern regions.

Corkk ready to pop in Winchester

English wine specialist Corkk has plans to open in Winchester.

Owned by Jonathan Piggins, the company already operates two hybrid venues in Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury.

Despite objections from a number of local residents, Winchester city council granted licensing approval last month for the premises on Great Minster Street.

Corkk plans to sell English wine to drink in or take away, plus coffee, tea, snacks and other cold food.

• **Finley's** in Hoxton, east London, will close in October unless owner Sia Smith can find a buyer before she relocates to her home country of Australia. Smith launched the wine bar and shop, which specialises in wine from female-led producers, in 2022.



New Clerkenwell indie has opened

Hair salon pop-up gets its own home

July saw the opening of a new wine bar and bottle shop in Clerkenwell, London.

Sommelier Raku Oda formerly worked for The Fat Duck before launching Ebi, which began life as a pop-up at his wife's hair salon in Islington.

"My motto is 'good wine from everywhere,'" says Oda. "My experience, particularly in international restaurants, is I want to choose equally widely from everywhere. I don't choose to work only with natural or organic wines – of course there are absolutely great wines from these categories, but there are also many great wines from producers who face very severe or challenging conditions in terms of winemaking."

Currently the wine range sits at 150 and Oda says he is working with 10 suppliers and is open to extending that list.

• **One of north London's best-loved indie wine shops has closed after 43 years. Long-time employee Andy Smith and wife Naomi acquired Mill Hill Wines from founders Laurence and Christine Hanison in 2017. The couple ran the shop until its operating company, Praedbrook Ltd, entered creditors' voluntary liquidation in August.**



Two icons from the hill of Hermitage

Biodynamic pioneers of the Rhône Valley, **M. CHAPOUTIER** has been crafting exceptional wines from the hill of Hermitage for generations.

This pair captures the appellation at its finest: a richly aromatic white and a powerful, spice-laden red, each grown on some of the estate's most prized parcels.

Hermitage Chante-Alouette

94 Points, James Suckling (2021 vintage)

Named after the hunting lodge perched on top of the hill of Hermitage. Drawn from three plots on the hill - alluvial soil 'Le Méal', clay-gravel 'Les Murets' and loess and granite 'L'Ermite' - this 100% Marsanne combines the unique character of each parcel. Partial ageing in 600 litre demi-muids results in a beautiful example of Hermitage white.

Hermitage Monier de la Sizeranne

Organic and biodynamic, named after the Monier family, who previously owned vines on the hill of Hermitage. Maurice Monier de Sizeranne created an early version of braille - one reason Chapoutier still features braille on its bottles today. From fruit grown in the Les Bessards, Le Méal and Les Greffieux plots, vinified in concrete vats before 85% is aged in French oak for 18 months.

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This is an excellent opportunity to taste our latest releases, explore bestselling and award-winning wines, and discuss opportunities for the crucial Christmas season.

RSVP REQUIRED - Please contact ontrade.uk@lgcf.fr

MANCHESTER

Venue: Castlefield Rooms, 18-20 Castle Street, Manchester. M3 4LZ

Date: Tuesday 6th October

Time: 12:00pm - 5:00pm

BRISTOL

Venue: The Engine Shed, Station Approach, Redcliffe, Bristol BS1 6QH

Date: Wednesday 7th October

Time: 12:00pm - 5:00pm

WE LOOK FORWARD TO WELCOMING YOU!

Pfaffl Wien 2 Zweigelt/Pinot Noir 2025

There's only gentle oak on this Viennese blend – just 20% is aged in used barriques – but the vanilla is as unmistakable as the squashy black cherries that dominate the palate. Of course we served it chilled – we're not *animals* – and that way the sweeter elements were kept in check. A cool wine for autumn afternoons.

RRP: £18.50 ABV: 14%

Daniel Lambert Wines (01656 661010)
daniellambert.wine



Joseph Mellot Le Troncsec Pouilly-Fumé 2025

Many indies dispense Sauvignon Blanc through gritted teeth but Le Troncsec is one you can sell with a smile. It's the texture of the wine that grabs you: all that fine lees ageing adds a lovely weight to a wine that balances stone-fruit richness with lively minerality. Most wines claim to be versatile; this one really is.

RRP: £26.25 ABV: 13.5%

Hatch Mansfield (01344 871800)
hatchmansfield.com



Saint-Mont Vignes Retrouvées 2023

The "rediscovered vines" in question are Gros Manseng, Petit Courbu and Arrufiac, which supply the fruit for this arresting blend from the foothills of the Pyrenees. Described by Top 100 judges as a "wake-you-up wine", it has a pithiness and pungency that not all will love, but we kept going back for more.

RRP: £13.99 ABV: 12%

Cachet Wine (01482 638877)
cachetwine.co.uk



Domaine Clavel Cordélia Chusclan 2022

A plump and juicy iteration of Côtes du Rhône Villages for those who want richness and ripeness in their southern red blends. But there's a darker force at work here too, with a liquorice sort of character, and it's enough to keep it all in balance. Unpretentious, easygoing fare from a long-established family estate.

RRP: £15-£16 ABV: 14.5%

Les Grands Chais de France (07789 008540)
lgcf.fr



Domaine Lafage Moutou 2024

Moutou is from Lafage's first regenerative vineyard, in Côtes Catalanes, where a compound called biochar conserves water and improves the overall health of the vineyard. It's a wine which defies its origins in more ways than one: stormy and lean with squeezes of pomegranate and mulberry, fistfuls of flowers and earth, flickering with green pepper and wormwood.

RRP: £26.99 ABV: 13.5%

Hallgarten & Novum Wines (01582 722538)
hnwines.co.uk



Odulìn Ribolla Gialla 2024

Stefano Girelli does it again with another crowd-pleasing white that feels about £5 underpriced. This time he's in Venezia Giulia, exploring an old local variety called Ribolla Gialla, and doing all his usual tricks to preserve the purity of the harvest. No rough edges at all: just playful, lemony fruit, a suggestion of white flowers and some spicy undertones.

RRP: £13-£14 ABV: 13%

North South Wines (020 3871 9210)
northsouthwines.co.uk



Scions of Sinai Granietsteen 2025

Granietsteen is from Sinai Hill, one of three major hills in Lower Helderberg. It's an absolute rocket of joy, launching through the palate with a mix of steel, salt and citrus peel. There's the trademark squelch of Stellenbosch yellow fruit on the mid palate, which drops off before the wine exits the earth's atmosphere.

RRP: £44 ABV: 12.5%

Flint Wines (020 7582 2500)
flintwines.com



Errazuriz Villa 2022

The full bottle weighs almost as much as a small dog and that's perhaps fitting for a wine that crams so many varieties into the blend: Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmenere, Malbec and Grenache, from the Aconcagua DO. The wine itself is surprisingly light on its feet, with red fruit and cinnamon stealing the limelight, and deeper, earthier elements lurking below.

RRP: £29.99 ABV: 13.5%

Hatch Mansfield (01344 871800)
hatchmansfield.com





81: CRISPMAS

Anthony Davies

The Grape Escape, Cheltenham

In a nutshell: A pairing of five wines with five different styles and flavours of crisps. Customers rank the pairings and vote for their favourite match.

Tell us more.

"It's something that we've been doing since we opened over 10 years ago. The idea came from an evening with friends who asked me to recommend wines to go with some crisps. We had so much fun doing that and I wrote it up on the wine blog I had at the time. It got such a good response that as soon as we opened The Grape Escape we knew it would be a fun thing to do.

"At some point, just because it was an annual thing, we came up with the pun Crispmas and we always do it on the Sunday halfway between last Christmas and the next one."

You had some special guests this year ...

"We were talking to Ingrid [Bates] from Dunleavy Vineyards about Crispmas and she mentioned that Monster Munch goes really well with her sparkling wine, so we asked her to come along and do a guest pairing. She suggested we also ask Ben Franks from Canned Wine Co. We know Ben well and thought, the more the merrier.

"On the day, Ben's Old Vine Garnacha paired with Walkers Bangers & Mash was the winning combination."



Have you ever had any really surprising flavour matches?

"People tend to like meaty flavours and big red wines. A few years ago we did McCoy's flame-grilled steak with some Marietta Cellars Zinfandel and that went down a storm. Generally, people like big red wines so they tend to choose those as their favourites. Personally, I like really bright, fresh white wines with really spicy flavoured crisps, but they seem to split the room a bit more."

Are there any no-go areas?

"We enjoy searching for the weirdest and most wonderful flavours that we can get hold of. The only thing that we can't do is prawn cocktail flavour. We think prawn cocktail with Chablis or Sancerre is one of the best pairings, but the problem is

that half the room will always hate prawn cocktail flavour, no matter which brand or texture of the crisp. People either love it or hate it, so it's our *bête noire*."

Crisps aren't just for Christmas, so presumably this event has a year-round appeal?

"Yes, we did the Crispmas thing for a hen do last weekend. We were chuffed to bits because the Scampi Fries and German Riesling won – it was a match made in heaven.

"The more fun you can have with wine, the more people engage with it and I think the feedback we get certainly mirrors that."

There always seems to be new crisp flavours appearing, so this will never get old.

"There's always something new, and a couple of weeks ago on holiday in the Loire Valley we found a brand called Brets. They have flavours including tartiflette, carbonara, camembert and a doner kebab flavour. They were really good and we would happily do a joint thing with them."

What crisps do you stock at the moment?

"Two Farmers, which are quite local to us, and we have what we call pub snacks, like Mini Cheddars and Scampi Fries. Currently our favourites are Awesome Oinks from Golden Wonder."



Anthony wins a WBC gift box containing some premium drinks and a box of chocolates.

Tell us about a bright idea that's worked for you and you too could win a prize.

Email claire@winermerchantmag.com

Action points for indies

Liberty Wines' latest independent off-trade report paints a picture that shows that independents' sales are under pressure – yet plenty of merchants are growing. The research points to six areas where independents can still find momentum, and where their natural strengths really matter

The winners are still winning

The brutal truth is that independent wine sales are down. But that is arguably not the most interesting take-away from the research. Spend across the sector has slipped over the past two years, yet the report makes clear that this is not a story of universal decline. More than 40% of the independents in the sample increased sales, and many grew strongly.

That shifts the conversation away from whether independent wine retail still has its place and towards why some businesses are making it work better than others. The report says there is “no simple answer” to the gap between stronger and weaker performers, but keeps returning to familiar themes: quality, range, communication and attracting new customers.

It's a fairly uniform picture across the UK: regional performance varies only modestly. The much bigger differences are between individual merchants. A difficult market, in other words, is not necessarily an excuse for decline – nor a guarantee of it.

Quality beats a race to the bottom

There is reassurance here for merchants wondering whether rising prices make the independent model untenable. The report's answer is no – provided the extra money genuinely buys better wine.

Bottle prices have risen sharply across supermarkets and independents. But the research argues that a bigger share of the increase in independents reaches the wine itself, rather than being swallowed entirely by tax, transport, margins and currency movements.

“In independents, money spent on the wine in the bottle has increased 60p since 2019,” the report says. “In supermarkets, however, it has fallen 1p. If quality increases with price, paying more seems justified and consumer trust is earned. If the price rises but quality does not, it is unsurprising if shoppers don't return.”

The implication is pretty clear: independents should resist imitating supermarkets. Provenance, individuality and quality remain the trump cards.



The real problem is fewer customers

Customers are not mainly responding to harder times by putting less in the basket. The bigger issue is fewer people shopping with independents.

The report calls the decline in customer numbers “by far the largest cause of falling spend”. Spend per visit has actually risen, but not enough to compensate for the people who have disappeared. The strongest merchants, meanwhile, tend to be the ones gaining customers.

That makes this less a pricing problem than a relevance problem. The answer is not simply persuading a loyal core to buy a more premium bottle. Merchants need more reasons for occasional shoppers, lapsed customers and newcomers to walk through the door.

The remedies will be obvious to most indies: tastings, events, good staff, lively communication and a range with enough personality to give people something worth talking about. The data suggests these are not optional extras.

Don't chase volume. Sell fewer but better

Nobody can pretend the volume story is good news for business. People are drinking less wine, and independents are selling fewer bottles than at the pandemic peak. But the report argues that this is a structural shift across the market, not a specific failure of independents.

In fact, quality-focused channels are holding up better. The report says independents have outperformed supermarkets on volume, while the premium on-trade has also fared better than the rest of hospitality. Its conclusion is that “quality, rather than price, delivers stronger sales”.

There is another positive for indies. More alcohol is being consumed at home than 15 years ago, cushioning the off-trade from some of the wider decline in drinking. That does not restore lost volume, but it does offer some protection.

The message is not to chase volume. Selling fewer, better bottles to engaged customers is more sustainable than fighting for low-margin sales.



The independent customer is getting younger

It's sometimes assumed that specialist wine merchants fixate on an older demographic. The data says otherwise. The average independent customer has become younger since 2019, and is younger than the typical shopper using national specialists or online-only wine retailers. The average age for indie customers is 55.

The customer base remains affluent. That combination – younger and financially comfortable – is one of the report's most encouraging findings.

There is a useful quirk in the spending data. Customers spending under £20 a month with independents are not necessarily less affluent than those spending much more. The report identifies “a huge opportunity” to encourage these lighter users to visit more often and spend more.

That suggests the task is less about finding an entirely new wealthy audience and more about deepening relationships with people already within reach. A younger shopper who buys one interesting bottle occasionally may have plenty of potential to visit indies more often. The challenge is making the shop relevant often enough that occasional becomes habitual.

No need for indies to play it safe

The younger customer does not appear to be demanding a safer, narrower wine list. If anything, the trends point in the opposite direction.

Champagne, English sparkling wine and Provence rosé remain big draws, but the still-wine picture is more adventurous. Spain and South Africa are gaining ground, while Greece, Georgia and Germany are also improving. Australia shows renewed interest too. The report links this to consumers' willingness to seek out “quality, distinctiveness and value”.

The same pattern appears at varietal level. Mencía, Monastrell, Touriga Nacional and Saperavi are benefiting from a broader appetite for discovery, while Godello is edging into territory long dominated by Albariño. Even within the classics, there is movement: Piedmont is a bright spot in Italy, while Burgundy and Beaujolais continue to pull strongly in France.

For independents, this may be the best news in the report. Genuine specialism in wine, rather than aiming to tick every commercial box, is part of a good indie's DNA. A range that feels personal, surprising and well explained can often be one of the strongest reasons to visit.



DAVID PERRY



Irregular Thoughts

Strawberry feels forever imprinted in my memory of Châteauneuf-du-Pape



Galets, galets galets galets

It is funny what sparks a memory. This time of year I generally have a few strawberries in my lunch box. I tend to graze throughout the day rather than stop for lunch.

Occasionally a strawberry can be a bit battered and squishy but all the more delicious for that. Every time that happens I am transported to La Crau, the famous lieu-dit on the plateau of Châteauneuf-du-Pape, covered in galets roulés. I had the great good fortune to visit Vieux Télégraphe with Jeremy Thorman Hunt in 2014 and, due to the transport circumstances, found myself being driven by owner Daniel Brunier from Châteauneuf-du-Pape back to his other winery in Gigondas.

Part of our conversation revolved around

the complex flavours of his wines. We both agreed there was a note of strawberry, but not just normal strawberry. Daniel suggested that it was the strawberry at the bottom of the punnet that was a bit squishy but definitely not rotten.

At that moment I knew exactly what he meant. He wasn't being at all pretentious. It jumps to my mind whenever I have a squishy strawberry. I was also thrilled that, without prompting, Daniel mentioned liquorice. The reason I was so happy about this is that it is a faint tone I quite often find but have yet to meet anyone who agrees with me, and I was ridiculed for it by my daughter, Alice. Ha! When will she learn that Daddy is always right?

We were together in his car for probably an hour, during which time, I'm afraid,

I effectively interviewed him. As soon as I could, I scribbled some notes and eventually, back home in Shaftesbury, included them in a typed-up, 30-page travelogue with tasting notes and photographs.

I return to it occasionally, more often during strawberry season.

One topic I often talk to customers about is the need, or not, for a grand cru Châteauneuf. There is a big difference between Perrin's offer in Tesco (£21-£28) and Daniel's (around £70). My view is that there are probably five or six wines that stand head and shoulders above the rest, so why not officially differentiate them?

Daniel's view was that, yes, there are some top wines and, yes, he would, modestly I think, put Vieux Télégraphe in there at number five. But setting up a grand cru would piss off a lot of his friends and neighbours. And while he can sell everything he makes at a premium price, why bother?

I still have a soft spot for VT. The last lot I had was an older vintage from our late friend and colleague Graham of New Forest Wines. We had it on sale one Christmas. I wanted some for myself, so every time someone bought a bottle we put the price up. We kept putting the price up but it kept selling and I didn't get any. I do still have a magnum of Télégramme under the stairs at home though.

