

FLYING HIGH UNDER THE RADAR

Heritage Wine has quietly grown into one of the country's most successful restaurant wine suppliers. Yet unless you're a customer, you probably know very little about the company. *Richard Siddle* discovers that's just the way they like it



If you relied on the reviews in the national papers or magazines to get a feel for the state of the UK restaurant sector, then you would be forgiven for thinking there wasn't much life outside of London's West End. But while London is arguably one of the most important restaurant markets in the world, the press coverage paints a very different picture to the scene in the rest of the country.

Heritage Wine is as well placed as any to give a hands-on view of the real state of the regional on-trade, as it acts as distributor and wine consultant to some 650 restaurants and bars throughout the country – the majority of which are in the south and south west – as well as being a growing business supplying leading restaurants in London and locations within the M25.

"We are quite happy beavering away in the background," says managing director Guy Adams, who is rightly proud of the way the business has grown from a small wine shop in Chipping Sodbury in the late 1970s. They do not hold fancy London tastings, or chase the public spotlight, as they are too busy doing their day jobs.

The request for this interview came from *Harpers*, not Heritage Wine. In fact, it took some persuasion to get Adams and his team to agree to putting their heads above the parapet. Not because they have anything to hide, but simply because they do not see it as their place to do so.

Heritage's success comes down to a lot of graft. The business was originally founded by Tony Coles – or "my wine godfather" as Adams calls him – and moved from retailing to on-trade supply with the purchase of a Champagne agency business in 1984.

Adams has been with Heritage Wine since the tender age of 17, when he admits he was signed up due to his towering six-foot-plus figure – ideal for stocking the tall shelves in the wine shop.

But he feels he really came into his own once the businesses switched to being a supplier and distribution company. It meant getting out and drumming up business for themselves, recalls Adams. One of the most important things they did in those early days was to buy a red Astra van and literally drive around the country, knocking on doors and asking, "do you want any wine?"

"It was just me on the road in the beginning, so it was a case of long hours and lots of miles on the road," he says. Norman Tebbit would have been proud of him.

Heritage Wine did not set out with some sort of domination plan, but literally took a client-by-client, customer-by-customer approach. "We started out in Bristol and then to Bath and so on," recalls Adams.

Point of difference

Coles's philosophy in those early days was to build up his own unique list of wines and not simply follow the branded route of many of his likely competitors. In particular Heritage looked to target single-estate vineyards, winemakers with their own stories to tell, and reasons for people to stock them. "Anything but brands is a real strength of Heritage," says Adams.

Crucially, Heritage has acted as its own importer and sourcer of wines. "We go direct to the vineyards. There are no middlemen," explains Toby Mason, Heritage's sales director. That search for interesting, different winemakers continues to this day. Adams believes Heritage can offer these kind of producers a more bespoke service, a dedicated approach that makes them feel special, "and as a result our customers get fabulous wines."

"It also means we can be more flexible," adds Mason, with the strategy enabling them to bring in new lines more frequently. And with a minimum order of just 12 bottles – which can be mixed – new customers are not tied into protracted contracts.

But Adams admits they are super-zealous when

deciding what to take on. "We are so fussy about what we list. We get bombarded with enquiries and samples from wineries every day. But our customers trust us implicitly to put together a valid wine list for their needs."

There are, for example, no kickbacks or incentives for stocking or pushing certain wines on Heritage's list. Wine tasting and selection is very much a team affair. All the Heritage team, including directors and sales staff, are invited to taste wines and agree together what to take on, which means when they are out on the road selling, they can personally identify with what is on offer.

So it means a lot of visits to wineries, a lot of trips and a lot of tastings. Adams says the best wines Heritage finds are the ones where the team goes to visit the winery in person rather than sourcing through a generic tasting or wine fair. "A lot of the people we deal with won't be at the London International Wine Fair in the first place," he explains. Instead they work with existing wineries to develop new ranges and styles or work with local co-operatives in particular countries to help find local heroes.

Personal experience

When Adams says he understands what restaurateurs are going through, he should, as he is one; as well as the Heritage business, Adams also runs the Hole in the Wall restaurant in Bath, so knows what is selling or not and can spot trends even before they happen.

So what impact is the recession having on both sides of his business? "In the restaurant, people are now moving back to wines they feel comfortable with and sales above £25 have come to a halt – in London it is probably £10 more than that," says Adams.

