

## John Avery MW ☐ end of an era

23 Mar 2012 by Jancis Robinson

John Avery, a boyish 70, who suffered a heart attack in his sleep and died in hospital on Friday, was a one-off. He was also one of the most family-minded wine merchants of my acquaintance and his wife Sarah and four children (one of them, Mimi, works for the family wine company) will miss him acutely. John and Sarah were a devoted couple and always seemed to me like young newly weds who had met at the local tennis club. They were very much part of Bristol's solidly mercantile society, John having inherited the famous Averys of Bristol wine merchant business on his famous father's death in 1976. I reproduce below the article about Ronald Avery written for *The Oxford Companion to Wine* by his protégé and my *FT* predecessor Edmund Penning-RowSELL.

Ronald may have gone to Cambridge but 'young Johnnie' went to Oxford, and there was little doubt about his future career - although he cherished a lifelong interest in the theatre and acted as an 'angel' for all manner of West End productions. His son Richard is an actor and John often boasted of making more money from his theatrical investments than his wine business.

John was not a natural businessman. Like many in the wine trade, what he loved was the wine itself, and he was lucky enough to have been brought up with constant access to some of the world's finest, including some legendary bottlings. The Averys were famous for blurring the line between the company's stocks and their own personal cellars.

But what distinguished John, who passed the Master of Wine exams in 1975, was Chairman of the Institute of MWs in 2000 and was also a Past Master of The Vintners' Company, was his insatiable curiosity about the wines of what was then called the New World, and his openness to their qualities. Although [Geoffrey Roberts](#) was the pioneer British specialist importer of fine wines from outside Europe, it was John Avery who first brought wines from the likes of Tyrrell's and McWilliams of Australia and Matawhero of New Zealand into the country. He was also a founder member, with the late Harry Waugh and Hugh Johnson, of the Zinfandel Club (through which I met my husband) which celebrated fine California wine in the 1970s and 1980s. Right up to the end he continued to travel throughout Australasia and South Africa and was particularly well known as an international wine judge.

Notoriously disorganised and congenitally late, he was also extremely generous. When we made one of our [Vintners' Tales](#) 10-minute films for the BBC about him, he gave a dinner party at which he went to great lengths to serve me the Chambolle-Musigny, Les AmoureuSES 1959, presumed de Vogüé, that first turned me on to wine in 1970.

I last tasted sustainedly with him at the [Southwold 2008s tasting](#) in late January, to which he, as usual, brought the best bottles for our dinners. He was always a very unself-conscious taster, bold in his guesses. But our professional lives continued to criss cross. He most recently came to our house at the end of January in his capacity as an [André Simon](#) judge and trustee - and even though these shortlist deliberations take place two floors below my study, I was always well aware of when the booming but impish John had arrived.

Averys of Bristol was sold to Clark Swanson of California in 1987 who sold it to Pieroth about five years later. It is now part of the [Laithwaites](#) empire. John remained as figurehead but his real value to the world of wine was his enthusiasm and his enormous knowledge of fine wines produced, throughout the world, in the second half of the 20th century.

We will all miss him greatly.

A funeral is to be held for close friends and family at 3pm at Wrington parish church and memorial service is to be held in Bristol.

From [The Oxford Companion to Wine](#):

**Avery, Ronald** (1899-1976), came from an old Cornish family which partly moved to Bristol, then an important port in the west of England, towards the end of the 18th century. The family wine merchants Avery & Co dates its origin from 1793 (three crucial years before the birth year of arch rivals [harveys](#) of Bristol).

Born in the celebrated [bordeaux](#) vintage of 1899, he remained faithful to [claret](#) as his favourite red wine throughout his life. His time at Cambridge was cut short by the death of an uncle, who with his father ran the firm. To gain experience in the trade at a time when nearly all wine was imported in cask and bottled in Britain, he worked in cellars in London, Bordeaux, and Oporto before taking over the running of Averys in 1923.

In those days, wine merchants mostly bought from British agents or their principals, and only visited the wine regions for social purposes. But Avery had a keen, enquiring, even suspicious mind, became an excellent taster, and paid frequent visits abroad, particularly to Bordeaux. There he selected the casks he preferred, and when they arrived in Bristol docks was not averse to topping them up with another wine altogether. By the late 1930s Averys produced an exceptionally extensive list with a large range of German wines and 100 clarets extending back 20 years, including unusually good stocks of 1923 burgundy and 1929 bordeaux whose quality he was astute enough to discern. At one time the list included seven vintages, back to the famous 1921, of Ch Cheval Blanc, a wine then little known in Britain but of which he was very fond. After the Second World War, he and Harry [waugh](#), a friend and rival then working for Harveys, were the first to import Ch [pétrus](#) into a distinctly unimpressed Britain. At this time he also became specially interested in burgundy in order to secure authentic wines, much subject then to blending from sources in southern France and [algeria](#).

The British wine trade was then an occupation for gentlemen, and Ronald Avery was an eccentric example. Habitually unpunctual, he seldom arrived at his office before 1 pm, but then stayed late, writing heavily annotated letters of recommendation that turned many customers into friends. At this period most amateurs of fine wine in Britain had an account with Averys.

An excellent navigator, Ronald Avery frequently crossed the English Channel to France in his large motor yacht, which he had to sell to reduce the borrowings entailed by his enthusiastic investment in the Bordeaux vintages of the late 1940s and 1950s. He died in 1976, after which time the firm was run by his son John, although it lost its independence in 1987.