Incidentally, we sell Les Olivets by Roger Sabon. I visited their winery too, and at just over £30 it is pushing the top tier, but still at a not unreasonable price. I explain this to customers who think all Châteauneuf-du-Pape is the same: so why is it a tenner more? Also, with up to 17 different grape varieties to use, how can they all be the same?

Another memorable thought from M.

Every time someone bought a bottle of Vieux Télégraphe we put the price up. But it kept selling and I didn't get any

Brunier came when we talked about global markets. His wines sell mostly in France, the US and the UK. They go all over the world, though. He had an interesting view: the Chinese have a taste educated by tannin and can enjoy young, harsh wines. The Americans, on the other hand, have a palate educated by sugar, which is probably unnatural. I think I agree.

Nowadays, though, I think the new Chinese middle classes are more Americanised. We laugh at the idea of them buying show-off wines and mixing them with Coca-Cola. We forget, though, that the equivalent emerging nouveau riche of the Victorian industrial revolution would spend a month's income on a pound of Chinese tea and then ruin it with milk and sugar – *plus ça change!*

My notes also mention that Daniel scoffed at the newish village appellation of Plan de Dieu with a Gallic shrug, explaining that most of the area needed irrigation. I wonder how that is working out now ...

Having tasted the 2011 and 2012 reds and the 2012 and 2013 whites at the winery, we enjoyed magnums of 2004 red and 2008 white with lunch. This was 2014, remember.

The whites were a revelation. Jeremy enthused that they were much better value than white Burgundy, although still out of reach of most pockets. The thing he said that has stuck with me, though, is that white Châteauneuf pairs with the foods others can't touch: asparagus and egg, for example. That's something I still tell customers, although I have no practical experience as I don't really like asparagus and can't afford white Châteauneuf.

It is funny how the taste of a strawberry can bring back so much. It helps having 30 pages of transcribed notes to hand. Twelve years later, we still sell the current vintages of eight of the wines from that trip.

Similarly, the taste of Beaumes-de-Venise brought back memories of my breakfast in Condrieu. Same trip, previous day; another time, maybe.

David Perry is the owner of Shaftesbury Wines in Dorset

THE BURNING QUESTION

Which wines sold particularly well for you this summer?



"All the oranges have been doing brilliantly this summer, as a quirkier alternative to rosé. We have had the delicious Finca El Molar Macabeo from Bodega y Viñedos Propio in Manchuela on by the glass and it has flown out. We've also been surprised by how well our Dolomite Cabernet Franc by the Raats Family has been going. We've had a sprinkle of rain in the Lakes recently, so customers like to move from the white for a little more comfort in the red. We've served it with a slight chill and our mixed platter."

Jenni Hutchinson * Champagne winner *
Lake District Wine, Keswick, Cumbria

"Our on-tap Vinho Verde has been the clear number one this summer. Honestly, if I took it off tap right now there'd be a riot! Surprisingly, Kakhuri No 8, a Georgian orange wine, has also sold loads. On the sparkling side, our Crémant du Jura Brut from Domaine Désiré is the top seller, with the Lambrusco Salamino di Santa Croce from Cantina di Soliera close behind. The Vinho Verde is our house wine by the glass, and it's one of the wines you can redeem Wine Miles on for a free bottle. But really, people just love it."

Stephanie DiCamillo
Wine & Such, London



"Chillable reds, Vinho Verde and English rosé have definitely been our big three. I've been banging the drum for chilled reds for a while, so it's been brilliant seeing customers get on board. Our Light & Bright section is the perfect home for anything juicy, crunchy and delicious with a chill. At a recent "all chilled reds" tasting, it was great pouring someone a glass straight from the fridge, watching them look slightly suspicious, and then seeing the penny drop."

Evelyn Wordsworth-Sewell
Vino Gusto, Bury St Edmunds

"This summer the chilled reds have been selling very well and also the traditional-method sparkling wines from Portugal, particularly the Caves São João sparkling red. It's elegant and smooth with crunchy tannins and great with a barbecue. The Vinho Verde-style wines have also been really popular, especially the whites with the slight sparkle and the orange wine styles from this region."

Marta Bowers
VinedMe at Walsingham, Norfolk

HALLGARTEN & NOVUM WINES

CHAMPAGNE GOSSET
THE OLDEST WINE HOUSE IN
CHAMPAGNE: ÄY 1584



DUNCAN MCLEAN



Northabout

I might have the blue boiler suit blues. But at least I have some lovely mackerel

From the earliest days of our shop in the 1850s up to the second world war, the staff wore long white aprons, usually topped by a black waistcoat, white shirt and tie for the men, and a smart blouse for the women. These days I don't think anyone but waiters at the Ritz would work in such a ge- up: I've seen high court judges dressed less formally.

About the time of the second world war, photos show staff wearing white coats of the type I think of as lab coats. Dentists used to wear them, though my dentist these days prefers blue scrubs like George Clooney sported in ER. He needs all the help he can get to look anything like George Clooney.

Since the rebirth and redesign of our shop 20 years ago, we've worn a succession of aprons, mostly denim, with the shop's name stitched across the top. They're smart and necessary – given the cheese-wrangling side of our business – and come with multiple pockets ideal for stashing away waiter's friends, corks, order notes, cheese wrappers, pencils and pens, and half-eaten biscuits that have to be concealed quickly when a customer comes in.

Yesterday a customer came in wearing a different kind of uniform, one that gives identity not just to a band of work colleagues, but to a big chunk of the Orkney population: a blue boiler suit. I don't know if these were initially worn by folk on fishing boats and then picked up by farmers, or if it was the other way around, but they're ubiquitous: the uniform of membership of one of the islands' most venerated vocations.

Most folk wear a T-shirt under them,

though in summer male wearers often go bare chested. We have one farmer customer who leaves his open almost to the navel all year round. Lovely. In winter they'll be topped by a padded tartan shirt, and, if the wearer is working on the roads or with freight, a yellow hi-vis waistcoat.

They're a strong marker of identity and class, reminiscent of the red hats of MAGA supporters – though certainly not with the same political implications. A multi-pocketed denim apron might seem like a sturdy piece of workwear in a shop, but compared to a blue boiler suit, it might as well be a frilly tutu.

Such is the identification with our islands, that Portwest, one of the world's biggest producers of industrial workwear, has a special blue boiler suit called the S816 Orkney Coverall: "Combining top performing Kingsmill fabric, with a polyester wadding liner, this rugged garment protects against the coldest of conditions."

I have to say, I don't remember anyone coming in the shop wearing anything featuring quilted polyester insulation. That risks being seen as the garb of southern softies. Well, Portwest are based way down south in Yorkshire.

The band I'm in sing a song about all this:

*I was up at Birsay Farmers buying poison
for the rats*

*The guy at the till said "Hey beuy, you
can't come in dressed like that"*

*I thought I looked quite snazzy from my
head down to my shoes*



*Then I realised my problem: no blue boiler
suit blues*

(Fiddle solo.)

*Well I live out in the country, and I drive a
big white van*

*I can feed the kye and caa the yowes but
that don't mean a damn*

*Cause if you do not have the uniform then
there's nothing you can do*

*You're an outcast from society: blue boiler
suit blues*

So, yesterday a retired seaman came into the shop wearing a blue boiler suit, and holding an orange plastic bucket. He grinned. "Got a present for you, beuy."

"Oh aye? What's that, Sandy?"

"I ken how you like fresh mackerel."

"Love it."

"Well, out on the east side they're as thick as fleas on a mangy dog. Some good year for mackerel. So I brought you a dozen."

"Wow, that's amazing. Thank you."

"And they're gutted. So all you need to do is press some oatmeal onto them then throw them in a frying pan."

"I'll do that as soon as I get home, Sandy. Well, maybe not all of them, but a couple anyway. That's tea sorted!" He turned to go. "Hold on," I said, "I'll have to give you something as a thank you."

"Ach no need, I just do it for the fun of it."

"Something in exchange."

"There's really no need. But ..." He scratched his hairy chest through the open front of the boiler suit. "I suppose, if you twist my arm ..."

"Tell me!"

"If you have a nice Austrian Grüner Veltliner, that would be good with my mackerel would it no? Something with high acidity to cut through the fattiness of the fish, maybe from the Kamptal, though it would have to be a cooler microclimate. I see you've got one from Weingut Barbara Öhlzeltis there, maybe that would do the job. If that's all right with you."

I wrapped up the bottle and he stuffed it into the capacious pocket of his boiler suit, and left.

*Duncan McLean is proprietor
of Kirkness & Gorie, Kirkwall*





EVREMOND EVOLVES

Domaine Evremond, the Kent-based sparkling wine estate established by Champagne Taittinger and Hatch Mansfield, is releasing Classic Cuvée Edition II. Chef de Caves Alexandre Ponnafoy gives an update on how the project continues to develop and mature

This is the second edition of Domaine Evremond. How does it differ in style and profile from Edition I?

The Classic Cuvée is an evolving range. Every edition is built around the blend of a recent harvest, complemented by perpetual reserve wines that bring consistency and depth to the wine.

With Classic Cuvée Edition II, Domaine Evremond continues its pursuit of expression through the meeting of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier with the chalky Kent terroir, shaped by a strong oceanic influence.

Classic Cuvée Edition II fully embraces this contrasting climate, where inland freshness meets maritime softness and coastal winds. It reveals the chalky soils of Chilham, scattered with flint, through a mineral, saline and intense expression, giving the wine a unique signature and a remarkable sense of verticality.

What are the main differences between working in Champagne and working in southern England?

There are many differences between these two regions. However, I would say that the main common ground between our two estates is the use and mastery of the traditional method to produce world-class sparkling wines, as well as the use of the same grape varieties despite very different growing conditions.

Champagne benefits from a continental climate and an exceptional diversity of soils. By contrast, southern England has an oceanic climate with soils primarily composed of chalk and flint. These major differences allow each region to express its own distinctive identity.

Harvest management and winemaking protocols are also specific, particularly to manage naturally high acidity levels and

the phenolic bitterness that can be found in English vintages.

Does Evremond feel like it's a sister to the Taittinger wines, or more like a distant cousin?

Champagne Taittinger is a wine of blending, drawing its identity from a mosaic of terroirs. Domaine Evremond, by contrast, is an estate wine, expressing its singularity through the chalky soils of Kent at Chilham – and created to demonstrate that England can produce sparkling wines of outstanding quality with a distinctive signature of their own.

Have you been surprised by anything in your Evremond journey?

We embarked on the Evremond adventure without any intention of comparing the two projects. Instead, we drew on our expertise to develop the tools and facilities best suited to the domaine's vision.

By avoiding comparisons, we were able to enjoy complete creative freedom in shaping Domaine Evremond's stylistic, architectural, agronomic and oenological identity. It was essential not to create a copy of any of our other estates.

Will we notice further refinements in the coming years?

I believe we are only at the beginning of what promises to be a remarkable story for Domaine Evremond. Through Editions I and II, we have shown that it is possible to produce a sparkling wine that is joyful, highly precise, mineral-driven, full of energy and beautifully expressive in its fruit. At the same time, we

know that this terroir still has much more to reveal.

Can you elaborate on why you think that's the case?

The vines are still young: the first plantings date back to 2017. Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier generally begin to produce fruit of exceptional quality between 15 and 25 years of age. The finest expressions of a terroir rarely emerge from the very first vintages.

The estate is still learning its terroir. Even with Taittinger's expertise, it takes many harvests to fully understand the differences between individual plots, refine picking dates, optimise winemaking decisions and adapt viticultural practices.

The reserve wines will gain in complexity. The initial Classic Cuvée Edition I is based on the 2020 vintage, incorporating reserve wines from 2019. Edition II comprises the 2021, 2020, and 2019 vintages.

Over the years, the library of reserve wines will grow, enabling the creation of blends with greater nuance and depth.

What I find fascinating about this project is the opportunity through the various editions of Domaine Evremond's Classic Cuvée to witness the birth not merely of a new cuvée, but of an entire estate, and to unravel all its subtleties.

In the short term, we will see a noticeable improvement in the consistency and complexity of the cuvées; in the medium term, the vines will reach a more interesting stage of maturity and the estate's style will become more clearly defined; and in the long term – likely the point at which we can truly assess Domaine Evremond's full potential – the results will become fully apparent.



GRAHAM HOLTER



Editorial

There's a lovely unit available for a wine shop. But do the sums add up?

A little retail unit – previously selling women's clothes – has become available in my small Sussex town. I'd quite like someone to turn it into a wine shop, please.

Let's do the sums to help out the next tenant. The rent is £1,000 a month. Business rates £175. Electricity: maybe £250. Water: £40. Broadband: £60. Insurance: £125. Waste collection: £75. Some sort of allowance for an alarm and card terminal connectivity: £65. Routine repairs and maintenance: let's say £85.

So before we even get started, the basic monthly occupancy cost is £1,875.

Now let's begin trading. They'll open five days a week. We'll be optimistic and say they'll achieve sales of about £15,000 a month – around £700 a day. That will be going some, in this town, especially with no employees to help out, but that's the aim.

They need wine to sell, at a healthy 40% gross profit. They'll buy it for £7,500 and sell it for £10,000 including VAT.

So far we've ignored monthly costs like EPOS, accountants, packaging, breakages and marketing. We'll hope that £750 can cover all of that for now.

Let's add everything up. Hooray! Our tenant can make an annual profit of £28,500. That's assuming eight hours of graft a day, six days a week (one when closed), with one week off. It works out at £11.64 an hour – less than the National Living Wage and the Real Living Wage.

Have we left anything out? Yes – shopfitting and signage, which a friend

will have to do for free. Loan interest. We haven't got a van. And then there's the licensing application. Let's hope nobody objects, though of course somebody will.

Indies: an underreported success story

It sometimes seems that running a profitable independent wine shop requires defying the laws of physics as well as economics. And yet across the country, resourceful entrepreneurs find a way.

Many businesses don't merely survive – they thrive. But the indie wine success story is underreported. Policymakers don't seem to appreciate what such businesses bring to the economy, or to their communities. So they see no reason to frame their decisions accordingly.

Mo O'Toole of Carruthers & Kent in Newcastle has shared a long letter she's sent to her MP Catherine McKinnell making these kinds of points. After listing some of the irritants facing indies – such as Brexit, high duty, VAT, EPR, the DRS etc – she outlines the contribution made by businesses like the one she runs with Claire Carruthers.

She mentions the premium nature of the food and drink they sell, and its lesser environmental impact than mass-market alternatives. She moves on to jobs. "In addition to our own staff, we contribute to the employment of a much larger cohort within our area," she says.

"Our supply partners include farmers, bakers, butchers, chocolatiers, pâtisseries

and chefs. We provide work for designers, builders, plumbers ... the list goes on. In our 16 years, we have provided countless staff with a range of transferable, social and life skills which they have deployed at university, in vocational endeavours and their future careers.

"Like all of our fellow independents we therefore make a valuable contribution to the local economic ecosystem."

Mo then talks about how indies like Carruthers & Kent add to the general local feelgood factor, for residents and businesses alike. The economic value of these things is hard to measure, but everybody notices when it's gone.

Wines that taste of nothing. But why?

On the subject of things that are gone: how's your sense of taste been this summer?

One evening, a few weeks ago, I brought home about 10 wines to try. I knew something about most of them and expected to make enthusiastic notes. But the first wine did nothing for me, nor for those around me, and we moved on to a second. Bland; forgettable. So we forgot it, and poured wine number three.

You get the picture, I'm sure. Everything we tried seemed flat and lifeless. I gave up on the tasting and retrieved a reliable white and a notoriously flavoursome red. Again, the essence had been sucked out of both, but by what mysterious force?

I mentioned this a week later to someone who sells wine to restaurants for one of the bigger importers. "It's been like that all summer," he confided. "Everything is flat. Which is not ideal when you're pouring samples for clients and you only get one chance with each wine."

There's a lot of pseudoscience surrounding this stuff, and not much real evidence, though we know that falling atmospheric pressure can impact a wine's taste, as can high humidity, which can alter our perception of aroma.

It's just as plausible that we've all been a bit hot and bothered in this summer's heatwaves. If that's the case, I might have to raise my game because, by the sound of things, next year will be even warmer. ■

Rising Stars

Astral Brown
Once Upon a Vine, Leeds

Once Upon a Vine joined Leeds's vibrant wine scene eight years ago when Simon Cocks opened the first site in Horsforth. Last November saw the addition of the Wetherby shop and a Headingley branch is imminent.

Astral is currently part-time at Horsforth and hopes to go full-time when Headingley opens and split her time between the two stores.

Simon says: "Astral came to us when I was ill a couple of years back and I didn't meet her for the first three months of her employment as I was in hospital. I was so pleased that she was one of the new members of our team when I came back to work, and I'm proud to be helping her through her journey into the wine trade."

