The hand that pours can hold yours

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Bertrand Faure Beaulieu, 44, would like the world's best sommeliers to work either for a two- and three-star restaurant or for him.

This Swiss-born entrepreneur seems to have timed his business interests uncannily well. Banking in Norway during the oil boom was followed by commodity trading with Russia in the immediate post-Soviet era. At the end of the 1990s he left the vast oil and metal trader Trafigura that he co-founded, well before their spot of bother in Sierra Leone, to invest in internet streaming technology, and then in a company dedicated to maximising company productivity as well as employee wellbeing. Today his chief investment is in alternative energy sources - and in treating his growing stable of private sommeliers to a lifestyle of which their counterparts can only dream.

From a standing start he has fallen in love with wine and is planning to scale up the personal relationship that lit the flame for him into a global business. He still commutes between Paris and London and it was his coal hole in Holland Park, London that held his first modest forays into Bordeaux and Barolo, but 'I always felt wine was intimidating and I'm quite shy, so I didn't go to tastings'. It was not until he put himself in the hands of French sommelier Philippe Messy whom he met at L'Etranger estaurant in London in 2003 that he felt at ease with wine.

And now he seems dead set on recreating this sommelier-as-wine-guru relationship for a series of up to 75 well-heeled clients around the globe who will pay a joining fee of £50,000 plus £12,000 a year to have their every vinous wish satisfied. Faure Beaulieu has recently come up with a name for his personal sommelier service, Sarment, French for a vine shoot (although I must admit that I encounter the word more often applied to dead wood than sprouting growth).

I first became aware that this was in the pipeline in April 2008 when I saw Messy sitting comfortably in business class while the rest of the British wine trade trooped past him to the rear of the plane back from tasting the Bordeaux primeurs. Messy is definitely the daddy of Faure Beaulieu's sommelier team, currently standing at three in London and one in Hong Kong but planned to increase to eight by the end of the year. 'We're very keen to have more Asian sommeliers, but it's difficult to find the right sort of empathy and ability to work in a group. Knowledge alone is not enough,' according to Faure Beaulieu.

As Messy pointed out over dinner at Faure Beaulieu's Paris apartment last month, the only drawback to the life of Riley envisaged by Faure Beaulieu for his sommeliers is how quickly they put on weight once they have abandoned the physical rigours of a restaurant floor for leisurely business class travel between the world's top wine producers. 'I want them on the road for at least 25% of the time so they have experience, and stories to tell', Faure Beaulieu explained.The sommeliers present - Messy, Christophe Delalonde ex The Square and award winning Gearoid Devaney ex Tom Aikens - did not demur.

Faure Beaulieu seems quite content to rack up the losses on Sarment. For the moment they don't have any clients, although he claims that 12 days of wining and dining likely prospects in Hong Kong recently, followed immediately, straight from Heathrow, by a five-hour lunch in London for some potential Indian clients, together with some good contacts in the Russian community in London, have resulted in a total of 20-25 people who are seriously interested in taking up Sarment's offer of a personal sommelier. Faure Beaulieu's aim is that no sommelier has more than 10 to 15 clients, with account directors looking after the nuts and bolts of delivery, storage etc (which will be included in the overall fee) for about 30 clients at a time.

'I don't want to make money buying and selling wine,' he claims, 'the idea is all about acquiring knowledge, and access to the top wines of the world.We already have some allocations and I should think 70-80% of our wines will be sourced direct eventually.'

He and his team are pretty sniffy about some of the traditions of the wine trade, particularly how UK agents for some of the more reputable producers work. 'The producers say they've been selling that way for 30 years, but some of those agents have been flipping the wine [selling on their UK allocations to more lucrative markets] for 30 years. It's ridiculous. The selling prices can be 16 times what the vignerons receive. They should be paid more.'

Messy bought some wine for Faure Beaulieu in an auction in New York and had it shipped to the UK by the auctioneer's recommended shipper, inserting a temperature-recording microchip into the relevant cases. They found that for 12 hours the wine temperature inside the case had been 32 degrees C when the recommended maximum is under 20. 'I've been really surprised by how such valuable assets are treated so badly,' said Faure Beaulieu.

Selfishly, I would like to see his undoubted entrepreneurial skills harnessed to come up with ways to improve standards in the wine business as a whole rather than frittered away on 75 particularly well-heeled wine neophytes in emerging markets, but Faure Beaulieu would rather, perhaps understandably, sit back and enjoy his new hobby. 'I don't want to devalue the whole wine trade. You need to have established a reputation.'

Interestingly, despite his several years' exposure to some of the finest wines in the world, he defers entirely to his sommelier team - although they did humour him at our dinner by serving one of Switzerland's best Pinot Noirs, a 2006 from Gantenbein, grown close to where he was brought up, that did not flatter the Burgundian classic, Rousseau's 1995 Clos St Jacques, served alongside.

He still seems rather in awe of the sommeliers' expertise, and is at pains to stress that they should be seen as equals, as 'seven day a week trusted companions', by the clients they advise.

Sarment is by no means the only outfit offering personal services to well-off individuals who lack the time and experience to look after their own wine collections. Where it differs is that its owner seems in no hurry to generate profits, and its complete dependence on those whose wine experience was gained in restaurants rather than in the cut and thrust of the wine trade. This is probably not the perfect vehicle for those who see wine as an investment. On the other hand it seems the perfect home for an ambitious sommelier.

OTHER PERSONAL WINE SERVICE PROVIDERS

Many individuals, especially in the US, have made a good living out of buying and selling for one or two super-rich clients but these are some of those who offer advice on establishing and maintain wine collections to a roster of clients.

Juancho Asenjo (juanchoasenjo@telefonica.net) - advises both restaurants and private customers in Madrid.
Judy Beardsall - New York-based advisor to a small but starry list of clients.
Chai Consulting - Maureen Downey of San Francisco offers saleroom expertise to private individuals and their collections.
Susie De Paolis (susie@depaolis.co.uk) - London-based charmer with a great address book.
Vincent Gasnier - specialises in UK sports fortunes, especially Man Utd's.
Soutirage - Napa-based with ex-sommelier as wine director, owned by son of Silver Oaks winery.
Vinfolio - Selling and cellar management seem to be the focus of this San Francisco/Hong Kong business.
Vintrust - Bicoastal US outfit that combines storage facilities with some advice from sommeliers.