

M&S - hiding its lights under a bushel

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I don't usually get worked up about the wines sold by British supermarkets. Most multiple retailers are eminently capable of looking after themselves and their precious market shares and special offers. But Marks & Spencer's wine range fills me with frustration, almost rage. This is not because it is bad. If anything it's because it is so good, but M&S seems collectively determined to hide this fact from the consumer.

For example, Torbreck is one of Australia's most renowned producers. Some of its Barossa reds from jealously guarded sources of ancient vines sell for well over £100 a bottle. To be able to offer a wine made by Torbreck on a British supermarket shelf one would think would be a badge of honour. But to work out that M&S's £9.99 **Marananga Dam, Grenache/ Shiraz/ Mourvèdre 2005 Barossa Valley** comes from this sought after address, you need a magnifying glass and, preferably, a deerstalker too. The T- word appears in dark red letters no higher than a cuticle on black at the bottom of the label.

Also in South Australia, The Lane has rapidly established itself as a top quality source of Adelaide Hills wines. M&S offer three of them, two of them selling at the ambitious price of £12.99 (the average price spent per bottle in British supermarkets is only just over £4) but nowhere on either the front or back label will you see any mention of The Lane. All three of these wines are sold under the name The Gum (would you pay £12.99 for a bottle of gum?) and the producer named at the bottom of the back label is J & H Edwards. I happen to know that the owners of The Lane are called Edwards but I am not sure many M&S customers do.

Similarly, Craggy Range is one of the most admired producers in New Zealand. Its Sol Syrah from the Hawkes Bay region is one of the most admired examples in its home country and has won international admiration too. M&S tried to sell a very similar wine, at £14.99, called Lone Range Syrah (with no obvious link to the famous Craggy) but has given up in favour of a **Lone Range Pinot Noir 2006 Martinborough**, also £14.99 from Craggy Range, at the same price. How on earth the average wine drinker works out the Craggy Range connection is anyone's guess.

This hiding of massively interesting lights under a bushel is perhaps more easily explicable with the pair of wines that M&S's wine buyers buy direct from arguably the most respected source of Hunter Valley wine, Tyrrell's. You will search in vain on front and back labels of M&S Hunter Valley Shiraz and Hunter Valley Chardonnay at £7.99 for a mention of this venerable family. According to the back label, the wine is produced by a company called Twin Wells – Tyrrell's pronounced with a plum in the mouth? This may be not unrelated to the fact that if the word Tyrrell's appears anywhere on a label in the UK, a commission of 10 per cent is due to Tyrrell's official UK importer.

There is another quite understandable example of a wine whose origins are not spelt out. **Silver Tree Merlot 2005** is a really first class South African red at £8.99. It comes from young vines grown on a Very Famous Estate which does not want its name associated with this wine made effectively of offcuts. On the other hand, I can't understand for the life of me why the origins of the South African **Darracott Sauvignon Blanc 2006 Constantia** at £8.99 are not shouted from the rooftops. Producers Steenberg have a great reputation and would surely have no objections to its name being used.

But this is not an exclusively New World phenomenon. Jean- Marc Brocard is one of my favourite Chablis producers. He supplies M&S with a 2005 Chablis at £9.99, a considerably higher price than most Chablis in most other supermarkets. So what is there to persuade the M&S customer to part with this amount? No trace of the name Brocard but a made up name, Domaine Pierre de Prehy. (I don't know who Pierre is but Prehy is the name of Brocard's village.

One of the retailer's most sumptuously packaged bottles is their Single Estate Grenache Blanc 2006 from Roussillon. Admittedly it sells for just £5.49 but it does seem odd to me to sell something so prominently on the basis of its coming from a single estate and then fob the customer off with the only clue to its provenance being 'SOE', the name given for the producer Oenoalliance. And why don't they flaunt the name of one of Sancerre's most respected producers Henri Bourgeois on their new Loire Sauvignon Vin de Pays Les Pierblancs? Similarly, a doppelganger for Ch Potensac, little brother of the world- famous red bordeaux Ch Léoville Las Cases, does not carry its usual name on the shelves of M&S but that of the virtually unknown **Ch Gallais Bellevue 2001 Médoc** – a snip at just £7.99.