"She is incredibly bubbly, fun-loving and smart. Customers love her energy, as do the rest of our team. Astral is still learning about wine, but she's always keen to offer suggestions based on the wines she's tasted, and she's gained a loyal following of customers who come in seeking her out for advice. She's equally happy pottering around on a quiet Tuesday afternoon as she is racing around slinging glasses of wine on a busy Friday night – always with a smile on her face."

Moving to Leeds from her hometown of Nottingham, via Newcastle University, Astral worked at Friends of Ham, a wine bar that Simon also had a previous professional connection with. Astral says: "That was quite a cool thing to find out later on. It was like it was meant to be."

It was while working there that Astral first got interested in wine. She says: "I found out that a colleague had his WSET Level 3 and when we were working behind the bar together, he'd tell me some really interesting wine facts and I thought it was really cool. I've always liked learning things, so when I saw this job opportunity at Once Upon a Vine, I just thought it would be great."

Astral also has a part-time role at Waterstones, which not only suits her love of literature, but has given her ideas about future events in the shop, which she hopes to implement when the Headingley branch opens.

She says: "A lady who works at the Wetherby site has started doing a book club with the customers. I've been wanting to do one at Horsforth for a while now, but I think I'm going to wait until Headingley, and then I could combine my two loves."

It's obvious that Astral also has a skill that can't be taught. She's clearly a people person, and it would be fair to say that the city itself is her third love.

She says: "I've lived in Leeds for seven years now and I consider it home. The people are so friendly and there is a real sense of community. There are some lovely regulars that I get to see here, and they just make my day. We'll often get people saying 'I'm sorry, I don't know anything about wine', and we're like 'that's absolutely fine, no one's expecting you to. The fact you've walked in here and you feel comfortable to browse and to ask – that's amazing.' And that's the environment we want to create."



**Astral wins an 180th anniversary magnum of
Champagne Devaux Cuvée D
courtesy of Liberty Wines**

If you'd like to nominate a Rising Star, email claire@winermerchantmag.com





Favourite Things



KYLA BROMHEAD
Beets, Edinburgh

Favourite wine on my list

I love the Félicité Lightspeed, which tastes like juice. It's great for this summer, being chillable and lush.

Favourite wine and food match

I would choose to serve the above wine with angel food cake, or baked cheesecake, or any cake really. I am rather partial to cake in general!

Favourite wine trip

I was lucky enough to visit the Barossa Valley in South Australia when I was 25. Those were the days! My best friend lives quite close to the valley, so we spent many a day trawling the wineries (or rather more crawling around the wineries).

Luckily for us, her soon-to-be betrothed agreed to drive because she said she would only marry him if he did. He and I had no idea if she was serious, so he decided not to risk it. And yes, they are still married.

Favourite wine trade person

Well, this may upset some people as they are all great and could be classed as favourites. But now that I have to pick, it has to be John Murphy from Liberty Wines (after Mike Stewart who just upped and left me! No harm done Mike!)

Favourite wine shop

The Drinks Cabinet in Aberdour, Scotland. It's a gorgeous wine shop, just near the beach and next to the castle walls. The staff are lovely and you can enjoy gorgeous food.

Majestic staff told to shop in disguise

Bosses at Majestic Wine told staff to don disguises to buy bottles of Champagne at Sainsbury's – to cash in on a Nectar card double deal.

Managers were told to dispatch staff on undercover missions to grab as much Bollinger Special Cuvée as possible.

Sainsbury's is selling the fizz to Nectar card holders for £45 – 25% off its £60 price – but if you buy six, you get another 25% off, making each bottle less than £34.

Majestic sells the Champagne for £65.

About 100 bottles were bought before bosses called a halt.

By law, licensed shops such as Majestic must buy booze from wholesalers, not supermarkets or other retailers. It is thought the bottles will now be given to staff as gifts.

The Sun, August 26



Bolly Special Cuvée was on offer in Sainsbury's

Less oak means falling barrel sales

French barrel makers are facing a second straight year of decline as weaker wine and spirits markets cut demand at home and abroad, according to new figures from the Fédération des Tonneliers de France.

The federation said total revenue fell 11.7% in 2025-26, after a 9.5% decline the previous year. The drop was sharper in export markets than in France, with revenue down 13.9% overseas and 6.9% in the domestic market.

Global production of wine and spirits has declined, consumer habits are changing, and climate pressures are affecting wine producers. At the same time, many wineries are making lighter styles and in some cases using less oak than in the past.

Vinetur, August 19

• *Vagabond Wine, the wine bar chain backed by Majestic, has acquired its "dream location" to open a new bar in Brighton in the autumn. It is the brand's first venue outside London in five years.*

The Drinks Business, August 11



The Shipping News

Updates from the supply chain

• **Brent crude** is back above \$90 a barrel after fresh US-Iran tensions and disruption in the Strait of Hormuz. Higher fuel and insurance costs could create surcharges on new world wine shipments. *(Reuters)*

• **The pound** is around \$1.36 and €1.17, cushioning both dollar freight bills and euro wine purchases. *(Reuters)*

• Drewry's latest **World Container Index** rose 4% to \$4,526 per 40ft box, with carriers restricting capacity. Long-haul shipments remain the concern. *(Drewry)*

• **Champagne's earliest-ever harvest** follows frost losses of around 30%, with heat and drought shrinking the crop further. Smaller French yields could mean firmer 2027 ex-cellar prices. *(Reuters)*

• The UK's EPR regime is now feeding real costs into **glass, cardboard and other packaging**, with glass charged at £192 per tonne for 2025-26. For a typical wine bottle, that can mean roughly 8p-12p for the glass alone. *(DEFRA)*

Italian business snaps up Jascots

Henkell Freixenet's UK subsidiary Freixenet Copestick has announced it has sold Jascots Wine Merchants to Italian food and beverage company Compagnia del Gusto Holding.

Through the company's British arm CDGH UK, it will assume full responsibility for Jascots' administrative and sales teams as well as all commercial assets.

According to Freixenet Copestick, it will also forge a new relationship between the company and CDGH, with both businesses entering into "a strategic partnership to strengthen their premium wine distribution capabilities across the UK on-trade sector".

Harpers, August 3

New MWs study AI and empire

The Institute of Masters of Wine has announced seven new MWs, taking the number worldwide to 427.

They are Alice Archer and Owain

Hughes from the UK, Weiran Liu from China, Gabriella Macari from the US, Tiago Macena from Portugal, Jake Skakun from Canada and Sue Tolson from Hungary.

Archer, who has worked for Cambridge Wine Merchants, Moët Hennessy UK and Harrods, produced a research paper examining the potential for generative AI to help wine businesses write compelling descriptions for labels.

Hughes, who now works in finance alongside wine consultancy, explored wine and empire through the work of Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling.

The Drinks Business, August 20

Chateau Denmark Hill on the way

Denmark Hill in Camberwell is about to become the first British railway station to produce a wine from vines grown on its property.

The 30 Bacchus vines, planted by the Camberwell Society just metres away from the rail tracks, have yielded enough grapes to make Chateau Denmark Hill's first vintage.

The Drinks Business, August 3



QUIZ TIME

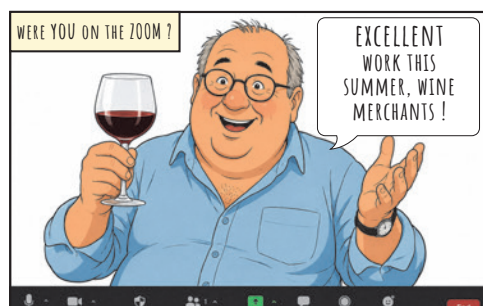
With Flying Fücks

1. Champagne began its 2026 harvest earlier than ever before. On what date did the first official picking start?
(a) July 29 (b) August 12
(c) August 24 (d) September 1
2. Which of these French appellations does not permit Sauvignon Blanc?
(a) Menetou-Salon (b) Reuilly
(c) Saint-Bris (d) Vouvray
3. Put these four Italian wine regions in order from north to south:
Barolo – Chianti Classico – Etna – Soave
4. Which variety did 14th century Duke of Burgundy Philip the Bold call "a very bad and very disloyal" grape when ordering its removal from the region?
5. Which country has the larger vineyard area?
(a) New Zealand (b) England
(c) Switzerland (d) Uruguay

Answers on page 57

CORKAGE

BY BRETT





Wine on the Tyne

Four years ago, Charlotte was an accountant and her wife Lorrie worked in construction. But after catching the wine bug, the couple took the plunge in a railway arch in Gateshead and Victor Indigo November was born.

As **Nigel Huddleston** discovers, things have been going pretty well since then – even if their dog gets most of the credit

There's a board behind the bar at Victor Indigo November honouring the employee of the month, an accolade that's permanently bestowed on Rayna the dog.

As the Gateshead shop and bar's chief greetings officer, she plays a key role in shaping both the vibe and direction of the business founded by married couple Charlotte and Lorrie Fenwick in March 2023.

"We do a lot of our business meetings on walks with Rayna," says Lorrie. It was on one of these that names for the new business were kicked about, when the ingenious use of the phonetic alphabet spelling of the French word for wine sprang into view.

"We always knew we were going to focus on France and wanted there to be a nod to that," says Charlotte, "but we didn't want a French name in case people thought it was the kind of pretentious place where people scowl at you if you can't pronounce the name of a grape. It tells people what we are but that we're not taking it too seriously."

The lightbulb moment hasn't come without shortcomings, however. "It can be tricky when you're on the phone because people think you're just spelling the name out phonetically, rather than just that it's the actual name," says Lorrie.

"When you're giving out the email address it's like, 'Victor Indigo November ... but spelt out,'" adds Charlotte. "Most people

call us Vin [to rhyme with tin] or Vin [the correct French pronunciation]."

"Nobody's called us Victor's," says Lorrie, "which I'm quite pleased about."

The couple have created a chic hybrid wine store and bar with a French focus and dreamy blue branding in a railway arch, five minutes' walk from Gateshead town centre – and not much further over a footbridge that takes passing trade over the Tyne into the heart of Newcastle.

Every now and then a train trundles overhead into Newcastle station from the south towards Middlesbrough. VIN has a couple of micropubs, a tattoo parlour and a "football shirt social club" as neighbours.

"We looked at a few places in Newcastle but we just didn't feel anything," says Charlotte. "But when we walked into the arch ... they're light and spacious, a blank canvas, you can do what you want with them. We just thought, 'this feels like the place.'"

VIN has added a second, unconnected unit next door in the past few months to serve as a dedicated events and private hire space, having been surprised by how

Arches are light and spacious, a blank canvas. You can do what you want with them

that side of the business took off.

Charlotte and Lorrie were first-timers in the wine industry: Lorrie had careers in construction and support work, while Charlotte was a chartered accountant.

"I'd already done WSET Level 2, to see if I was as interested in wine as I thought I was," Charlotte says. "It just cemented for me that I wanted to do something in wine – but I just wasn't sure what."

"At the same time, we wanted to share our life, rather than go out and do different jobs in the week and then just see each other at weekends."

Lorrie initially planned to keep her job and help out in the shop and bar, but that soon changed.

"We did a soft launch," says Charlotte, "and the next day Lorrie handed her notice in. We decided if we were both going to do it, we had to be all-in."

Lorrie, did your construction background come in useful in fitting the place out?

Lorrie: I think so, because we only wanted to spend money where we had to spend money, the things that were important like the fridges and the wine displays, some of the furniture, but everything else I just made. It also meant we could change our minds if we wanted to. It wasn't a case of "this is what it's going to look like". It meant we could be quite flexible, once we got into the space and understood it a

▶ little bit more. I had some skills but I'm not a carpenter or a joiner. But I would say I'm handy. I can watch a video and work it out. Charlotte's got a more artistic eye. When I'd done the bones of the benches [in the tasting room], I was happy they were done, but Charlotte was, like, "they don't look finished". So I just elevated them a little bit.

Charlotte: As an accountant, I'm quite risk-averse. I've always got the numbers in the back of my head. It just made sense to do a lot of it ourselves without it costing us a fortune. We didn't want to go in with a highly geared business and have to charge customers really high margins. Gateshead is not one of the most affluent areas in the region and we wanted to be affordable. We also didn't want to make somewhere that was showy and Instagram-ready. We wanted to build something that felt a little more rustic and had heart.

Lorrie: I was working at a farm that had an old barn that was going to be pulled down. There was a lot of wood, pallets that had been there for years that had weathered really beautifully with all these different colours. They became the bar. The window benches were old cattle dividers that were just going to end up in landfill.

We didn't think our own events were going to be a big part of what we did. But every time we put one on, it would sell out

What was the attraction of the site?

Charlotte: We didn't really know about this area but we live in Gateshead and got a magazine with the local council news in it through the letterbox. Axis, the bar next door, and Microbus, at the top of the street, had just opened and there was a little piece on them and about how the council were really behind the area. We came down just to have a look and had a drink outside Axis. It just seemed like there was a nice vibe – and it was much less risky than Newcastle because the rents were cheaper.

How did the addition of the second unit come about?

Charlotte: When we started we didn't think our own events were going to be a big part of what we did, just an occasional add-on, but every time we put one on, it would sell

out, sometimes within 45 minutes. People were asking if we'd do them again because they'd missed tickets. The trouble was we'd have to close to do them, so we were never going to do more than one a month when we just had the shop.

It became clear quite quickly that we needed a dedicated events space and the only way to do that was to have a second space or move somewhere bigger. Ultimately, we decided we didn't want to leave where we were. Our neighbour told us she was going to hand back the keys and we thought, we're never going to get another opportunity to get a unit next door.

Lorrie: We've got a lot of love from Gateshead because they want to draw people here and there are plans for a big development in the old listed town hall two minutes up the road. It's going to take a lot of time but the money to improve things seems to be there, and the will from the council.

Charlotte: Already in the time we've been here it's changed a lot. That's one of the reasons we wanted to stay here, because we believe it's an up-and-coming area that's going in the right direction.

Lorrie: There's a lot of good stuff happening in Gateshead but there's still a lot to do.

Do you deploy the new unit for overspill for the bar or is its use ring-fenced?

Charlotte: We use it for our own wine tasting events and hire it out for private parties, and corporate events and tastings. We do food pop-ups with a private chef who comes in a couple of times a quarter.

How often does that mean it's used in practice?

Charlotte: It varies but we try and squeeze all the events together if we can, because it makes more sense for us to have an event on Thursday, Friday and Saturday than to go Friday-Friday-Friday, from a staffing point of view and in terms of cleaning and stocking the fridges. So we tend to push them together and have a little break where we can reset for the next set.



Charlotte (left) and Lorrie Fenwick

Your own tasting roster features unusual and quirky themes, things like Orange is the New Blanc and Ewe-phoria [around cheeses made from sheep's milk].

Charlotte: We specialise in France.

Probably about 60% of the range is French, as are all of our cheeses and provisions, so the events have always been French-led. They've always been more of a deep dive into something and it gives us the chance to come up with some quirky things. We try to make them informal or fun, about the stories behind the wines and taking people on a little journey, rather than "what can you smell, why does the wine taste like this?"

Lorrie: People are quite surprised; they say they've never been to tastings like ours. People often like the idea of going to a wine tasting but they can feel like they won't know anything or it will be a bit highbrow. We just want people to come in and enjoy some wine, and we'll tell them some fun facts. It takes the pressure off.

Where do the themes come from?

Charlotte: Sometimes we'll taste a wine and think it's got a great hook and look at what we can put with it, to build a tasting around a group of wines. Other times, we'll be out on a dog walk and a daft name will come to us and we'll think it will make a good tasting. Cru Do You Think You Are? was very much a name before it was a tasting.

Some of them are around external events. We've done a couple of tastings around International Women's Day which are very popular. We've done the Tour de France a few times. France Versus the World is an important one that came about because of the Paris Olympics and is one of the only formats we repeat. We did a Champagne tasting, because I'm a big Taylor Swift fan, and I just really wanted to do an event called Champagne Problems.

Lorrie: Some people got that it was a Taylor Swift song, but others were just intrigued as to what it was all about. The name engaged people and you can tell them about how there are so many different Champagne styles, and we're going to try ►



► loads and work out which ones you like.

The first event we did in the tasting room was a Brets crisps tasting: Simply the Brets. It sold out in 10 minutes, so we put it on the next night as well. A lot of the things we've done have been about food pairing but not taking it too seriously. We've done crumpets with Bovril and Châteauneuf-du-Pape; honestly it works. People still talk about that one.

Charlotte: Brets crisps are huge. A lot of people know them from holidays in France. We absolutely love them, so when we found we could get them in the UK we started stocking them and it snowballed. We've got nine flavours and we can't keep hold of them some weeks.

Why the specialism in France?

