

Vinexpo - the wines that didn't arrive...

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The best story in this week's *Harpers* UK trade weekly is a report by Stuart Peskett on the fact that the great majority of South African wines destined for the biennial trade fair in Bordeaux, as well as some wines from Gallo and Foster's, were impounded by French customs officials and arrived at the fair only on its third day. This year was supposed to mark Wines of South Africa's (WOSA's) glorious return to the fair after an absence but with a country like this, the ability to show samples would have been even more important than for more traditional producers who are often there simply to establish eye contact and shake hands.

Apparently the South African shipment had been sent from Stellenbosch to Antwerp, whence it was presumably shipped on with the California and Australian wines by road. The consignment was stopped at the Franco-Belgian border because it was missing an Accompanying Administration Document (AAD). This happened late on the Saturday night before Vinexpo opened on Monday so there was still time for some producers to pack bottles in their baggage but this was clearly little compensation for the estimated £20,000 per producer that the WOSA presence entailed. Will they be back? "We're trying to stay positive," said WOSA's marketing manager for Europe Dalene Steyn, through tight lips presumably. Foster's meanwhile were perplexed as they were convinced their paperwork was fully in order.

Peskett clearly roamed to good effect. He seemed to have caught the MD of Castel UK, the normally serene Ann Burchett, on a bad day. She claims, against all visible evidence, that there is no intention of successively rebranding all their Oddbins sites as Nicolas stores (now up 80 in the UK, about 60 of them having been Oddbins quite recently). "Castel has a role to play in the UK, and if we could be allowed to get on with it, it would be nice," she observed to Peskett. "Sometimes I really feel that people love to hate us."

It's true that many of us yearn for the Oddbins of old with its well-priced range of seriously interesting, innovative wines - and perhaps that old model made no business sense which must be irritating for the Castels who paid a fortune for the ailing chain and are still trying to make it viable.

Burchett is particularly "annoyed" by some critical reactions to the new Oddbins Selection range of famous French appellation wines launched on June 5. I have just tasted them and offer my reactions, not all negative.

I can't understand why they have chosen to use synthetic corks and am sceptical about the reasons for bottling the Chablis, the tart and cheap Mâcon-like **Bourgogne Rouge 2006** (12.5% £6.99) and vapid, callow **Châteauneuf-du-Pape 2006** (14% £12.99) in Beaujolais. It also seems a mistake, when there is still so much lovely 2005 red bordeaux sloshing about, to choose a stinky 2006 for their **Bordeaux Rouge 2006** (12.5% £5.99). The **Sancerre 2006** (13% £9.99) and **Pouilly-Fume 2006** (%) are bottled by the same 'Marquis de Clermont' and are ok but not exciting but...I thought their **Chablis 2006** (12.5% £9.99) was absolutely delicious. Masses of classic minerality and purity yet already a very fine drink. This shows every sign of thriving for at least another two years. A bouquet for Ms Burchett!