

The single bottle dilemma

12 Jun 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is much longer

The UK is acknowledged around the world as a sophisticated market for wine. So how come it short changes sophisticated wine consumers in one important respect?

I refer to the relative difficulty of buying fine wine by the single bottle. In general, British wine lovers are expected to buy their smart wine by the case: usually a box of a dozen, sometimes half- dozen, bottles. If in the UK you want something grander than a typical supermarket wine, you are expected to place an order by phone or online with a traditional merchant or fine wine trader and then either keep it in a specialist warehouse (usually bonded, so to extract it there is yet another layer of paperwork) or wait patiently until the vendor is ready to deliver the case to your door. And in both this case and the rare cases when British wine stores do stock serious wines by the bottle, the wines in question are usually far too young to drink.

But now that so much en primeur bordeaux and top burgundy costs a four- figure sum per case, there is surely even more of a market for single bottles. And what about spontaneity? What does the wine lover about town do if on impulse they want to drink or give a single special bottle? In most countries, it is a given that wine stores are well stocked with wines at all price levels, right up to first growth level, all available by the single bottle and at varying degrees of maturity. Potential buyers can pick up and inspect bottles before putting them in their shopping baskets.

But this is relatively rare in the UK. Because well over 70% of all wine retailed in Britain is now sold by the supermarkets, because high street rents are so high, and because of the recent growth in selling wine online, the number of specialist wine shops has been decimated. Peter Dominic, Augustus Barnett, Victoria Wine, Fullers, Unwins and more recently Thresher are all extinct. Oddbins soldiers on under new management, with some distinctly superior wines, having been sold to the son of one of the original management team by Castel of Bordeaux, who continue to use the Nicolas chain of wine shops in the UK and France as a useful outlet for their own wines. The only large specialist wine retailer in the UK that seems to be flourishing is Majestic, but part of their winning formula is that they will not countenance purchases of fewer than six bottles.

The disappearance of the chains has had one healthy effect: a recent flowering of new, independent small wine retailers all over the UK, but they typically operate on low start-up costs, and often sell exclusively online, only exceptionally having premises wine lovers can wander round.

So British consumers in search of a single superior bottle of wine will find relatively few retailers able to help them. They may be able to choose from scores of dreary 'special offers' of basic wines at the supermarket - although here continual duty increases have applied downward pressure to margins and wine quality. And thanks to the enthusiasm of the new wave of independents, they can choose from a wide range of more interesting, handpicked wines in the £6- £20 range, but these relatively new companies rarely carry much stock of mature fine wine.

An exception to this, and to most generalities in the UK wine scene, is **The Sampler**, a small store in Islington, north London, which is soon to sprout a second outlet in South Kensington. Here customers can buy tastes of scores of wines chosen by a true wine lover rather than an accounts department, and of the 1,500 different wines on sale by the single bottle, almost half could be described as 'fine and mature' and sell even faster than The Sampler's cheaper wines - precisely 'because they are unavailable elsewhere', according to founder Jamie Hutchinson.

Philglas & Swiggot is a similar, rather older, operation with three stores in Greater London but its focus is on New World wines. The most obvious small group of wine shops with a hand picked, slightly more classic range (including one of Britain's best collections of fine Italian wines) is **Lea & Sandeman**, who reckon that about 200 of their 900 wines fall into my, admittedly arbitrary, category of 'fine and mature'. The **Jeroboams** fine wine stores around London are also very useful sources of single bottles of fine wine, although of course this convenience factor tends to come at a price. **Handford**, **Huntsworth Wine** and **Wimbledon Wine** are also superior sources.

The single large **Roberson** store in Kensington High Street may well have London's best collection of seriously smart wine available by the single bottle: the likes of DRC burgundies and first growths are commonly found in their cavern at the back of the shop. Mark Andrew of Roberson reckons that as many as 800 out of their 1,400 lines would qualify as fine and mature. More convenient for wine lovers based in the City of London are **Pont de la Tour** wine shop just south of Tower Bridge and the enterprising retailer **Uncorked**, which claims to have as many as 600 smart wines in store and available by the single bottle.

Strangely, perhaps, few of the traditional fine- wine merchants on whose trade the UK's fine- wine reputation was once based, have serious retail outlets. The exception in London is **Berry Bros**, which claims to have as many as 2,500 different wines, all available by the single bottle, in their recently extended and highly atmospheric shop a spit away from St James's Palace.

It is perhaps not surprising that most of the UK's best places to buy expensive wine are in London, where the people and the money are. The department stores **Harrods**, **Harvey Nichols**, **Selfridge's** and **Fortnum & Mason** have long been obvious places to buy fancy bottles - at a price. It could be a long overdue sign of Manchester's ascendancy that this northern city now has a fine wine store in **Hanging Ditch**, even though many northerners still make the trek to the cavernous, and particularly keenly priced, **D Byrne & Co** in the small town of Clitheroe, north Lancashire.

In Yorkshire **Chez Vin** of Otley and **Campbells** of Leyburn also have their followers. Other provincial wine merchants recommended since this article was first published are **Richard Granger** of Newcastle upon Tyne, **S H Jones** of Banbury and the **Butlers Wine Cellar** in London- on- Sea aka Brighton.

One traditional country wine merchant with a particularly wide range of single bottles for sale is **Tanners**, the family firm that dominates the wine trade in the Welsh borders, for long a dark horse. James Tanner reckons that as many as 600 wines of the '1,086 available in Shrewsbury Cellars shop over £10 (swelled by adverse euro)' are of the sort that need and have benefited from maturing in bottle.

In the east of England, **Adnams** of Southwold have one of the most attractive wine shops in the country but **Noel Young** of Trumpington outside Cambridge is the most obvious place to find fine, mature wines by the single bottle. Noel claims to have 'hundreds and hundreds from all over the world!!! Very possibly around a thousand, never actually counted. We keep a large part of our inventory at the shop so even if not on the shelves customers can look at our website in store and ask for single bottles and we very often have them.'

Scottish wine lovers are best advised to head for **Woodwinters** and **Luvians**. I am assured that Corney & Barrow's shop in Ayr also does the business.

Based in Northern Ireland but able to supply wine lovers throughout the British Isles, **James Nicholson** is a model source of fine wine from all over the world and at all stages of maturity.

But this list is just about it - in a country of 33.4 million wine drinkers.

For contact details of all these merchants, see [Where to buy](#).

For Purple pagers' thoughts and suggestions on the matter, see [this thread](#) on the members' forum.