Charlotte: It's what we like. We love visiting France; we love the language, the food, the culture. The vast majority of what we drink is French – and that's where we fell in love with wine. But we also felt there wasn't anywhere locally that was doing French wine justice. Everywhere has wines from France but it tends to be the usual suspects. We've got wines from all the big regions, but also from places such as Savoie, Corsica and Jura. The by-the-glass list has things that people are familiar with, like Chardonnay or Sauvignon, but there'll also be something really quirky and unusual like a Jacquère or a Mondeuse from Savoie.

How do you source that variety?

Charlotte: We work with a lot of suppliers and it can be hard to manage that with the size that we are, but it's important and worthwhile because it means we get the diversity of the range. If we just wanted to stock Burgundy and Bordeaux we could pick one supplier and it would be nice and easy. We've probably got 15 suppliers and it keeps growing.

Any favourites among them?

Charlotte: We've always worked with Yapp. They were the first name on the list for us. We've worked with Boutinot from day one and they are still a big part of the range. We work with Vindependents now, which



is brilliant because it gives us access to so many interesting wines that aren't sold anywhere else in the area. We work with Hallgarten, Daniel Lambert, Richmond, Enotria, North South. We get some great wines from Graft as well.

Was it a steep learning curve, coming from non-wine work backgrounds?

Charlotte: One of the hardest things, that we were perhaps naïve about, was that we didn't know anybody to float ideas past, even about things like till systems or glasswashers. We were just baffled by it and we never thought about how challenging that might be. It was a lot of internet sleuthing really, looking for wines we had known and loved and trying to work out who imported them.

Why was Yapp the first name on your supplier list?

Charlotte: We went to Châteauneuf-du-Pape in 2019 and visited Domaine Boisson. We loved the wine we tasted, and the woman who served us just wrote down Yapp on a piece of paper. They had a really strong Rhône range and at the time we launched that was probably what we drank most of, so I knew that was the perfect place to start.

I don't know how I came across Boutinot, but when I did it was perfect because we had this entire shop to stock and they had everything. Then, once *The Wine Merchant* put out an article saying "there's a new

wine shop opening", all the suppliers started calling us. But we were absolutely winging it at first.

You said Gateshead isn't on the prosperous side. Do your prices reflect that?

Charlotte: I think so. It's hard, and getting harder, to source French wines sub-£10. The vast majority of our wines are between £10 and £20. The most expensive wine we sell is £55. We don't have a market for £70-£80 bottles of wine. We use the shelf space for other things. Most of our sales are around the £15 mark.

What else excites you or your customers apart from France?

Charlotte: We've got wines from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal, the US and Croatia, but it tends to be more the kind of things that people expect than it is with France. We didn't want to put people off who were looking for a Vinho Verde.

We've got a lot of the usual suspects but also try to have French-adjacent stuff, things we'd choose to drink if we were drinking outside of France, such as Clare Valley Riesling, for example, or our Croatian red, which is made with Frankovka, or Mencía from Spain.

Do you buy any wines direct?

Charlotte: It might be something we do in



the future but we've never had the capacity in terms of storage – or probably the brain capacity to get our heads around it. The size we are doesn't really justify it, unless we did wholesale, which at the minute we don't.

Is ecommerce on your radar?

Charlotte: All our wines are on the website and we do get a few orders but it's not a big chunk of what we do. The vast majority of our sales are face-to-face.

Lorrie: We find that some people use the website before they come in, to find out what we have and then they know exactly what they want when they get here.

Charlotte: The website absolutely serves its purpose but it's something we're still working out.

Neither of us had worked in wine or hospitality, or run our own business. Some things we've taken to really well and others are still a bit of an unknown, and ecommerce is one of those.

It's never got to the point where it's the next job. Now that we've finished the tasting room maybe it will be. It is a potential growth opportunity.

What's the balance of drink-in versus take-home?

Charlotte: It is more bar-led, but it changes, and we focus on both parts of the business equally. When we opened it was clear there was a real appetite for the bar but we never took our eye off the shop. We really believe in that and it's the future-proofing of the business.

It will take longer to build up but it will grow year on year as we gain people's trust and more people know we're here. At the minute, the bar is probably a good 65%.

Lorrie: Wine flights are super-popular. We do a Flight of the Month where we look at a specific region or producer. Sometimes it's a story about a particular grape. It means we can put three wines in front of people that they'd normally never get to try side by side. We get people coming back because they know it's going to change every month and they know it's going to be good.

The brand identity seems very strong. Was that a conscious decision?

Charlotte: Yes, I think so. I always worry the brand isn't strong enough, so it's nice to hear that. We decided on blue and picked two colours that accent each other and ran them through everything. Otherwise you're picking a new colour every time you do an Instagram post or a web page. A lot of customers come into the tasting room and say they love the blue, but it's just the same as next door where they've never noticed it. But we want each space to feel like it's ours without being a carbon copy. They've each got their own personalities.

Has business met your expectations?

Charlotte: We didn't know what to expect; it was finger in the air. It's been really good. We've still got a lot of areas we can grow into but we've always been able to pay our bills, we've always been able to make a profit, we were able to pay ourselves a salary almost from the beginning, and now we've got a team of three members of staff. From that point of view, it's successful. We're here, we're doing what we wanted to do and we're not tearing our hair out looking for cash. From my point of view, as an accountant, those are the metrics I'm looking for. I'm not sure what Lorrie's looking for ...

Lorrie: I just love that you're happy. I don't need any more than that.



The business has been profitable from the beginning for Charlotte and Lorrie

ROB HOULT



Another Thing Hate seems a very strong word for a perfectly lovely Alsatian Pinot Gris

Have you ever hated a wine? I don't mean disliked. I'm not talking about a wine that really wasn't your thing. I'm not even talking about 19 Crimes. I'm on about a deep-seated, absolute and no-redeeming-features hatred of a wine.

After three decades of tasting and drinking wine I cannot recall a wine I have hated. I've disliked plenty, disagreed on the merits of a lot, but not one wine has caused me to feel actual hatred.

The reason I ask is because a customer told me the other week how much they enjoyed a bottle of Caves de Turckheim Grand Cru Brand Riesling and they were after another one.

"I'm afraid I've sold out, but I do have the equally excellent Grand Cru Pinot Gris from them, though."

"I took a bottle of that as well last time. Hated it!"

"Hated it?"

"Hated it!"

"Hated?"

"Yep, *hated* it."

The conversation continued a little longer and I mentioned my never having hated a wine, but this chap was adamant. Even when his girlfriend suggested that hate might be a little harsh, he was not for backing down. This slightly performative hatred felt like a bit of a flex and it wouldn't be the first time that a gentleman has tried to show off and assert his supposedly great wine wisdom in my shop. Alas, it is my shop, and so it's my rules, and that means



A Turckheim tantrum

I may not always be right, but I'm never wrong.

This chap's real problem was that his next request was for me to recommend another bottle of wine. Well, I couldn't really, because he hated a wine I absolutely love, so it would seem that we are on very different wavelengths, taste-wise.

The Turckheim Grand Cru Pinot Gris is a genuinely exceptional wine. It also happens to be genuinely silly value, costing under £13.70 ex VAT to buy in. I've enjoyed it countless times and featured it to great sales success in many tastings over the years. So the grandstanding by this chap meant that really my opinions on taste, quality and value were now redundant, and I was very much stuck for what to suggest.

I did tell him that I would talk about him at a tasting that night, and most likely write about him too, in a friendly way, and I like to keep my promises.

By the way, I asked this chap why he didn't bring back the offending bottle, I could have checked whether it was faulty

and replaced it for him. His reply was "oh, we drank it all, still".

I guess what this feeds in to is the old phrase "the customer is always right", coming from either Cesar Ritz, Harry Selfridge or some other client-focused entrepreneur around the turn of the 20th century. But why should the customer always be right? In my experience a great deal of customers are wrong, but only in the sense that they don't really know what they are looking for or have trouble articulating the thought of what they (and I include myself in this) actually want.

When I'm a shopper I will have an idea of what I'm after but there are experts in every field that know a lot more than I do, so I'm always prepared to listen and learn. Even if I'm in another wine shop I would never presume to know more than someone who works there. (Who am I kidding, I reckon we are all very judgy when confronted by our peers, including when reading something like this, too.)

Nothing makes me happier, though, than to be genuinely "sold" something, to willingly hand over my money for something I have discovered was not what I wanted, but was what I needed, despite how poorly I may have initially described it. Because the true skill in retail isn't just to give the customer what they think they want purely because they are "always right". It is to work out what it is they actually need and want; to essentially be able to tell them that they are wrong.

If we don't do that, we run the risk of giving the customer something they don't want and, despite the fact they asked for it, the blame for it being wrong will still fall at our door. Our customers aren't always right, but most of the time they are absolutely lovely – and, sometimes, they are misguided about their hatred for a particular wine. ■

*Rob Hoult owns Hoult's
Wine Merchants in Huddersfield*

**It is my shop, and so it's
my rules, and that means
I may not always be right,
but I am never wrong**



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Classics vs challengers

The appeal of Italy's red wines is not usually down to grape variety alone, but to a sense of place. So it's logical to explore established Italian regions in search of less celebrated wines – and there are plenty of them, argues

Jacob Stokes

Seeing native Italian red varieties outside the country's borders still feels like a slightly unsettling novelty. There's something about Italy's indigenous treasure that feels weirdly sovereign. Especially when compared with France, which has seen most of its natives blown out across the globe to be reinterpreted, reestablished and in some cases even renamed.

But it's no secret that the credentials of Italian and other Mediterranean varieties, with centuries of hot, rain-shy summers under their belts, are now rightly being explored by producers across the globe as inspiration for planting vines more suited to their respective growing environments.

Gradually, climate change will reshape which varieties are truly international, with water-sensible Mediterranean selections likely climbing to the top of the list.

It's something that has already begun naturally. Grenache in particular is proving its worth as a variety that can sustain a range of styles at high levels of quality, often under intense climatic pressure.

These initiatives are absolutely essential, not just for sustainability, but also for producing the level of quality and stylistic precision now expected by consumers. After all, a warming climate and an increasing preference for lighter, lower-ABV styles aren't exactly compatible.

But despite all of this, Italy itself seems to impart a character on its wines in a way which feels

stronger and less shakeable than almost anywhere else. This means that the varieties it has nurtured into stardom have inevitably carried a strong whiff of their homeland with them. So much so that when Sangiovese finds itself in Mendoza, as it has done for more than century, or Nebbiolo settles in Yarra, or, in Estampa's case, when Aglianico and Teroldego set up shop in Colchagua, the expressions are almost entirely unrecognisable.

I'm too young to remember whether this was the case in the early days of other transnational experiments. But if the ever-so-well-documented Super Tuscan rise is a case study to learn from, the answer would be no.

Instead, it seems that, in the absence of international examples to diversify our databank, our sensory perception of what the likes of Sangiovese or Nebbiolo should be isn't entirely based on varietal character alone, but on an interweaving of place and variety that has become impossible to untangle.

So, if the impression Italy leaves on its native varieties actually undermines their success abroad, then Italy might always do Italy best. Surely, then, it makes sense to push consumers deeper into the underexplored diversity and detail within its own boundaries, at least at first.

Italy's world-leading abundance of talent means that for every champion, there are dozens of challengers waiting in line for a shot.



Italian reds from Jeroboams Trade

Few countries reward exploration quite like Italy. From the refined elegance of Chianti Classico to the power and complexity of Brunello di Montalcino, it remains one of the most exciting and dynamic categories in the Jeroboams Trade portfolio.

Representing around a third of the range, Italy is a longstanding specialism, shaped by decades of relationships with family-owned producers whose wines combine authenticity, individuality and a genuine sense of place.

The four reds featured here offer a snapshot of what makes Italian wine so compelling today: historic estates, pioneering winemakers and a shared commitment to quality. From the prized terroirs of Panzano to the rolling hills of Montalcino, they reflect the balance Jeroboams seeks between benchmark classics and more adventurous discoveries, united by character, craftsmanship and a strong sense of origin.

For more information:
jeroboamstrade.co.uk
 or telephone
 020 7288 8888

Fattoria Casaloste Chianti Classico 2022

An organic estate in Panzano, one of Chianti Classico's most prized villages. Founded by Giovanni Battista d'Orsi and Emilia d'Orsi in the early 1990s, Casaloste has become one of the area's standout producers through low-intervention winemaking and a focus on Sangiovese.

"Expressive and nicely layered ... savoury and earthy with impressive complexity."

91 points, Antonio Galloni, Vinous

ABV: 14%
 RRP: £27.95



Castello dei Rampolla Sammarco 2020

One of Tuscany's great pioneering estates. Biodynamic since 1994, Castello dei Rampolla created Sammarco in 1980 and remains a benchmark for Cabernet-based Tuscan wine.

"All finesse ... dark fruit, graphite, incense and new leather. What a beauty."

95 points, Antonio Galloni, Vinous

ABV: 13.5%
 RRP: £70



Podere Le Ripi Amore e Magia Brunello di Montalcino 2020

A biodynamic estate in Montalcino known for its radical high-density vineyards and low-intervention approach. Winemaker Sebastian Nasello crafts some of the region's most characterful and distinctive Brunellos.

"Wild strawberry, lavender and cedary spice ... floral-laced wild berry fruits framed by grippy tannins."

93 points, Eric Guido, Vinous

ABV: 13.5%
 RRP: £90



Bakkanali Rosso Toscana Sangiovese IGT 2022

An exciting collaboration led by Podere Le Ripi's Sebastian Nasello. Whole-bunch Sangiovese from Monte Amiata, fermented with wild yeasts and aged in concrete for maximum freshness and purity.

"Gorgeous, wild nose of sweet raspberry ... lively, energetic and unpolished."

17+ points, Walter Speller, JancisRobinson.com

ABV: 13.5%
 RRP: £29.95



Montalcino

A challenge from within

You'd be justified in asking how, after alluding to challengers, our first stop is Montalcino, a region which has long dwelt in Italy's highest echelons. Well, that's because Montalcino is a champion now challenging itself.

The traditional way to look at Montalcino is as a parent of two children: Brunello and Rosso. Now, parents aren't supposed to have favourites, but just like we know that we aren't supposed to wake ourselves with alarms each morning and sit in front of screens for eight hours a day, humans have a habit of ignoring what is right.

And Montalcino is no exception, with Brunello being the A-side of the siblingship for all of its existence, with access to the best sites, oldest vines and highest levels of cellar education. It was a genetic roulette that left Rosso less equipped for success and, in the eyes of its parent, an afterthought.

Rosso has therefore lacked confidence over the years; sometimes a simple fruity wine pumped out for cash flow, sometimes a clumsy Brunello imitator with undue structure and power, and, more rarely, a truly brilliant balance between the two. This made the exploration of Rosso a bit of a nightmare for consumers.

But with the market sending a clear demand for freshness and elegance in recent years, and no obvious reason to alter Brunello's all-conquering nature, Rosso has become Montalcino's catalyst for capture. As is habitual for Brunello, producers are now setting out with a specific vision for their Rosso too.

Through more precise site selection, dedicated earlier harvest dates and the use of vessels such as concrete and amphora in the cellar, producers are

creating wines with a clear, modern identity.

As a good example of just how endearing this style can be, I remember sitting with four merchants in Cecchi's new Montalcino outpost last year, tasting its Rosso and Brunello. The Brunello was exactly as we expected: world-class. It was objectively the better wine: more complex, more intense, more dynamic and more serious.

Yet the Rosso was preferred by everyone. And when it came to dinner that evening, it was the Rosso that anchored the table all night, with the Brunello left wondering how its once awkward little brother grew to be so charming. Long may it continue.

Seek out:

• ***Podere Le Ripi Sogni e Follia Rosso di Montalcino, RRP £35 (Jeroboams)***

• ***Le Ragnaie Rosso di Montalcino, RRP £35 (Justerini & Brooks)***

• ***Cecchi Aminta Rosso di Montalcino, RRP £35 (Vinexus)***



MASI®

From *Valpolicella* to *Amarone*

For more than 250 years, Masi has been rooted in Valpolicella. Its mastery of native varieties, single vineyards and the ancient art of appassimento makes it a natural reference point for the region's distinctive red wines

Rooted in Valpolicella

Masi's story begins in 1772, with the Boscaini family's first harvest in Vaio dei Masi, a valley in the heart of Valpolicella Classica. Seven generations later, that connection with the region remains fundamental to the business.

For retailers, the Masi range provides a useful way to illustrate the journey from the generous fruit and freshness associated with Valpolicella to the concentration, complexity and ageing potential of Amarone.

Central to both is **Corvina**, prized for its perfume, body and characteristic cherry flavours. Masi has also played an important role in reviving **Oseleta**, an old Veronese variety rediscovered by the company in the 1980s. Its thick skins and high tannin content bring colour, structure and concentration. Oseleta now features in several of Masi's wines.

