Hunting wine on the web

17 Sep 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

As you doubtless know all too well, it is one thing to identify a good wine but much more difficult to track it down. The internet has brought huge benefits in this respect, initially thanks to the diligent coding work of New Zealander Martin Brown, who helped set up Berry Bros' online retail operation in London and in the late 1990s saw a gap in the market for a global price-comparison search engine. Thus was born **Wine-searcher.com**, which lists more than four million wines available from about 18,500 wine retailers around the globe.

Wine-searcher's strength is in listing dozens, sometimes hundreds, of wine offers in ascending price order, allowing complete transparency of pricing. (It is Wine-searcher I chose many years ago, like so many others, to provide the information for the Find this wine links on all of the nearly 50,000 tasting notes in our database. In the interests of full disclosure I should point out that this website receives a modest affiliation fee each month from Wine-searcher, depending on how many Purple pagers used this facility.)

The somewhat rudimentary search box allows you to choose your currency, which country or continent you are particularly interested in, whether you want global results, whether you are interested in retailers who will deliver worldwide, whether to include auction prices, and many more bells and whistles if you choose to pay for the premium Pro Version at $29.95 a year. The Pro Version provides all listings while the free service shows only those from Wine-searcher's retail sponsors. The company, now run for Brown by Adon Kumar in Auckland with 20 full-time staff, depends for its income on subscriptions, ads and sponsorships but does not charge for basic listings and takes no commission on transactions.

Now, British wine lovers can see precisely how much more they pay, thanks to duties and UK margins, for their European wines than those who live in, say, France and Spain. They can also marvel, in many cases, at the wide variation in prices between different merchants - although the picture can be clouded by the fact that Wine-searcher lists the prices as cited online by the retailer, which may or may not include duty and VAT.

For many online retailers, Wine-searcher is their prime source of new business. To the frustration of their competitors, some retailers try to lure customers with what look like exceptionally low prices for what they then claim is no longer in stock. Part of Wine-searcher's daily routine is dealing with complaints, and offending retailers may be struck off the site for six months. Retailers, whether online or bricks and mortar, can check Wine-searcher when pricing their wines, and can check, for example, that their suppliers are offering them a fair deal. Wine-searcher may be the friend of the wine lover but it is no friend to the importer and distributor. Yet it is increasingly popular, with more than 10 million visits last year, of which more than half were new visitors.

It is no wonder then that Wine-searcher has attracted the sincerest form of flattery. Canadian programmer Eric McGee started **Globalwinestocks.com** in 2005 primarily for the wine trade but is about to launch a new, free version for consumers. He claims to trump Wine-searcher with six million wine listings and more than 20,000 retailers worldwide. His data-gathering system at one point required a staff of 26 but now that the groundwork has been done, he has reduced his staff to three, while 10 of Wine-Searcher's employees have wine qualifications which they use to provide ancillary wine content to consumers - and, presumably, to check wine names and listings .

None of the others is anything like as comprehensive as either of these, although most are free, and some look much more polished. Perhaps the most attractive, user-friendly competitor is **Vinopedia.com** set up by Dutch wine lovers Jeroen Starrenburg and Jasper Hammink, who quit their jobs in IT to build a site that locates prices and stockists of 1.6 million different wines (the current tally) but also incorporates individual wine ratings (from the American wine magazine *Wine Spectator*). One particularly useful feature is that they identify wines whose prices have dropped most significantly recently and showcase them on their home page.

Vinopedia, which is currently attracting about 100,000 visitors a month, has just four currencies - $, £, € and Swiss franc - to Wine-Searcher's 11, which do not (yet?) include the Chinese RMB, although Chinese is one of the seven languages into which Wine-searcher is translated. Vinopedia's retailers are only in North America and Europe whereas Wine-searcher and Globalwinestocks are steadily infiltrating Asia and are already well established in the rest of the world. Visitors can choose how to sort Vinopedia's search results, although I am not sure why you would want to have the most

expensive price at the top of the list.

Snooth.com claims to be 'the world's largest wine site, with over one million monthly users', but to the outsider this site represents a triumph of SEO (search engine optimisation) over content. Snooth may feature prominently in Google searches but for accurate information on prices and availability, Snooth would not be my first choice. Set up in 2006 by ex wine trader Philip James, it claims to have over a million wines and more than 11,000 merchants around the world but I found too many inaccuracies and confusions in the wines I randomly looked up to inspire confidence. There is a real attempt to make the site conform to social media norms, however, with its forum, Facebook-like elements and, supposedly, lots of background information. But too often a click on 'Learn more about this wine's winery' results in the message 'We don't have much information about this winery'. Prices are in dollars only.

To make life easy for Snooth, I chose a wine that is easy to find in the US and put 'Greysac 2005' in Snooth's search box. Snooth came up with no fewer than seven 'different' wines answering this description, all of the names slightly different (eg 'Ch Greysac Médoc Cabernet Sauvignon Merlot 2005' and 'Ch Greysac Bordeaux 2005') and it was a cumbersome, multi-click process to 'Compare prices and buy', resulting in the inevitable message 'Sold Out' once I had finally got the New Jersey store supposedly offering the lowest price. Wine-searcher, Globalwinestocks and Vinopedia, on the other hand, did not list this offer, but one click revealed the half bottles of Greysac 2005 which this store still seemed to stock.

Snooth is not the only site trying to capitalise on the growing number of young American wine drinkers. **Winezap.com** and **Classicwines.com** are both active in this arena and trying hard, but the presentation of search results leaves much to be desired. **Vinquire.com** is rather better-looking while **Winefetch.com** is slightly more international in its outlook, has a much clearer layout and includes the 'Ship to which state' option that is so useful in the heavily proscribed US wine market. But the order of results seems random and not easy to change. **Drinkprice.com** is a British version of the genre, still at the testing stage, that is intended to offer price comparisons for all alcoholic drinks on sale in the UK.

The two early American entrants into this field, **Winealert.com** and **Wineaccess.com**, formed alliances with the respective American wine critics Robert Parker and Stephen Tanzer some time ago. Wineaccess is now selecting and selling special parcels of wine, which must rob it of some independence.

And then there are the search engines focused exclusively on investment-grade wines such as **Liv-ex.com**, a detailed and topical resource for which you have to pay at least £49.95 a year. **Wineprices.com,** available at Vinfolio.com and based on Globalwinestocks.com's database, is free but very much sketchier. Truly, price-conscious wine buyers have never had it so good.

See my more detailed guide to the guiders to be published on Monday.