Is this misplaced modesty? Or is it arrogance perhaps – a belief that the fact that a wine has been selected by M&S's six- strong buying team is virtue enough? Perhaps it is all driven by a determination that all wines should be exclusive, like their fashion collections by famous designers, and therefore free of price comparisons? It is worth pointing out perhaps that Tesco, Sainsbury's and M&S all have a red Crozes- Hermitage supplied by the Cave de Tain co- operative. The prices are, respectively, £6.99, £6.99 and £7.99, although the M&S one is more luscious than Tesco's (I have not tasted Sainsbury's) and I am assured that the M&S team, acknowledged throughout the world of wine as much more interventionist than most, have worked especially hard to "reduce the rusticity" of this North Rhône Syrah. In fairness I should also point out that of the big retailers only M&S is adventurous enough to offer white Crozes- Hermitage – two in fact, one from the highly respected Domaine Pochon, in this case fully credited.

I sought an explanation of M&S policy regarding naming producers from Chris Murphy who has worked in M&S's wine department longer than anyone, since 1983. Why was it that, for example, Bunan 2002 Bandol, Contino 2002 Rioja and **Selvapiana, Bucerchiale Riserva 2003 Chianti Rufina** (£18) got major name checks on the front label whereas the wine loving customer was kept pretty much in the dark about the thoroughly superior origins of so many of the wines cited above? While there was mention of a "definitive decision tree", no very coherent answer emerged. There were mutterings of exclusivity re the Bunan, Contino 2002 Rioja and Selvapiana that, I pointed out, turned out to be not so exclusive after all.

My guess is that the M&S buying team have inherited a philosophy that is no longer relevant to the wine market today. If you are asking someone to pay around £10 for a bottle of wine, you should be boasting about its origins – often grander than for other retailers' own label wines – rather than being coy about them. Wine lovers nowadays are too sophisticated and well- informed to hand over total responsibility for their wine choices to a retailer.

Other favourite M&S wines

(in addition to those in bold above – with actual provenance)

WHITES

La Basca, Uvas Blancas 2006 Castile- Léon £5.49

Spanish white from Telmo Rodriguez

Sauvignon de Touraine 2006 £5.99

Zesty white Loire from Jacky Marteau.

Zamora Sauvignon Blanc 2006 Lodi £6.99

From Bear Creek and really fresh but with masses of fruit – just what we need from California.

Vinha de Urze 2006 £7.99

Really interesting Portuguese white from Roboredo Carm

Ch Gaillard 2006 Reully £8.99

Very sleek, more interesting than most Sancerres.

Organic Chablis 2005 £11.99

Full of beans and ready to drink from J M Brocard.

Condrieu 2005 Vins de Vienne £30

Lovely but Tesco sold a 2004, perhaps a lesser cuvee, for less than £20.

REDS

Corbières 2006 £5.79

Dully labelled superior Languedoc red from Gérard Bertrand.

Organic Mareante Hill Cabernet/ Merlot 2005 £5.99

Why not tell us more clearly this is made by Chilean wizard Alvaro Espinoza at VOE?

Tupungato Cabernet Malbec 2006 £6.49

From the excellent Catena operation's high altitude vineyards in Argentina.

Teichert Ranch, Petite Sirah 2006 Lodi, California £7.99

Congratulations on another really interesting wine from Bear Creek, with 20% port grape Souzão.

Tinderbox Shiraz 2006 McLaren Vale £9.99

A classic Australian 15 per center from RockBare.

Stag's Leap Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 Napa Valley £18

Not the sort of wine you find easily in UK supermarkets, from Stag's Leap Winery not Vineyards.

Ch de Launay 2003 Bordeaux Supérieur £20

Not unlike the garagiste Girolate about which I wrote a year ago. Very luxurious.