The art of appassimento

The defining leap from Valpolicella to Amarone comes through **appassimento**, the traditional Veronese technique of partially drying grapes after harvest.

At Masi, selected bunches are laid on traditional bamboo racks, or *arele*, in naturally ventilated drying rooms. They remain there for at least 100 days during the winter, gradually losing water and concentrating colour, aromas, flavour and texture. Masi has spent decades studying and refining the process through its Technical Group, while retaining the slow rhythms of the traditional method.

It is this transformation that gives Amarone its remarkable combination of richness and dry finish – not simply greater power, but layers of flavour and texture that distinguish it from conventionally vinified reds.



A step up in structure

Masi Toar Valpolicella Classico Superiore 2022 (RRP £26.50)

Toar demonstrates how substantial and serious Valpolicella can be without losing the accessibility that makes the category appealing.

Corvina provides generous cherry fruit, while Oseleta adds extra tannin, colour and intensity. The result is a dark, structured but approachable red, with cherry and blueberry aromas, ripe berry fruit and notes of vanilla, cinnamon and clove, finishing long and dry.

For merchants, it occupies a useful position: a recommendation for customers looking beyond lighter Italian reds towards something richer, while stopping short of Amarone's weight and price. It works particularly well with roasted or grilled meats, game and mature cheeses.

Amarone at its most complete

Masi Riserva di Costasera Amarone della Valpolicella Classico DOCG Riserva 2019 (RRP £67)

Riserva di Costasera is a flagship expression of Masi's appassimento expertise. Its name refers to the slopes facing the evening sun and



overlooking Lake Garda, where the exposure favours ripening.

Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara are joined by Oseleta. Prolonged appassimento is followed by at least three years' maturation in wood. The 2019 combines super-ripe fruit and cooked cherry with cinnamon, vanilla, cloves and sweet spice, while retaining the dry, persistent finish that is central to fine Amarone. Masi suggests a cellaring potential of 30 to 35 years.

Rather than presenting it simply as a powerful red, merchants can position Riserva Costasera as a wine for special dinners, gifting and the cellar.

Taking the idea further

Masi's willingness to apply its Veronese expertise elsewhere is neatly illustrated by **Masi Tupungato Passo Doble Tierra Soleada 2023 (RRP £18.95)**. Produced at its organic estate in Mendoza's Uco Valley, it combines Malbec with lightly dried Corvina, which undergoes a second fermentation with the Argentine wine.

It is a meeting of Mendoza and Veneto, but also evidence that, after more than 250 years, Masi continues to find new possibilities in the techniques and grapes that have defined its history.



In association with Berkmann Wine Cellars

For more information about Masi wines visit berkmann.co.uk or call 020 7609 4711

Gattinara and Valtellina

The prince and princess of Nebbiolo

There's a regal quality to Piedmont: wine of kings this, queen of wines that; even the name Nebbiolo is thought to derive from the Latin term *nobile*, meaning noble. You might contest Barolo and Barbaresco's king- and queendom over Italian wine generally, but in terms of Nebbiolo they're the undeniable throne-sitters. Begging the question: where would one find a fitting prince and princess?

First, Alto Piemonte. Rather surprisingly, in the 19th century, the iron-rich volcanic hills of Gattinara actually had more Nebbiolo planted than the Langhe, and its wines more highly prized than those of both Barolo and Barbaresco. Records from the 16th century show that vineyards here were effectively classified according to quality long before formalised French cru systems.

Despite this pedigree, Gattinara has been left in the shadows. A region that once had around 600 hectares under vine now has fewer than 100. But it hasn't lost its quality potential and stylistic identity.

Unlike in Barolo and Barbaresco, where alkaline marl soils (a combination of limestone and clay) encourage power and intensity, Alto Piemonte is home to the only volcanic Nebbiolo on the planet. Gattinara pairs its acidic mixture of sedimentary rocks from Monte Rosa, granite and iron-rich volcanic porphyry with altitude-induced temperature fluctuations and gentle Alpine breezes to create Nebbiolo which is haunting rather than flaunting: more elegant and perfumed than its Langhe neighbours.

Leaving Gattinara and heading just over two hours north east, past Lake Como and into the Alps of Lombardy, we find our next Nebbiolo successor. Valtellina is the epitome of heroic viticulture; here, on the right bank of the Adda valley at altitudes of up to 800 metres, Nebbiolo vines are moored on dizzyingly steep dry-stone terraces which can reach gradients of 70 degrees. The total length of dry-stone walling in Valtellina is 2,500km, more

than twice the length of mainland Italy.

On average, 1,400-plus hours of labour are required per hectare, around four to five times more than necessary in Barolo, for example. Everything must be done by hand; monorail systems are used to transport grapes and equipment down to the valley floor in the absence of tractors and mechanisation.

Cultivation of Nebbiolo, known locally as Chiavennasca, is practised only on the sun-drenched, south-facing side of the valley and offers an exploration of style through five DOCG subzones: Maroggia, Sassella, Grumello, Inferno and Valgella, each with distinct personalities.

It's this exploration of specific terroir which makes Valtellina so exciting. From the lean and intensely mineral Sassella to the more powerful and smoky Inferno, Valtellina is testament to how sensitive Nebbiolo is to its surroundings. And, in Pinot fashion, how beautifully it translates these differences.

But more generally, as displayed in the generic Rosso di Valtellina DOC and Valtellina Superiore DOCG wines, the Valtellina expression of Nebbiolo is consistently more ethereal and delicate than anywhere in the world. Expect crushed rock, red fruit and flowers galore, with ABV rarely above 14%.

Seek out:

- **Travaglini Gattinara Selezione, RRP £45 (Astrum Wine Cellars)**
- **Antoniolo Gattinara Riserva San Francesco, RRP £70 (FortyFive10/Bat & Bottle)**
- **Dirupi Olé! Rosso di Valtellina, RRP £36 (Passione Vino)**
- **Arpepe Valtellina Superiore Sassella, RRP £47.95 (Tutto Wines)**

Barbagia Cannonau

Italy's Grenache frontier

In the rugged wilderness of Sardinia's highest mountain range, Barbagia gets its name from the Roman statesman Cicero, who called this area of Sardinia the Land of Barbarians after indigenous tribes fiercely resisted Roman occupation.

The constant revolts and skirmishes meant that Roman dominion over this territory was largely nominal, preserving the dialects and traditions which still endure today.

It's also Italy's most historically significant Cannonau region, with locals, perhaps unsurprisingly, claiming that the variety is actually indigenous to their hills rather than Garnacha imported from Aragon. What we do know for sure, though, is that Barbagia, specifically the town of Mamoiada, had around 55ha of vines in 1855.

But in 1972, a decision was made to homogenise

Sardinia's Cannonau offering with the creation of the Cannonau di Sardegna DOC. This permitted plantings in every corner of the island, bringing the prevailing, often mediocre, style under one umbrella classification.

The move meant that Barbagia therefore had either to conform and make wines that fitted the regional image, or forge a path of its own. Both options have persisted to some extent, splitting the styles available into two camps, with many producers still using the island-wide DOC because of its commercial viability and consistency with domestic preferences.

But the truth of it is that this DOC is an insult to Barbagia and its rich heritage of Cannonau cultivation. In response, the Mamojà association was formed in 2015, dedicated to protecting and promoting the unique identity of Mamoiada wines. Some producers have instead opted to use the IGT Barbagia classification, which is paradoxically far more precise than the all-encompassing DOC.

Mamoiada, specifically the wines of Mamojà members, offers a wonderful journey through Cannonau from single sites, known as *ghiradas*, where vines, in many cases more than 100 years old, express the subtleties of six delineated zones across the region.

It's true that Barbagia wines aren't abundant in the UK just yet, but the ones that lend themselves to freshness and transparency have the character to rival anything from France and Spain, with the best truly deserving of a spot in the top tier of Italy's modern red-wine landscape.

Seek out:

• **Esole Ghirada Garaunele Barbagia Rosso, RRP £42 (Winetraders)**



How does Tombacco balance respect for tradition with the need to innovate and meet the tastes of modern consumers?

For us at Tombacco, wine is much more than a product; it is a way of telling Italy's story. Every bottle should introduce people to a region, its history, its people and the traditions that make it unique.

Italy's wine heritage has been shaped by centuries of culture and craftsmanship, and our responsibility is to preserve it while keeping it relevant to today's consumers. Innovation does not mean changing a wine's identity; it means enhancing it through thoughtful viticulture, modern winemaking and contemporary communication.

Today's consumers are looking for authenticity, provenance and meaningful experiences. That is what we aim to offer: a journey across Italy, one region and one bottle at a time.

Primitivo di Manduria has become one of southern Italy's most recognised red wine styles. What makes your new Ala Rossa Primitivo di Manduria a distinctive expression of the appellation, and what character did you want to express?

Our ambition was to present one of southern Italy's most iconic wines in a way that is true to its origins.

Primitivo di Manduria is naturally generous, expressive and full of character. Our interpretation emphasises its richness and depth while retaining balance and elegance, creating a wine that is approachable and versatile at the table.

Every Italian region has its own identity, and Primitivo reflects Puglia particularly well.

Indigenous varieties are fundamental to Italy's identity. How important is it for Tombacco to preserve and promote varieties such as Raboso, and what does this grape offer?

Italy is home to an extraordinary diversity of indigenous grape varieties, and we believe this heritage is one of the country's greatest strengths. Preserving grapes such as Raboso means protecting not just a variety, but also the culture and traditions of the place it comes from.

Raboso has been part of Veneto's

'Wine is a way of telling Italy's story'



Veneto-based Vinicola Tombacco is a family-owned business with more than a century of winemaking heritage. It showcases Italy's diverse regions, indigenous varieties and wine styles, always with a strong focus on quality and sustainability.

Cristian Tombacco is its owner and winemaker

winemaking tradition for centuries, with a personality defined by vibrant natural acidity, firm tannins and excellent ageing potential. It offers consumers the chance to discover something genuinely different, which is precisely what makes it compelling.

In recent years, we have seen growing interest in wines with a real sense of place. Raboso offers exactly that: an alternative to more familiar international varieties, with freshness, character and impressive versatility at the table.

What inspired the decision to create a sparkling version of Raboso?

Our sparkling interpretation came from a desire to reveal a different side of its personality while remaining true to its origins.

Its naturally vibrant acidity and lively fruit make it particularly well suited to a lightly sparkling style that is fresh, energetic and unexpectedly versatile.

We believe its appeal comes from its individuality. It was not created to follow

a trend, but to offer a fresh perspective on one of Veneto's most distinctive varieties.

What excites you most about the future of Italian red wines?

I believe the future of Italian wine lies not in becoming more uniform, but in celebrating what makes each region distinctive.

Consumers are increasingly seeking wines with a strong sense of place, compelling stories and lesser-known grape varieties. That presents a significant opportunity for Italy.

As producers, our responsibility is to protect that heritage while embracing innovation with balance and purpose. If we continue to communicate Italy through its wines, every bottle can become an invitation to experience the culture, landscapes and traditions that make the country unique.

**In association with UK importer
Lanchester Wines**

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Italy: red alert for indies

Alliance Wine, SWA Fine Wine Merchant of the Year 2026, has built a formidable Italian portfolio. Buyer **Beans Boughton MW** picks out six themes shaping Italian red wines and the opportunity for independents

What makes Italian red wine so exciting right now?

Italian whites are enjoying a deserved surge of interest, but the reds are another big opportunity. Diversity is their advantage: indigenous varieties, distinctive regional identities and endless room for discovery. Styles are becoming fresher, more approachable and lighter in alcohol, without losing character. Il Borghetto's biodynamic, concrete-aged Montigiano shows how: unmistakably Sangiovese, uncompromising, yet an easy recommendation.

Which producers are challenging convention within Italy's established regions?

Riecine and San Polino challenge convention by stripping away intervention rather than chasing novelty. Riecine champions pure Sangiovese, fermenting plot-by-plot in concrete with ambient yeasts, preserving freshness and site expression. In Montalcino, San Polino has farmed biodynamically from day one and keeps pushing regenerative practice further, treating its vineyards as living ecosystems. Both feel progressive precisely because their innovation is rooted in place – and both give you an on-the-ground story to tell.



Harvest time at San Polino



Chiara Drocco of Cascina Adelaide

What makes Italy's classic reds – Barolo, Brunello and Chianti Classico – so timeless?

It's a paradox: they stay timeless by evolving. The best producers are custodians of centuries-old stories, never prisoners of them. At medieval Castello di Meleto, sensor-led monitoring has cut spraying by 30%, while parcel-by-parcel vinifications in the new winery sharpen site expression. At Cascina Adelaide, Chiara Drocco farms only top cru plots below the town of Barolo. She respects what Barolo must be, yet her delicate touch is winning awards – and gives you an approachable Barolo customers will drink any day.

Which Italian regions are ones to watch right now, and why?

Etna already commands serious attention, and it still has further to run. Altitude, day-night temperature swings, volcanic soils and Nerello Mascalese give reds with perfume, tension and freshness.

Tornatore is one of the longest-established winemaking families on the northern slopes. They capture the terroir faithfully, without the stony minerality and unresolved tannin that put off first-time Etna drinkers – which makes it a great Etna listing.



Terroir is all-important for Tornatore

Which Italian reds offer great quality and value for everyday drinking?

Feudo Antico's Montepulciano d'Abruzzo combines generous cherry fruit, supple tannins and unoaked purity. In Veneto, ILatium Morini's family-made Valpolicella is bright, fragrant, juicy and just 12.5% ABV. Both are unmistakably Italian, food-friendly and full of character, yet accessible enough for midweek drinking and repeat purchase rather than special occasions.



Olim Bauda: rising star of Nizza DOCG

Any up-and-coming appellations collectors should be watching?

Nizza DOCG is one to watch: it is to Barbera what Barolo is to Nebbiolo. A standalone appellation only since 2014, it is repositioning Barbera as a serious, age-worthy wine rather than simply an everyday red. Strict yields, 100% Barbera and extended ageing give concentration, freshness and cellar potential. Olim Bauda was an early champion; its Nizza Riserva, made only in exceptional vintages, shows how compelling the appellation can be, and it is keenly priced for a fine-wine listing.

Beans Boughton MW will be hosting a special masterclass in London on October 7 with the theme of *Italy Rediscovered: Classics, Icons & Hidden Gems*. To register, contact Alex Baudouin: alex.baudouin@alliancewine.com.



BOOK REVIEW

ITALIANITY

BY ANDREA LONARDI MW
AND JESSICA DUPUY

GREENLEAF BOOK GROUP
£40

The excellent final chapter of *Italianity* consists of a series of short articles by people in the trade, mostly North Americans, explaining what Italian wine means to them. As I read it, I thought I could have contributed a good one.

I would have written about the time I attended the wedding reception of my MotoGP-loving Italian former student in a winery in Campania. It left me with a confused memory of bottles of sparkling Fiano shared on a terrace, silly amounts of Aglianico drunk over dinner, and an excited man repeatedly rising to his feet and toasting the newlyweds. It was the best wedding I've ever been to.

I'd also have told the story of the bottle of Barbaresco I drank out of a plastic mug in my flat in Tokyo, just because I really wanted a great wine and couldn't be bothered to buy a glass.

Italianity could be the best book about wine that I've ever read. It was so good, in fact, that I put to one side a novel by the American thriller writer Douglas Preston.

Italianity is largely the work of two people, Andrea Lonardi, a Master of Wine, and Jessica Dupuy. More than half of the book is devoted to a discussion of what the writers call the red wine spine of Italy, comprising Piedmont's Nebbiolo, Alpine grapes like Corvina, Sangiovese in Tuscany and Nerello Mascalese on Mount Etna. There's a chapter about whites, another which deals with the future of Italian wine, and the aforementioned final section written by lovers of Italy.

Lonardi and Dupuy are both very good

writers and, importantly, have a talent for storytelling. There are many entertaining anecdotes about Italian winemakers, producers and restaurateurs, including some very big cheeses, such as Angelo Gaja. The structure of the book, which consists mostly of one- or two-page essays on a theme, helps. There's no chance to get bored. You read a story about the old-timer that Lonardi struggled to win over in Sicily, then it's on to the tale of his friendship with two Italians with whom he did the MW course. *Italianity* is therefore unlike many books about wine, which lack the human element.

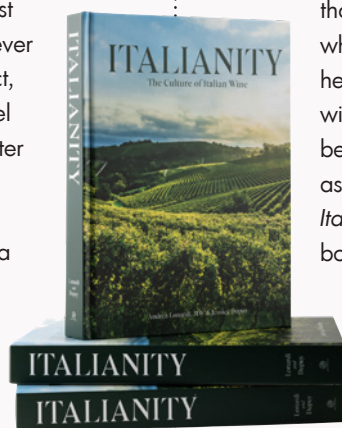
There are some surprising pieces of information. Dolcetto was an easy sell in Piedmont in the past. Barbaresco, on the other hand, used to be an "afterthought", and "was given away for free" by producers "as an incentive for a minimum purchase". Perhaps my caper with the plastic mug in Tokyo was not such a faux pas after all.

