Comparing wine prices online - who's best

24 Nov 2004 by JR

There's no doubt that one of the great boons of this revolution in information technology is www.jancisrob - sorry, not this blessed site of course but the easy price comparisons we can make nowadays. Not just between merchants in the same country but right across the world.

I've been playing around with the new Pro version of WineSearcher and having great fun. It costs US$15, which seems remarkably low for anyone who spends more than about $150 a year on wine (I reckon it could easily save you 10 per cent on wine purchases). The major downside is the rather cumbersome payment method imposed by PayPal, the American outfit that collects money via credit cards. (I hope our own system is more straightforward; let us know if you can suggest any improvements.)

It sifts through data from hundreds of different wine merchants all over the world and lists stockists in the most sensible order (cheapest first). You choose a single currency for all the prices to be shown in (which you can keep on changing if necessary) and it all works remarkably fast and easily.

The downside is that the site is completely at the mercy of the data supplied by the merchants. Each price is dated for when it was supplied, and there are notes explaining which taxes and duties may have been removed. But, for example, I thought I'd look up **Château Talbot 1986**, the most attractive wine for current drinking in a recent comparison of 1986 clarets, including several first growths about which I'll write soon.

Wine Searcher.com suggested more than 30 stockists, in the US, UK, France, Switzerland, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan (I'm listing them in generally increasing price order). Prices ranged from $54 a bottle from Alliance Wines, Durham, North Carolina (an outfit I have noticed before that offers particularly keen prices) to - per single bottle - $175 a bottle from Fine Wines International of San Fransisco (sic).

The second cheapest stockist, with a price of $73.32 dated 22 January, was a British company Medbourne Fine Wines of Leicesture (sic again) which I had never heard. So I clicked on their name and found out their contact details and rang them up. 'They' turned out to be one individual who sounded in rather a hurry to get off the phone and who said he was winding up the business and had already sold off virtually all his stock.

Wine Searcher.com is run from London by someone who is also trying to hold down a job with Berry Bros & Rudd (which may account for the typos) - and certainly there is some nice advertising for that venerable wine merchant on the free section of the site. Certain firms are 'sponsors' and get to have their names printed in bold.

I then tried Wine Searcher.com's most obvious rival www.winealert.com based in and very much centred on the US. They offer free Silver membership, and Gold membership for $29.95 (I still don't understand why Wine Searcher.com is undercutting winealert.com so substantially).

I had to answer a few questions in an easy format before being allowed a Silver search for Ch Talbot 1986. This threw up three names, one in the US, one in the UK and the Antique Wine Company that will supply either market. Prices are given in the relevant local currency only, making price comparisons pretty difficult.

I didn't think much of this so I thought I'd better invest in Gold membership, and managed to hand over $29.95 to them with minimal hassle. Except that my search as a Gold member threw up exactly the same results as I had already received for nothing. Indeed the chief advantages of Gold membership seemed to be that prices are also supplied for large formats and by the case and you can click to hear the correct foreign pronunciation (which I reckon I learn anyway from travelling on the London Underground). I so far feel rather cheated therefore but perhaps I will come to know and love my Gold membership of winealert.com. (In theory it should be very useful for finding US stockists for the international edition of the *FT*.)

For the moment, however, I reckon Wine Searcher.com is much the better deal. The layout is much clearer and it seems to cover more ground. A search for **Ch Palmer 1997**, for example, a much more current wine (and the one we drank yesterday at his London club, the Travellers, after Edmund Penning-Rowsell's funeral), presented me with nine choices

from winealert.com and 34 from Wine Searcher.com.

There's also www.financialwines.com, by the way, for the sorts of wines that are traded rather than necessarily drunk. But I think I'll leave that one to the traders for the moment.

Perhaps I'm missing something. Feedback would, as ever, be much appreciated.