Mason says it is a case of adjusting wine lists to cater for people's more conservative wallets. "We are looking to offer more choice at around the sub-£20 mark, but we have got a lot of wine that can offer good value and a lot of variety at that price point," he adds.

Adams is pretty bullish about the year ahead. Yes it is going to be difficult for a lot of his customers, but he believes it will really sort out those businesses that are based on solid business principles from those that will fall away. Heritage themselves finished last year with sales well up on the previous year.

Mason says that shake-out is clear within the London scene. "A lot of the good local, family-style restaurants in London are still doing fine. People are looking for good-quality food they can trust. The City on the other hand is very up and down and it changes by the day."

Part of Mason's brief has been to develop Heritage's presence within London over the last eight years, and he believes the company's relatively low profile has paid dividends as it means they are potentially more flexible than previous suppliers have been.

Mason, who joined the wine trade as a manager at Majestic, before taking on a sales role at Matthew Clark, has seen the industry from both sides of the on and off-trades. He has also had experience of big and small businesses and it is clear which ones he prefers. "At Matthew Clark I had over 20 accounts but it was almost impossible to have strong relationships with them. At Heritage our customers are people we have personally brought into the business. That is such a fundamental difference and it means we have such a loyalty towards them. We have grown and developed with them."

Right people

Hence, the kind of people who get to work for Heritage are those who have such a passion for their product that they genuinely want to get to know the customers they are working with. But that does not mean there is a typical Heritage employee, stresses Adams.



THOMAS SKOVSENDE

HERITAGE WINE: COMPANY FACTS

- Started as a wine merchant when Tony Coles opened a shop in Chipping Sodbury, Bristol, in the late 1970s
- Guy Adams joined the business in 1983 at the age of 17
- Retail shop was sold in 1984 in favour of a new Champagne agency. Wholesale distribution arm set up called Heritage Wine
- Waitrose and The Ritz sign up as the company's first customers
- In 2004 it took control of its own HM Customs & Excise-approved bonded warehouse where it stocks over 100,000 cases for its own business, with 40% of space rented out to third-party customers
- All wines are therefore controlled by Heritage and delivered to customers by their own fleet of vans
- Supplies wines to over 650 on-trade accounts, with 80% along the south coast and M5 and M4 corridors and 20% within London
- Stocks over 400 wines from 13 countries
- Tony Coles bought out by Guy Adams, Toby de Haan, Toby Mason and Craig Adams in September 2007

“Our sales people, for example, all have a very different approach, and different personalities, but then we also have a very varied and broad range of customers,” he says. Mason adds: “Clearly we like people who can sell, but how they go about it is up to them, so they do not need to be a sales person per se.”

Anyone taken on by Heritage is asked to take the WSET Higher Certificate, but it is not a case of having a qualification just for the sake of it. They will be invited onto a variety of management, sales and tasting courses as part of the rather grandly named Heritage Academy.

This gives them a more solid grounding in the professional skills they will need. Adams explains: “We will sit down with them and taste the wines on our lists, get them to go out with different sales guys and meet a variety of customers. We want them to get a real feel of our ethos and our way of doing things before they go out on their own. A lot of companies don’t do that.”

High commissions

Heritage also offers a much higher commission than many of its competitors – up to four times more, according to Adams. “Some people can earn a lot of money through us,” he claims. Which probably accounts for why it has such a loyal, long-standing sales team.

“The way to grow a company is not to give someone 50

Guy Adams, left, and Toby Mason want to give customers as flexible a service as possible

accounts and say ‘go and manage those’. You get them to go out and get their own accounts, explain the ethos of the company and get them on board through you. That means every account will really mean something to them,” says Adams. The philosophy even stretches to offering hands-on training for waiting staff in restaurants, in areas such as understanding the wines and managing a new list.

“It also means we can tell them the story of the winemakers behind the wines and get them to sell them that way. People love that,” says Mason. “It also helps demystify wine lists,” adds Adams. It is amazing how often staff are scared of the list and just by talking to them it’s like seeing a light switch going on. It gives them a level of confidence they have not had before.”

Adams and his three fellow directors bought the business from Coles three years ago. They have in place a pretty young management team with three of the directors in their thirties, while Adams, as managing director, admits to being a “fortysomething”.

As well as Adams and Toby Mason, there is Craig Adams, the company’s IT and HR director, plus Toby de Haan who, as operations director, looks after logistics and the head office. “What we are not about is sitting around a boardroom,” says Adams. “But we are in the business and we can make decisions very quickly.”

Which in these troubled times is as big an asset as any.