The book has a few flaws. I don't like the title, for one thing. The word *Italianity* is taken from the Italian word *Italianità*, which is "Italian-ness". *Italianity* is supposed to mean the culture of Italian wine, but I don't think it sounds right in English. It's a made-up word that recalls a spell in *Harry Potter*.

Half of the book is written in Italian, which is only really a good thing if you speak or are studying that language. I thought the section about whites didn't quite attain the heights of the chapters on red wine, although it could just be that I prefer drinking reds, as reflected by the fact that *Italianity* inspired me to buy a bottle of Chianti Classico.

I read *Italianity* twice, so it must be pretty great. It contains many pictures, which are always a welcome addition to any book about wine, and some of the writing shows real flair. It's rather well priced too. Given the quality of the publication, I'm even willing to overlook the fact that Andrea Lonardi doesn't consider the flavour of cherries to be one of the defining characteristics of Italian reds.

Michael Walker





FERRARI TRENTO: THE ART OF MOUNTAIN SPARKLING WINES

Ferrari Trento pioneered the sparkling wines we know now as Trentodoc. More than 120 years after it was formed, it still creates memorable cuvées that respect, and are inspired by, their mountain terroir

Ferrari Trento's story begins in 1902, when Giulio Ferrari set out to prove that the mountains of Trentino could produce traditional-method sparkling wines to rival the best from Champagne.

It was a bold idea at the time. Ferrari was among the first to recognise the potential of Chardonnay in the region, planting the variety extensively and laying the foundations for what would eventually become Trentodoc – Trentino's traditional-method sparkling wine appellation.



The Lunelli family. From left: Alessandro, Camilla, Marcello and Matteo

The business changed hands in 1952, when Ferrari, who had no children, chose local wine merchant Bruno Lunelli as his successor. The Lunelli family remains in charge today, with the third generation overseeing a producer that has grown considerably without losing its focus on bottle-fermented sparkling wine.

Ferrari Trento's vineyards make the most of Trentino's altitude and marked shifts between warm days and cool nights, with Chardonnay at the heart of the range and Pinot Noir also playing an important role.

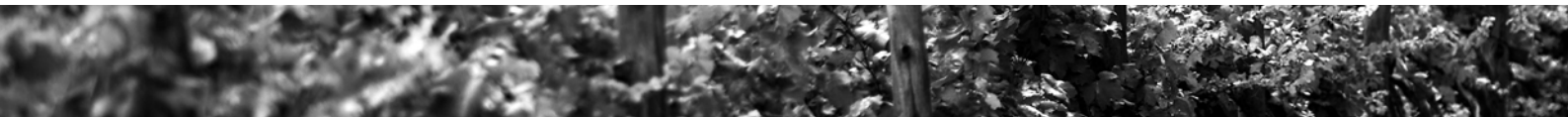
There is a strong environmental thread too. All Ferrari-owned vineyards have been certified organic since 2017, while growers supplying the company are encouraged to work under its Vigneto Ferrari protocol, covering soil health, biodiversity and sustainable mountain viticulture.

Today the range stretches from approachable non-vintage Trentodoc to long-aged prestige cuvées such as Giulio Ferrari Riserva del Fondatore – but the basic proposition remains much as Giulio Ferrari envisaged it more than 120 years ago: serious Italian sparkling wine with its identity firmly rooted in the mountains.

*In association with Ferrari Trento
UK distribution is through Liberty Wines*



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FERRARI MAXIMUM BLANC DE BLANCS

Made entirely from hand-harvested Chardonnay, Blanc de Blancs is the crispest expression in Ferrari's Maximum range. Vinified in steel and aged for at least 24 months on its lees, it combines freshness with a little autolytic complexity. The colour is a bright, intense straw yellow, while the nose brings together ripe fruit, bread crust and hazelnut. On the palate it is clean and finely drawn, with citrus notes becoming more apparent towards the finish, alongside a distinct mineral character. A Brut Trentodoc at 12.5% abv, it was first produced in 1991.



FERRARI MAXIMUM ROSÉ

Pinot Noir brings extra weight and fruit to Maximum Rosé, balanced by the finesse of Chardonnay. The result is a Brut Trentodoc with an attractive antique-pink colour and fine, persistent bubbles. The aromas lean towards citrus and peach, with the palate broader and more enveloping than the Blanc de Blancs. Extended bottle ageing contributes a subtle yeasty note to a long, persistent finish without overwhelming the fruit. First produced in 2002, this is the more gastronomic of the two Maximum wines, with enough structure and vinosity to carry it comfortably beyond the aperitif.



FERRARI PERLÉ 2019

Perlé is Ferrari's vintage Chardonnay Trentodoc, first produced in 1971 and conceived as a step up in complexity and ageing potential. The 2019 spent a minimum of 48 months on its lees. It comes from a year in which slow ripening and the contrast between warm days and cool nights helped maintain acidity in the mountain-grown fruit. Aromatically it is particularly lively: grapefruit, lemon and orange blossom lead into rhubarb, smoke and mineral notes. The palate is taut and energetic, with saline freshness, good length and a finish that brings together toast and bright lemon.



FERRARI PERLÉ MAGNUM 2018

The 2018 Perlé in magnum shows a slightly richer side of the cuvée. The growing season was productive and relatively wet, though higher vineyards retained excellent acidity thanks to greater day-night temperature differences. This release received at least 57 months' lees ageing and has a dosage of 5g/l. Golden in colour, with slow, refined bubbles, it offers russet apple, white peach and honey alongside sponge cake, almond and fresh butter. There is plenty of creaminess on the palate, but the wine remains balanced by freshness, minerality and an emerging citrus character that carries through the finish.



AMINTA

Montalcino

Cecchi is a fairly large wine company which increasingly acts like a collective of smaller ones.

For *The Wine Merchant's* fourth buying trip, we paid a first proper visit to Cecchi's newest estate, in Montalcino. Aminta, as it's been christened, is tiny by Cecchi standards: just six hectares, spread across three plots. And yet it's a logical extension of the family's wider project, which started in 1893.

Cecchi now has five estates, each with its own winemakers making their own decisions. The company's aim is not to impose a centralised style, but to allow its mosaic of terroirs to sing. At Aminta, there's been no rush to make this happen. The estate was acquired in 2018 but its first wines under its new name were not released until 2025.

The priority was to delve deep into the soil and map out the land, a task that was carried out in partnership with a local university.

All three vineyards are classified as Brunello di Montalcino and all three have galestro soils – Tuscany's famous crumbly, schist-and-clay combination. But there are subtle variations between each site.

Cantina, the vineyard we visit in the early evening, is rockier than the others and its 30-year-old vines tend to produce wines with structure and power. Grapes grown at Caselle, by contrast, usually have a fruitier character. Each vineyard's wines are vinified separately.

There's a hot spring close to Cantina and the remains of a Roman bath on the edge of the vineyard. A fossilised whale was unearthed nearby. Cecchi has made a key discovery of its own: this is a place where Sangiovese can thrive, sending its roots down as far as 10 metres into the ground in search of volcanic nutrients. Any Cabernet Sauvignon vines the company inherited here have gradually been replaced.

We're informed, as we climb the gentle slope to the 380-metre summit, that Italy sustains nearly 200 types of Sangiovese. Details like this remind us that, for Cecchi, viticulture is a precision business.

Aminta Rosso di Montalcino 2024

A bright, fragrant and easy-drinking "baby Brunello", made with the same winemaking principles as its more expensive sibling. Aged in concrete for nine months, it's supple and silky.

Aminta Brunello di Montalcino 2021

Still youthful and still developing, but the distinctive rosehip and black cherry fruit is very much to the fore. You can sense the elegance and polish of the wine even though the tannins are crunchy.

ANOTHER CHAPTER IN THE TUSCAN ADVENTURE

This summer *The Wine Merchant* took another group of indies to Tuscany, in partnership with Cecchi.

It was a chance to see how its newest estate – Aminta, in Montalcino – is fitting into the wider family business, based in Chianti Classico





VAL DELLE ROSE

Maremma

Anyone looking for an example of a state-of-the-art winery could spend a useful couple of hours at Cecchi's Maremma facility, which is now 15 years old but gleams like it's just been inaugurated.

Oenologist Andrea Fioriello guides us on a whistle-stop tour of the facility and in all honesty it's hard to keep up with the torrent of technical detail. "This winery helps us to make modern wine," he tells us, explaining how the systems are largely geared towards short macerations and minimal skin contact. "From a computer we can control all the processes and achieve a lot of extraction in two or three days. It means we can use one tank four times during harvest."

As an alternative to pumping over, Andrea recovers CO2 from tanks where fermentation is complete and sends a big carbon dioxide bubble into vessels where grapes are still being vinified. "It breaks the cap, so it's another way to extract," he says. "We don't have to use any pumps."

We get a brief look at the lab, where every wine from every tank is analysed, before heading down into the cellar. We inspect the 400 barriques and 100 tonneaux but find our attention drifting towards the concrete vessels, which are increasingly favoured by Andrea over stainless steel. "It's important to us to preserve the typicity of the fruit," he says. "We try not to use too much oak. We have more freshness and concrete is a good way to age wine."

Val delle Rose Cobalto 2024

Always one of the favourites among indie visitors, this ambitious Vermentino is a blend of wines that have been fermented and left on lees in amphora, oak and stainless steel. In the cellar we try its individual components: the oaked wine has power and aroma; the amphora wine has sapidity and minerality; and the stainless steel wine freshness and purity.



Val delle Rose Samma Cabernet Franc 2020

Maremma is something of a Cab Franc hotspot and Samma is a worthy ambassador. The wine announces itself with a classic green pepper aroma and wafts of herbs, but there's also a blackcurrant richness you wouldn't expect in the Loire. "A lovely mouth feel," says Vince Fusario of Luvians. "It's dry and sweet at the same time."

Val delle Rose Ciliegolo 2021

Ciliegolo is a bigger-berried relative of Sangiovese that was traditionally blended, but Andrea is getting excellent results with his single-varietal version, with its pronounced black cherry and plum notes. It's a blend of concrete and tonneau-aged wines. "A few producers are making young Ciliegolo, but for us it's important that we bottle after a few years," he says.



VILLA CERNA

Chianti Classico

Our visit concludes back at base: Cecchi's impressive headquarters in Castellina. It overlooks Primo Colle, the first hill that visitors to Chianti Classico see if they approach from the south.

It's an opportunity to spend some time with Andrea Cecchi, the fourth-generation owner whose attention to detail, and willingness to play the long game in his business dealings, guide the company's ethos.

First, we descend into the cellar with winemaker Miria Bracali, whose responsibility it is to assess every wine in every tank before working out which ones to blend, and in what proportions. The matrix of possibilities this presents – for Chianti Classico, Riserva and Gran Selezione wines – is mind-boggling. But she has an intimate knowledge of the parcels she's working with.

MERCHANT FEEDBACK

Tuscany has been a slightly neglected part of our range in recent years, so it was a great opportunity to revisit and taste a broad selection of wines from across the region.

I thoroughly enjoyed the trip. It was great to see Maremma and taste wines from a DOC I'm not that familiar with.

I enjoyed getting to know the Vermentinos; I think they could work well with our customers. I also loved the opportunity to taste a range of Chiantis, from different estates and vintages.

Sangiovese takes a lot of getting to know. I loved the breadth of wines we tasted from the one grape. I was also interested by Cecchi themselves – clearly a company that reinvests and keeps pushing forward, experimenting and innovating.

Can Cecchi wines do well in the UK independent trade? I'll let you know in a few months! Many of their wines are commercially attractive, and I hope they'll reinvigorate colleagues' and customers' interest in Tuscany.



Kate Goodman

Reserve Wines, Manchester

The Ribaldoni Chianti Classico DOCG stood out for me, as did the Valle delle Rose Rosamante Morellino di Scansano.

My favourites were actually the two Vermentinos: the Cobalto Vermentino Maremma Toscana DOC Superiore and the Lobelia Toscana IGT Bianco. Alongside those, Gli Amici Rosso di Montalcino DOC was the stand-out for value at entry level, and La Mora Morellino di Scansano DOCG remains a firm favourite.

I was surprised by the sheer number of wines Cecchi produces, and how consistent the quality is across every winery in the group. I was genuinely impressed by the value on offer across so much of the range.

I think Cecchi wines can do well in the independent trade. It's a crowded market, and Cecchi's strength is really in the depth behind the wines, the family, the subregions, the history, so that needs championing.



Jamie Dawson

Cork & Cask, Edinburgh

My ambitions for the trip were to learn about the Cecchi family of wines and understand their style and ethos with the aim of being able to share that with my clients.

Each of the estates that we visited had its own approach to the winemaking. I was most intrigued by the wines from Val delle Rose.

Some of the wines that really stood out for me were Morellino and also the Vermentino. I was very impressed with the Chianti Classico range and it was fantastic to revisit such a famous region with a fresh palate.

I believe that Cecchi has a valuable place in the UK's Tuscan offering, with their tradition of winemaking and their quest to always be advancing and growing.



Robert Wattie

Fairview Wines, Midhurst, West Sussex

"I often say that Sangiovese is a chameleon," she says. "It's so sensitive to the soil, to the terroir in general, that you can recognise the provenance."

She pours us a tank sample of a wine destined to be labelled as Villa Rosa Gran Selezione – another Castellina estate that joined the Cecchi group in 2015. It's from the Casetto vineyard, near "a special cypress grove", and there's already a distinct herbal influence.

Miria is a fan of her temperature-controlled tanks, which help avoid the problems that Chianti winemakers can sometimes experience with stuck fermentations.

"I don't like to push tannins," she says, discussing her winemaking style. "I wet the cap of skins just for a few minutes in the day because that way you can extract colour but not get green tannins."

"For me, wine mustn't be heavy, because you can tire very soon."

She's excited by what nature provides every autumn. "We have to pursue the character of the harvest," she says. "You can't have exactly the same wine year after year."



Cecchi Storia di Famiglia Chianti Classico 2024

"This is the most successful wine we produce in Chianti Classico," says Andrea Cecchi. "We want elegance and approachability. We don't want a big structure, so we only age a small portion of the wine in oak." It's fresh, lively and fruity and great value at around £17 on the shelf.



Villa Rosa Ribaldoni Chianti Classico 2021

One of the estate's single-vineyard bottlings, with classic, slightly savoury and balsamic notes joining the plums and violets, this was a big hit with our travelling indies. Tonneaux ageing adds some spice and hints of cedar. Another plus point is the contemporary label, which the group describes as pretty stunning.

Villa Cerna Chianti Classico Riserva 1988

The group enjoys the current 2021 release and the opportunity to taste this 38-year-old from the library is too good to pass up. "That's amazing," says Robert Wattie of Fairview Wines. "It's kept both its fruit and its acidity." The wine was made with a 20% component of white grapes. "Very bright and very lively still," adds Robert.

Thanks to Cecchi for funding our visit

In the UK, the wines are usually shipped direct to merchants, with sales handled by Vinexus.

For more information contact Cecchi export director Francesco Vitulli: fvitulli@cecchi.net or Gaetano Alabiso at Vinexus: gaetano@vinexus.co.uk.



The English are revolting, and so are the Scots

Dear Phoebe

Ah've a wee shoap in a wee toun and we're in Sassenach season. They Southerners are amok wi their Chelsea Tractors an their oot-the-box tweed (wee Mary's outfitters is gaun lik a tap!) an their jawin fur onyhin "local an biodynamic". I show em ma treats fae Jura but they're fu o demands fur "gloopy pet nats". Ah tell em the tide has turned on the Skittery Naturals but they're oan about a bar in Peckham and michty! they're sae fast an furious! Won't calm doon wi their snappin an yappin. Ah'm sick o it, and just want to drink ma Kagami in peace. Do ah tell em to get tae?

Hamish, Machrihanish

Dear Hamish

With industry and farming down the pan, what, now, have we to offer except good Scottish hospitality? Doesn't sound like you're Doing Your Bit, buddy. Tug the forelock, prostrate yourself and give them some of wee Mary's neep uisge-beatha. I find a little tartan ribbon and a bowl of Mrs Tilly's tablet at the till means I can hike the prices up immeasurably.

HTH, Phoebe

Rowdies are playing Buckfast and loose

Dear Phoebe

I am one of the highest ranking wine merchants in a picturesque, nay idyllic Cotswold village. Of late, the shop has been subsumed by a gaggle of rowdy Scots, bursting through the door with shrill, aggressive demands for "Buckie"



"Keep gaun, lads – Clarkson's Farm's jist ower the ither side o' yonder dual carriageway"

and "Belters!!" My suggestions of Cornas (or even a St Joseph!) are ridiculed with claims I am a "wank jobbie" and needling enquiries for rather more keenly priced bottles that would "dae the joab". They treat basic manners like an English conspiracy. Is it possible to bar entry for anyone with an accent north of Carlisle?

