

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS



REFLECTIONS OF THE WAY LIFE USED TO BE



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Back in 1994, Clive Hunt, one of the directors of Carlsberg-Tetley, asked me if I would have a look at their wine range. I did as instructed and twenty-five years later I am still advising the company (although Carlsberg UK's wine division is now Crown Cellars).

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO THE DRINKS INDUSTRY WAS UNDERGOING ONE OF ITS PERIODS OF TUMULTUOUS CHANGE

This resulted in Carlsberg-Tetley taking on the responsibility for the sales and marketing of their wines and spirits. In the early days there were some spooky moments when the whole idea of the company wholesaling wines and spirits was under threat. However, the profitable role that Crown Cellars can play in a mature on-trade market became self-evident about a decade ago and our proposition has gone from strength to strength since.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AS WINE CONSULTANT TO CROWN CELLARS (WITH A NOD TO THE SUPREMES)



MUSING ON THE ABOVE I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO DIG OUT A COUPLE OF OLD PRICE LISTS AND HAVE A LOOK AT WHAT HAS AND WHAT HASN'T CHANGED SINCE 1994



Perhaps the single biggest shift is at the house wine end of things. Back in the mid-1990s house wine was still primarily French Vin de Table. We had the Louis Larose and Maison des Bretons ranges and that was just about it. By the turn of the millennium that was all starting to change. From France we introduced the Aimery range and from further afield we had exclusive house wine pairs from all the major European and New World countries. Some of the labels, such as Millstream (South Africa) and Ochre Mountain (Chile) are still going strong, whilst others have fallen by the wayside.

I find it incredible that we introduced the Invenio range over a dozen years ago. More recently we have continued the innovation, constantly refreshing what we have to offer at the inexpensive end of the market. The choice of varieties has expanded as has the style of labels – from the coolness of Ren and Las Ondas, via the gothic horror of Dead Man's Dice, Clockwork Raven and Bone Orchard, to the gentle humour of Brightside and Drop Dead Gorgeous.



JONATHAN PEDLEY
MW

IF ONE LOOKS AT THE WAY COUNTRIES, GRAPE VARIETIES AND STYLES HAVE WAXED AND WANED IN POPULARITY, THERE ARE SOME BIG SHIFTS



In the late 1980s Germany had nearly a third of the UK wine market. Our sales of Liebfaumlisch and Piesporter Michelsberg were enormous. That market has since collapsed and it remains very hard to sell wines made out of the Riesling grape, regardless of where they come from.

THE ITALIAN STORY IS PERHAPS EVEN STRANGER

Does anyone remember Lambrusco Bianco? Sales were huge thirty years ago and then fell off a cliff. Interestingly at about the same time Pinot Grigio started to appear on the scene.

WE LISTED OUR FIRST PINOT GRIGIO IN 1999 – THE MEZZACORONA VERSION THAT WE STILL CARRY TODAY

We now list nine others (including the blush versions) from Italy alone. But that wasn't the end. Around fourteen years ago Louise Boddington, suggested that we consider listing a Prosecco. She had worked in the Off-Trade and had noticed the growing fashionability of this wine. The rest is history: we currently list six Proseccos and sell tens of thousands of cases.

WE CURRENTLY LIST THIRTY-FOUR DIFFERENT STILL ROSÉS AND ELEVEN SPARKLING

Another paradigm shift in the market has been the rise of rosé. At the start of our reference period, sales of rosé in the UK made up barely 1% of the mix.



BY THE MID 1990S THE NEW WORLD HAD MADE ITS BREAKTHROUGH

With links to importer Hatch Mansfield, from day one we carried the Errázuriz Chilean wines and Villa Maria New Zealand wines. South Africa required some work. Starting from scratch we added the Bellingham and Millstream wines.

INTERESTINGLY, BOTH OUR CALIFORNIAN AND AUSTRALIAN RANGES HAVE SEEN SINCE QUITE A LOT OF CHURN OVER THE PAST QUARTER OF A CENTURY

This has not been down to any quality issues but rather with the major corporate interests involved in the US and Australian wine industries. Denise Parker, Louise's predecessor as wine buyer, spotted the opportunity for Argentina early on and championed the Bright Brothers wines for many years.

Changes in the popularity of the main varieties of grapes has perhaps been less marked than one might expect. The Pinot Grigio and Malbec booms are the exceptions where a grape has come from relative obscurity to super stardom. However, we still sell plenty of Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon today. Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Shiraz might have squeezed them but they are still alive and kicking. Pinot Noir has become more mainstream but I thought Viognier might have become a little better known by now. Of course for those prepared to take "the road less travelled" the choice of varieties we now list is incredible: Grüner Veltliner, Saperavi, Godello, Pecorino, Manzoni, Raboso, Malvasia Nera and so on.

In those early days we listed no English wines. This was understandable: volumes were tiny, quality was variable and the industry in England was yet to latch onto the potential of sparkling wine. Just try the Nyetimber Classic Cuvée Brut to see how the latter has been realised.

IT COULD BE ARGUED THAT OVER THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS FRANCE HAS CHANGED THE LEAST

Rioja was important for Crown Cellars from the start and it still is today. However, in the 1990s we were already experimenting with some of Spain's upcoming regional wines and we have continued that process, not least because the quality:price rapport is tremendous.

We still carry a selection of top wines from Bordeaux, Burgundy, Champagne and the Rhône. But even in somewhere as well known as France we can all be surprised. I am pretty sure that nobody spotted the coming Picpoul de Pinet and Rosé de Provence explosions ten years ago.

One final reflection: back in the winter of 1986, I was taken on a buying trip to the Rhône. One of the co-operatives we visited was in Villedieu. Vintages and labels may have changed, but the Côtes du Rhône Cuvée St. Laurent we carry today is a direct descendent of the wine we selected at Villedieu a third of a century ago.



LITTLE GIDDING,
T. S. ELIOT

"WE SHALL NOT CEASE FROM EXPLORATION AND THE END OF ALL OUR EXPLORING WILL BE TO ARRIVE WHERE WE STARTED AND KNOW THE PLACE FOR THE FIRST TIME"