

Larmin's a damn fine thing

14 Nov 2006 by JR

The Wine & Spirit Education Trust, the London-based international educational body, has just released the results of consumer research undertaken on its behalf by specialist researchers Wine Intelligence last June.

They posed various questions to a cross section of people who had attended a WSET Intermediate Certificate course in the past 12 months, but who had no connection with the trade.

According to Ian Harris, the dynamic Chief Executive of the WSET, "The objective was to establish whether education, and particularly a WSET education, encouraged trading up, and this was indeed one of the key findings. This is a very important piece of work that demonstrates the value of education as a catalyst to change consumer behaviour in a way that benefits both the consumer and the wine industry as a whole."

In addition to a willingness to spend more on wine, and broadening their wine-drinking repertoire, consumers also reported that they acquired confidence, which increased their enjoyment and what the WSET press release calls "involvement in the category".

According to the WSET, the research showed that 'non-trade' WSET course attendees are not confined to the stereotypical "wine bores" – in fact, they are a mix of ages, both male and female, for whom participating in such a course was often the product of a long-term ambition. Despite the participants having no previous connection with the wine industry, the WSET endorsement added credibility and gravitas, as well as enhancing their knowledge.

Respondents also reported that gaining wine knowledge makes wine drinking more of a treat. By understanding their own tastes more thoroughly, they felt more able to choose a wine they knew they would enjoy, hence enhancing feelings of personal reward. They also enjoyed social situations more as they felt they could talk about wine with confidence. (This does sound rather as though the WSET may be guilty of churning out embryonic wine bores. Let's hope they have learnt how to talk entertainingly about wine rather than just parading their knowledge.)

Ever the opportunist as far as WSET is concerned, Harris is keen to point out that the research comes as wine industry leaders are investigating how to get consumers to trade up to more expensive wines when buying wine in both the on- and off-premise sectors.

He added: "...the results of this research reinforce the hypothesis that education, both for staff at point of purchase, and at consumer level, is good for the industry. Last year we carried out quantitative research which proved conclusively that a relatively low investment in training staff who work at the point of purchase paid back in a very short time, yielding a 600% return on investment over a 3 month period. I am delighted that the consumer research also supports my claim that education is the most powerful tool the industry can use to add value back into a category which is being de-valued by oversupply and discounting".

Fighting talk.