Julian, Moreton-in-Marsh

Dear Julian

Try dealing with them all the time, mate. It's like their mouths are only good for filth.

HTH! Phoebe

Do I turn a blind eye to Midland menace?

Dear Phoebe

Iechyd da! My shop is on the Welsh coast, a prime target for weekenders crossing the border from the Midlands. I hear them trying to pronounce the street names with a smirk before entering and asking why I don't carry

"more traditional British wines". I explain our selection of Welsh rarities, maen nhw'n dweud ein bod ni'n siarad cachu. They say we just ferment rain and sheep's milk, followed by "English Sparkling Wine literally beats Champagne in blind tastings". Rydyn ni'n deall e'n barod!

Myfanwy, Mumbles

Dear Myfanwy

I met a traveller from an antique land, who said: two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown, and wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, tell that its sculptor well those passions read which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, the hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed. And on the pedestal, these words appear: "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away.

HTH! Phoebe

‘We are mountain people’

Zuccardi's story began in 1963 when Alberto Zuccardi planted the family's first vineyard to demonstrate an irrigation system he had invented. It laid the foundations for his son, José, and grandson Sebastián, to take Zuccardi to its place in the highest reaches of Argentinian wine production – literally.

In association with Hatch Mansfield

Our home is Mendoza. The mountains define the identity of our wines, providing the landscape, the climate, the water and the soils in which we grow our vineyards. But they also shape who we are. We are mountain people. Our character, our way of life and the way we think about wine are all deeply connected to the Andes.

The Uco Valley is an extraordinary place; it teaches us something new every day. We came to this region 20 years ago in search of the mountain's influence. One of the greatest challenges, and fascinations, of this place is that the soils can change dramatically over just a few metres. This encouraged us to study the soils in depth, to understand how they influence vine growth, water retention, ripening and ultimately the style of the wines.

We represent our wine hierarchy as a pyramid. The defining factor at each level

is the origin of the grapes. The journey begins with broader regional expressions at the base of the pyramid and progresses towards increasingly precise and indivisible places at its peak.

I have no doubt that Malbec is the grape variety that most faithfully and transparently expresses the extraordinary diversity of the Uco Valley. It is an exceptional variety in terms of its ability to adapt to different conditions.

My understanding of the Malbec grape changed when we arrived here in the Uco Valley. I realised it was possible to make a very different style of Malbec from the traditional one. In the winery, year after year, we have gradually undressed the wines, removing the influence of oak so that the character of each place can emerge with greater clarity.



In 10 years, 14 Zuccardi wines have received 100-point scores from international critics. This is first and foremost an acknowledgement of the place where we cultivate our vineyards. The greatest recognition is that this corner of the world is capable of making wines at the very highest level. It reflects confidence in our family's ability to reveal the potential of this place through our journey, dedication and work.

We are living through a remarkable moment for Argentinian wine. There is still so much left to discover, and we must continue deepening our understanding of each place through viticulture and winemaking. The future is incredibly promising.

Zuccardi Concreto Malbec RRP £35

A very special wine for us because it marked a turning point in the way Malbec came to be perceived in Argentina.

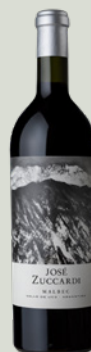
Made with a selection from the most calcareous soils in Paraje Altamira and Gualtallary, it offers a profile that differs significantly from the more classical style associated with Mendoza. We harvest early, ferment with whole bunches and handle it entirely in concrete. It clearly expresses our interpretation of Malbec from these remarkable places.



José Zuccardi Malbec RRP £39.50

A tribute to my father, José. Without the work of both him and my grandfather, I would not be making the wines I make today.

With this wine, we express a somewhat more traditional interpretation of Malbec. The fruit comes from the same origins as Concreto, but from a different selection of soils. For José, we choose deeper soils. The winemaking is more classical, with fermentation in concrete vessels followed by two years of ageing in oak foudres.



Zuccardi Regiones Chardonnay RRP £20.80

Zuccardi Regiones expresses the Uco Valley from a broader regional perspective. For each variety, we select the areas where we believe it expresses itself at its very best.

The Chardonnay comes from vineyards in Tupungato at an altitude of 1,250 metres. Half of the wine is fermented and aged in concrete vessels and the other half in used French oak barrels. We want to preserve the natural freshness and purity of these high-altitude sites.

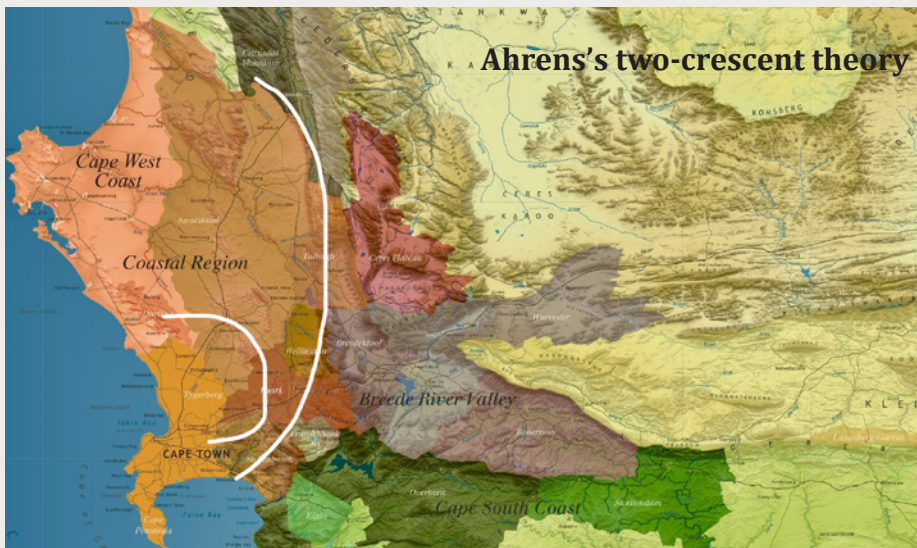


JACOB STOKES



First Press

There are two Cs in the Cape – even if they are the wrong way around



For August's South Africa feature, I jumped at the chance to get into the nitty-gritty of Chenin's relationship with key Cape stomping grounds. Perhaps the most appealing task in the entire trade for me. Blinded by excitement, though, one thing I didn't account for was how word-thirsty such a pilgrimage would be.

In typically South African fashion, as I began interacting with producers and exploring their views, they would, without hesitation, refer me further down the line to their mate and their mate's mate, who might be able to offer even more originality. A dangerous proposition for someone who has no self-control with such matters. So, inevitably, what started as a functional tunnel of information – think Charles Bronson in *The Great Escape* – ended up more like a commercial quarry, dazzling with endless ores of Steen.

In the end, the feature covered Paarl and

Darling through the eyes of two excellent young winemakers, on the suspicion that readers might know less about these places than, say, Stellenbosch or Swartland.

But one conversation lingered in my mind long afterwards: the one I had with Albert Ahrens from Ahrens Family Wines. It was a conversation that saw Albert have to pull over to the side of the road for half an hour to avoid any signal dropouts affecting the coherence of his explanation.

The discussion transcended Chenin in any given region pretty quickly and steered instead towards the matter of communicating the Cape effectively to consumers, something Albert has been dedicated to for a long time.

Just to give an idea of what Albert is all about: he called his recent first trip to the Loire an “eye-opener”, saying: “You can look at maps and taste the wines all

you like, but until you feel that soil in your hand, you just don't have an idea.”

But knowing that most consumers don't want to jump on a plane just to start understanding South African wine, Albert says the first step in breaking the Western Cape down is through an idea he calls the two Cs. For this, you need to imagine two backward Cs, or crescents, placed over two sections of the Western Cape.

First, the outer C is placed along the Cape Folds to separate the coastal region from the continental Breede River valley regions of Robertson and Worcester, with the second C placed across the granite outcrops within the coastal region to help delineate key areas and hopefully inform prevailing styles.

To explain the first outer C simply, Albert says: “No matter where you are, if you're on the Cape Town side of the Western Cape and you look east, you're always looking at the Cape Folds, rendering everything to the west of the mountains as the coastal range.”

In Stellenbosch, Cape Fold mountains such as Simonsberg and Helderberg are made from the ancient Table Mountain sandstone formation, which sits on a bed of granite. The soils derived from this formation, like those seen in the Polkadraai Hills, for example, are therefore highly weathered, nutrient-poor and heavily influenced by sandstone and granite.

As for the C delineating the granite outcrops from the Cape Folds, it starts in Stellenbosch with the Bottellary Hills, expands up to the 500-million-year-old Paarl Mountain, continues into Swartland with the Paardeberg and finishes with the rolling granite hills of Darling towards the coast.

It's important to stress that this framework is exactly that: a framework, not a comprehensive answer. It's then up to stakeholders to incorporate every other element beyond mountains and ocean, and every other complexity that might make up a wine's identity. But at least by starting a conversation, which is what Albert does so expertly, we begin to engage with the intricate journey of terroir at the level the Cape warrants – one that is so masterfully translated by Chenin. ■

Carmen DO is now 10 years old. What was the idea behind the creation of the range?

Carmen DO was created as a tribute to the producers who have preserved Chile's viticultural heritage through old vineyards, ancestral varieties and traditional winemaking practices passed down through generations. Crafted in small quantities from heritage grapes such as Semillón, Cinsault, País, Carignan and Garnacha, with an artisanal and minimal-intervention approach, the wines express not only the character of their origin and variety, but also the human stories behind vineyards – many over a century old – that give each wine a unique and distinctive identity.

The wines are closely connected to old vineyards and growers across Chile. How important are those relationships to the identity of Carmen DO?

They are fundamental. Behind every Carmen DO wine there are people, stories and knowledge that have often been passed down through generations.

In regions such as Itata and Maule, producers have preserved old vineyards and traditional varieties that form an important part of Chile's winemaking heritage. Without their dedication, many of these vineyards might not exist today.

For us, working closely with the growers is not simply about sourcing grapes. We learn from their knowledge of the vineyard and the place, and that becomes part of the identity of the wine. As winemakers, we also have a responsibility to give these producers greater visibility and recognition.

Why was it important for Carmen DO to focus on varieties such as Semillón, Cinsault, País, Carignan and Garnacha?

Because these varieties tell an important part of Chile's story. They have a long history in the country and are closely connected to traditional vineyards and regions, but they have not always received the recognition they deserve.

Semillón in Apalta, Cinsault in Itata, and País, Carignan, and Garnacha in Maule let us explore very different expressions of Chile. They also give us the opportunity to work with old, dry-farmed vineyards and



Over 10 years, the Carmen DO has revived Chile's viticultural heritage through historic varieties and close work with small growers.

From unique vineyards in Apalta, Maule and Itata, it produces wines with a true sense of origin.

Head winemaker **Ana Maria Cumsille** explains more

Sponsored feature

Wines are imported by Schenk Family UK
schenkfamily-wine.co.uk



A decade of Carmen DO

traditional forms of viticulture.

For me, the important thing is not that these are less familiar varieties. It is that they have something genuine to say about where they come from. If we can make wines that show their freshness, balance, personality and character, then we can demonstrate their relevance to Chilean wine today.

Carmen DO combines respect for tradition with some quite adventurous winemaking. How do you decide when to preserve a tradition and when to reinterpret it?

For me, it always starts with understanding the vineyard and the variety. We need to know what makes that place special before deciding how to work with it in the winery.

I believe in intervening as little as possible, but minimal intervention does

not mean doing less. It means observing more carefully and making precise decisions about when to intervene and, importantly, when to step back.

The important thing is that the winemaking should support the identity of the place rather than impose a style on it.

Looking back, what do you think the project has achieved that you are most proud of?

I am most proud that Carmen DO has helped to show a different side of Chilean wine. When the project began, the idea was to explore Chile's diversity through its regions, vineyards, and grape varieties, and to give greater visibility to lesser-known places and varieties.

Over the past 10 years, we have worked with old vineyards and producers in different parts of the country and made wines with a very clear sense of place. For me, that is the greatest achievement – demonstrating that Chile has so much more to offer than the varieties and regions with which it is traditionally associated.

I am also proud that the project has continued to evolve. We are still learning from these vineyards and looking for new ways to express them, while remaining faithful to the philosophy with which Carmen DO began.



The four still wines in the Carmen DO range

Our greatest from Greece

Four indies select their favourites and bestsellers from a country regarded as one of the planet's most exciting wine hotspots



Kirsty McEwan, Bludge Wine

Kirsty McEwan

Bludge Wine, Edinburgh

I believe my customers who are loving Greek wines are early adopters. It's such a popular holiday destination at the moment, and customers are keen to bring a little bit of that holiday spirit back into their lives with the wines they're choosing.

For a long time, I think we in the UK heard Greek wine and thought of piney retsina without considering the wide range of variety this exciting, untapped wine region has to offer. My customers are loving the fresh, crisp whites I have at the moment.

They're the perfect accompaniment for the picky tea summer we've been experiencing in Edinburgh. Customers who were perhaps stuck in a Sauvignon Blanc rut have been branching out and loving Vilana, and the Vinho Verde die-hards are switching to Savatiano (minus the resin!)

It's great for customers who are looking to drink a little less but a little better, nestling on the shelves between the £12-£17 mark.

Kirsty's picks

- Boutari Kretikos Vilana, Crete (£11.95, Boutinot)
- Papagiannakos Old Vine Savatiano, Markopoulo (£16.95, Boutinot)



Jack Baldock

Broadway Cellars, St Ives, Cambridgeshire

Greek wine, to me, is one of the most exciting categories in the wine world right now. While the more traditional regions and styles still command the spotlight, Greece is quietly producing wines of remarkable quality and individuality. I think there are over 300 different indigenous varieties, which is absolutely mind-boggling. While I have only been exposed to a few, I feel I am only just starting to scratch the surface on Greek wines, and I personally can't wait to keep on discovering more.

It's probably the wine region we've been asked about more than any other over the past few months, with customers returning from their holidays having discovered Greek wines for themselves. In fact, no word of a lie, a customer asked me for a Greek wine while I was writing this! It's clear that once people experience these wines in their natural surroundings, they're keen to rediscover them back home.

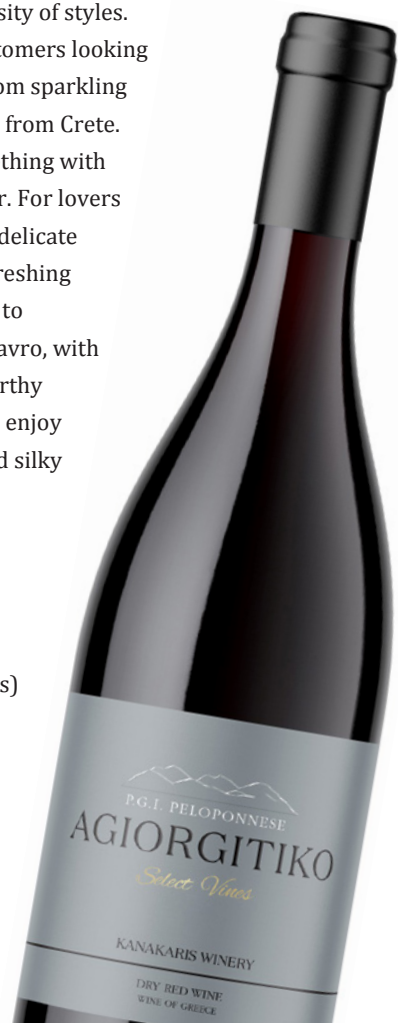
I think what makes Greek wine so exciting is its authenticity. Rather than following international trends, many producers have embraced their native grapes and unique terroirs, creating wines that feel fresh, distinctive and unmistakably Greek. From the volcanic vineyards of Santorini to Naoussa and the hills of the Peloponnese, there is an incredible diversity of styles.

Within our range, Greek wines are perfect for customers looking to move beyond the familiar. We have everything from sparkling Xinomavro from the north to sun-dried sweet wines from Crete.

If you enjoy crisp Sauvignon Blanc but fancy something with more texture and minerality, Assyrtiko is the answer. For lovers of elegant, dry rosé, a Liatiko rosé from Crete offers delicate wild strawberry and pomegranate flavours with refreshing acidity and a savoury finish, an excellent alternative to Provence. Lovers of Nebbiolo should explore Xinomavro, with its fragrant red fruit, savoury complexity and ageworthy structure. Fans of rich Rhône reds will find plenty to enjoy in Agiorgitiko, offering generous dark fruit, spice and silky tannins.

Jack's picks

- Kir-Yianni The North Assyrtiko (£20, Liberty Wines)
- Lyrarakis Kedros Liatiko Rosé (£19.50, Thorman Hunt)
- Kanakaris Agiorgitiko (£20, Liberty Wines)



Nish Patel

Shenfield Wine Co, Essex

When I was asked to talk about our Greek wine offering, I had to laugh: we didn't have one. Yet Richard and Penny on the team had been nudging me to find something worth listing, and Richard was keen to retaste an Assyrtiko from a trade tasting. This felt like an excuse for a proper deep dive.

Greece has around 300 native grape varieties, but only a handful have made real inroads in the UK, notably Assyrtiko and Xinomavro. That's an opportunity: plenty of headroom for a merchant willing to do the homework. Our tasting featured five Assyrtikos, a Xinomavro rosé, a red Xinomavro and an Agiorgitiko.

The bottles looked smart on the shelf. The one thing I'd like more of is back-label storytelling. As with Portuguese wines, unfamiliar varieties reward context. Tasting notes or food pairings would help customers take the leap.

The Assyrtikos were a mixed bag. Several lacked the acid, grip and zip I'd want from a benchmark dry white: pleasant, rather than exciting. A useful reminder that site and producer matter as much as the grape name. The Santo Santorini stood out. It was a genuine treat, gorgeous and long, though at £40 it needs a story to sell it.

It was with the reds where things got interesting, though. The Naoussa Cuvée Villages Xinomavro was savoury and traditional – Greece's answer to Nebbiolo or Pinot Noir. The Kanakaris Agiorgitiko was the crowd-pleaser, juicy and dark-fruited with smooth tannins and a long finish. Richard and Penny disagreed over which to list: Penny liked the Xinomavro for typicity, Richard the Agiorgitiko for approachability. Both had a fair case.

The rosé was an outright win. Having already sold three or four cases as a one-off at our spring tasting, there was clear proof of appetite.

Greek wine doesn't have big demand from customers yet, and Assyrtiko alone won't change that on this showing. But with a proven rosé and two reds we're genuinely excited about, we've got enough to make a real start, and a much clearer eye for what to look for next time.

I began a little embarrassed that we had no Greek wine listed. I'm finishing this looking forward to changing that.

Nish's picks

- Santo Santorini Assyrtiko (£40, Walker & Wodehouse)
- Kir-Yianni Xinomavro Rosé (£18, Liberty Wines)
- Kir-Yianni The Naoussa Cuvée Villages Xinomavro (£21, Liberty Wines)
- Kanakaris Agiorgitiko (£20, Liberty Wines)





Rosalyn Magee

Magees Wine, Crossgar,
County Down

Greek wine is something a little different. Perhaps that's the best thing about Greek wine: it doesn't taste like everywhere else.

At a time when wine drinkers are increasingly looking beyond the familiar grapes and regions, Greece has a treasure chest of indigenous varieties waiting to be discovered. These aren't international grapes planted somewhere sunny and given a Greek label, they're wines that genuinely taste of where they come from.

Assyrtiko is a brilliant example of why

Greek wine deserves a spot alongside the classics. Gavalas Natural Ferment Assyrtiko is made from Santorini's star grape and fermented using naturally occurring wild yeasts. It has all the freshness and acidity the island is famous for, but with extra texture, complexity and character. Think citrus, stone fruit, herbs and that unmistakable salty, volcanic edge.

If you're usually drawn to Chablis, Sancerre or mineral-driven white Burgundy, this is where we'd point you instead. It has that same serious, food-friendly feel, but with a personality that is completely Santorini.

For red drinkers, Xinomavro offers something equally exciting. Fans of Nebbiolo, Pinot Noir or lighter Italian reds

will find plenty to love here: juicy red fruit, herbs, spice, lively acidity and a savoury edge. It's a red that's as happy served slightly chilled as it is with a plate of food.

That's really where Greek wine comes into its own. Instead of another Sauvignon, try Assyrtiko. Instead of reaching automatically for Pinot or Nebbiolo, give Xinomavro a go. You might have to practice saying the grape variety, but chances are you'll want a second glass once you do.

Rosalyn's picks

- Thymiopoulos Xinomavro (£19.95, Keeling Andrew)
- Gavalas Natural Ferment Assyrtiko Santorini (£52, Alliance)

Wines of Greece Highlights Tasting

Around 104 wines from 35 Wines of Greece campaign wineries will be available at this informal self-pour tasting.

For more information, contact anny@westburycom.co.uk.

Monday, September 28
The Balcony Room
Swan London
21 New Globe Walk
London SE1 9DT

The Jolly Merchants Tasting

Independent producers from central and eastern Europe and the Mediterranean will be pouring wines based largely on indigenous grape varieties.

The line-up covers Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Hungary, Austria and Croatia, with an emphasis on food-friendly wines, freshness and moderate alcohol.

Reserve a place by emailing team@thejollymerchants.co.uk.

Tuesday, October 6
The Embassy of Bulgaria
186-188 Queen's Gate
London SW7 5HL

GCF Exclusive's Autumn Tastings

An opportunity to explore new releases as well as the company's most popular wines from the French-owned business.

Les Grands Chais de France offers wines from its own estates all across France, in addition to wines from partner producers – including many from beyond French borders.

The tasting will also include no and low-alcohol options and seasonal wines

tailored for the autumn and Christmas trading period.

RSVP to ontrade.uk@lgcf.fr.

Tuesday, October 6
Castlefield Rooms, 18-20 Castle Street
Manchester M3 4LZ

Wednesday, October 7
The Engine Shed, Station Approach
Redcliffe
Bristol BS1 6QH

Bordeaux Grands Crus Classés Tasting

Recent and older vintages will be poured by a group of leading Bordeaux châteaux.

The line-up includes Château Branaire-Ducru, Château Canon, Château Canon La Gaffelière, Château Gazin, Château Guiraud, Château Léoville Poyferré, Château Montrose, Château Pontet-Canet, Château Rauzan-Ségla and Château Smith Haut Lafitte.

Pre-registration is essential: nathalie@otaria.co.uk.

Thursday, October 8
Church House
London SW1P 3NZ

Assemblage Buyers Days

Buyers can book private tasting slots and select wines from the Assemblage portfolio in advance.

Two sessions each day will cover Assemblage services including staff training, masterclasses, wine-fair representation, consultancy and portfolio tastings.

Each day will end with an informal Champagne networking event.

Places can be requested by emailing maud@assemblagelimited.com.

Monday & Tuesday, October 12 & 13
Champagne & Fromage
22 Wellington Street
London WC2E 7DD

Alto Adige Trade Tasting

Registration: aloisel@hopscotch.one.

Monday, October 12
Shoreditch Arts Club
6 Redchurch Street
London E2 7DD

Wines of South Africa Trade Tasting

More than 70 exhibitors from across the Cape will take part in this event.

The programme includes a masterclass, a Cap Classique x Coravin bar, South African food and wines from producers including Steenberg, Simonsig, Klein Constantia, Reyneke, De Wetshof and Thistle & Weed.

Contact elona@winesofsa.com.

Tuesday, October 13
The Lindley Hall
80 Vincent Square
London SW1P 2PB

The Wine Business Network

An evening for members of the wine trade to meet and exchange ideas.

A guest-speaker session is planned, with details to be announced.

Places are limited. Register via emmanuelle.martin@wineowners.com.

Thursday, October 15
Fero Lounge
22 Ganton Street
London W1F 7BU

Great Greek Wines

Forty wineries from Greece and Cyprus are heading for London's South Bank.

Yiannis Karakasis MW will lead the *Greek Terroirs: An In-depth Exploration* masterclass from 10am to 11.30am, followed by the walk-around tasting from noon to 5pm.

Register interest in the masterclass via vinocial@effitsournavia.com.

Monday, October 19
OXO2

Level Two, Oxo Tower Wharf
Barge House Street
London SE1 9PH

Sustainability in Drinks

Now in its third year, this exhibition and conference focuses on sustainability across the drinks sector.

The programme includes exhibitors, workshops, talks, a keynote address and panel discussions, alongside products and services aimed at improving sustainability in the industry.

Registration is via sustainabilityindrinks.com.

Tuesday, October 20
Christ Church Spitalfields
Commercial Street
London E1 6LY

QUIZ TIME

Answers to questions on page 23

1. (b) August 12 2. (d) Vouvray
3. Soave – Barolo – Chianti Classico – Etna 4. Gamay 5. (a) New Zealand

Davy's Autumn Tasting

More than 230 wines will be available, with a particular focus on ranges for the festive season and winter months.

Contact angusc@davy.co.uk.

Tuesday, October 20
Vintners' Hall
Upper Thames Street
London EC4V 3BG

Essential Guide to Italian Wine

Daniele Cernilli, aka DoctorWine, will launch the XIII edition of *The Essential Guide to Italian Wine 2027*.

Italian producers will take part in a trade and press walk-around tasting from 2pm to 7pm, with a consumer session from 6pm to 7pm.

A masterclass is also planned, with details to be announced. To reserve a place, email giusy@giusyandreaacchio.com or pr@doctorwine.it.

Wednesday, October 21
The Royal Horseguards Hotel & One Whitehall Place, 2 Whitehall Court
London SW1A 2EJ

Saison Wines x MJ Wine Cellars Trade Tasting

Find new, organic and "superb-value" wines at this joint tasting for indies.

Mags Janjo (Weingut Mama, Austria), Marie Adler (Weingut Marie Adler, Germany) and Cedric Guy (Domaine de Bon Augure, France) will be present.

Email dt@saisonwines.com.

Tuesday, September 29
DVine Cellars
1 Voltaire Rd, London SW4 6DQ



Unbottling

with Rachel Gibson MBACP

Navigating redundancy

What do you do? When meeting people socially, or in a networking environment for the first time, one of the questions we are usually asked is about our jobs and what we do for a living. In our culture, our work is often near the top of the list of things that define us. It helps create the identity we project to others, underpins our self-worth and shapes our ambitions and lifestyles.

Losing our job, for any reason, can be devastating. Stress, worry and anxiety can quickly pile up in our minds and it can have a truly destabilising effect on our wellbeing. Financial worries may well be our first priority. Will I find a new job (that pays enough)? Will it affect my relationship and my family life? We may have built friendships and a secure support system with our colleagues at work that will be impacted. Will other people judge me? We may feel a sense of shame, exposure and tremendous personal responsibility. Imposter syndrome could start to creep in as our self-esteem takes a heavy bruising.

Even if you are currently working, the fear of redundancy or bankruptcy in the future can still be mental torture. Feeling at risk of losing your job, or your business, can create untold distress, and many of us will not share these feelings with anyone. Instead, we hold these painful feelings inside ourselves, impacting our mental health, but also our physical wellbeing.

Therapy is a safe and confidential space to release some of those feelings without fear of judgement, and to give some shape to the new reality we face. It is an opportunity to rebuild an inner core of self-confidence, make a plan and focus on what you really want. You may find yourself at a crossroads and discover you actually want to take a completely different path in your career. Most importantly, therapy is a place to strengthen your mental wellbeing and find the courage to step back out into the world, whatever that role may look like.

Rachel is an integrative counsellor and a member of the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy. She formerly ran Wine Utopia in Winchester. She offers ongoing online counselling sessions at the reduced rate of £35 per 50 minutes, so mention this article. Email rachel@rachelgibsoncounselling.co.uk or visit rachelgibsoncounselling.co.uk

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NEW AGENCY – Bodega Viña Alta, Mendoza

Bodega Viña Alta is located in San Martin, just east of Mendoza in the Maipu subregion, which is lower in altitude than the Uco Valley and the subregion of Gualtallary.

The bodega has been in the family for 60 years and extends over 100ha. It used to produce fruit for a co-operative – but in 2016 started to make its own wines.

The estate is run by Valentina Ludica, and her children Emiliano and Candela. Together they have steered the production towards an innovative, modern and minimal-intervention approach, producing some different ranges of more approachable wines and also using some of their native varieties.

The estate operates with dry farming practices, utilising the irrigation from the Andean Acquia systems to catch snowmelt. Herbicides and chemical inputs are avoided, natural biodiversity is maintained around the vineyard.



Wines (from left): Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Chardonnay, Malbec Rosé

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Introducing our four new Australian producers

Named Best New Winery at the 2027 Halliday Wine Companion Awards, **Decades** is an exciting project owned by acclaimed winemaker Steve Flamsteed and brewer Brad Rogers, producing single-vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in Tasmania's Coal River Valley.

A "master of minimalism" in the winery, **Luke Lambert** has something of a cult following for his single-vineyard Yarra Valley Nebbiolo – a pure expression with lifted aromatics, supple fruit, and fine tannin structure.

Adrian Rodda is a rising star whose classy cool-climate wines are defined by an impressive vitality and purity of fruit, capturing the essence of the single sites and old Chardonnay vines he works with in Beechworth.

Patrick Sullivan makes outstanding single-vineyard Gippsland Chardonnay from ancient volcanic soils. Believing that great wine is grown, not made, sustainability and a hands-on approach in the vineyard remain cornerstones of his philosophy.

Discover these new wines and many more at our Australia Tasting in London on 29th September. Please email events@libertywines.co.uk for more details.



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Q&A

“I had a bottle of sulphurous Frascati with Melvyn Bragg!”

Doug Wregg
Les Caves de Pyrene

Born in New York, Doug joined the wine trade after graduating in English at Oxford University. Starting as a restaurant manager and then becoming a sommelier, he has been one of the team at Les Caves de Pyrene, the specialist in organic and biodynamic wines, since 1995. He is the company's marketing director as well as a buyer.

What's the first wine you remember drinking?

A bottle of sulphurous Frascati with Melvyn Bragg (name drop) in an Oxford restaurant. I was terrified of having to order a wine under the basilisk gaze of the wine waiter and effectively closed my eyes and stuck a metaphorical pin in the wine list. It tasted like nectar, but in hindsight was foul.

What job would you be doing if you weren't in the wine trade?

I would like to write full time. I am working on a book about the nature and neuropsychology of taste. I trained to be a teacher – I wouldn't mind teaching English literature at sixth-form level.

How do you relax?

Listening to music, mainly progressive rock from the 1970s. Pure nostalgia. When I can afford to, I go to the theatre. I enjoy the immersive quality of the best plays.

What's the best book you've recently read?

Anna Karenina was on the bucket list. It's what long hot summer days on the balcony sipping mint tea were designed for.

Give us a TV recommendation.

I am rewatching *Life on Mars*. It's funny, clever, always keeps you guessing. Plus, it



contains the soundtrack to my schooldays. Just finished *Arrested Development*, which managed to be consistently inventive and hilarious. *Breaking Bad* was also addictive. I have been addicted to *Family Guy* for years and can quote chunks of dialogue.

Do you have any sporting loyalties?

Scotland (as I am half Scottish) for rugby, football and any team sport, so I am used to living with chronic disappointment and witnessing defeat snatched from the jaws of victory. I have followed Liverpool through their triumphs and disasters for over 50 years. For cricket, I have a strange soft spot for New Zealand.

Who's your favourite music artist?

Marillion – the Steve Hogarth era. In the autumn, I am hoping to go to a gig taking place at the same venue where I saw them for the first time 46 years ago. Also, Pink Floyd, Wishbone Ash and Dire Straits.

Who's your favourite wine critic?

Jamie Goode – he writes clearly and concisely, and I greatly respect his

opinions on wines, which are based upon an amalgam of science and personal preference. We do a podcast together and he's definitely the voice of reason in it. I like Alice Feiring – she writes fearlessly and with no little humour.

What's your most treasured possession?

I am not materialistic and consequently tend not to invest in objects. I reserve my “treasuring” for family and friends, if that doesn't sound too corny. I do have a lot of books, and I can't imagine living somewhere not surrounded by them.

What's your proudest moment?

The respective births of my son and daughter. Not that I did the heavy lifting. Professionally speaking, it was six months after our company opened Terroirs Wine Bar in Charing Cross. After a very long lunch, I left an already packed restaurant at 6pm. When I looked down the street, I saw customers queuing right to the end of the block (not for a table, just to come and have a drink in a natural wine bar). I was so happy that we had followed through on a random conversation, taken a risk to open the UK's first natural wine bar, and that it had turned into a conspicuous success.

What's your biggest regret?

That I never learned how to play an instrument. Air guitar doesn't count!

Who's your hero?

There are so many people that I admire, especially those who devote themselves selflessly to helping others – nurses, teachers ... those who want to protect the planet by educating us about it (for example, David Attenborough).

Any hidden talents?

I have a stupid memory. I forget names and faces immediately but can remember the name and vintage of a wine that I served to a customer over 30 years ago.

What's your favourite place in the UK?

Scarista on the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. I got married on the beach there, a huge curve of cockleshell sand facing due west, with the Atlantic in all her playful moods rolling in.

If we could grant you one wish, what would it be?

That my generation won't screw up the planet for my children's generation. ■



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