

## MATTHEW CLARK BOOSTS FINE AND 'ESOTERIC' WINE RANGE

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Matthew Clark has boosted its fine and 'esoteric' wine range as it seeks to offer customers a broader focus of products.



Andrew Shaw, Conviviality's group wine buying director

Speaking to *db* at last week's 'Drinks Emporium' portfolio tasting, Conviviality's group wine buying director Andrew Shaw said parent group Conviviality had boosted its focus on fine wines across both Matthew Clark and Bibendum, as well as adding in diversity to its offer.

It has promoted Robert Mathias, who was previously Bibendum's fine wine buying and sales executive, to the role of fine wine buyer on the Conviviality team, with a primary focus on the Conviviality Direct business, rather than its retail side, he said.

"We've got the armoury to tackle [fine wine]," he added. "It's about providing our suppliers and leveraging the breadth of distribution for suppliers best interest and that's been the focus for the last six months.

The buying team has also strengthened its European offer in the last six months with "fantastic" well-made and competitively priced wines from regional Italy and Spain, and a stronger Burgundy offer, as well as adding more 'esoteric' wines, such as a Cabernet Sauvignon from Ningxia, from Chinese producer Changyu and Sevilen Bogazkere-Öküzgözü from Güney in Turkey.

"The range China is a good example – a year ago, China was only a novelty, now it is almost business as usual," Shaw points out. "But you need a wider product range, which includes regions like Peru or Bolivia. There are lots of different things to focus on this year to further the wine portfolio."

According to Simon Jerrome, Head of Wine Buying across Conviviality's on-trade and events businesses, Conviviality Trading & Conviviality Direct, the Matthew Clark range has slimmed down slightly in order to allow more interesting areas and wines to shine.

"What we're doing is making sure we've got the best range for the customer base – that is key and more of a challenge now than ever before," he told *db*. "We've been changing the portfolio over the last few years to include more mid- and higher- priced – and finding interesting wines you can't buy elsewhere."

Some of the new wines in the range include premium wines from California, including single vineyard wines from Freemark Abbey, Chile, with the VIK Millahue Valley from Colchagua, and Errazuriz Las Pizarras Pinot Noir from Aconcagua Costa as well as the Alpha Crucis Winemakers Series Shiraz from Chalk Hills Wine in McLaren Vale.

"We're learning as we go along and you can lose a few and bring a few new ones in, so we've certainly grown the countries and areas we're buying from. For the first time we've got wines from China and Turkey, there are brand new things we're doing and we're adapting to what the market wants," he said.

The range has also "moved on" from just presenting its top wines – formerly the Wines of Distinction range – to become more inclusive and talking more about winemakers. "Wines are no longer branded as Wines of Distinction as that says 'these are our top wines' and puts them on a pedestal and we've learnt that's all customers will taste – we want them to try a Sardinian wine with a funky label that is at £4 as well as Chinese wines," Jerome explains.

These 'esoteric' wines are less likely to be sold into the Chinese, Greek and Turkish restaurant trade, he said, and more into the general trade. "We're hoping a few people will try by the glass to encourage people to try something a bit different – I've been telling sales people in training not to say 'Come and try our Chinese wine', but 'What do you think of this?' as it is more likely to encourage trial. We've got to stop trying to pigeon-hole wines."

There has been growth in wine by the glass both in terms of theatricality and choice, Jerome argues. "The lines are being blurred where the grape varieties come from, for example we have an Albarino from New Zealand, so we are starting to see people making wine because it's a great variety in that particular region. And I think as people experimenting more – as they do with craft beer – we need to get on-trade retailers to help that."

#### Areas of growth

Other wines that are seeing growth include cool climate wines, particularly Sauvignon Blanc from areas such as Chile & South Africa, he argued, as some of the quality of New Zealand's Sauvignon Blanc has suffered due to price pressure at the supermarkets.

"Chile and South Africa are giving producers from New Zealand a run for their money. It won't get to be anything like the 'ABC' (Anything but Chardonnay) that Australia saw, but certainly New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc's quality is suffering a bit and we're seeing an opportunity for other countries to come along with some really interesting wines."

"We have to make sure we're offering people choice somewhere, and I see Sauvignon Blanc as a new area – there is interesting stuff coming out of Chile and from people like Viña Errázuriz and also South Africa like Shannon and Elgin, where it is cooler. I'm very impressed with that."

And the wider move for a more diverse portfolio is bearing fruit, he adds. "This is the first time we've had a sommelier room at our portfolio tasting for example, whereas five or six years ago we'd have been kidding ourselves that we'd have had sommeliers coming, and that's what is different today."



Matthew Clark's Drinks Emporium' portfolio tasting had a circus theme to bring added theatre to the supplier's on-trade offer

"So we could go to any restaurants and hotel in the UK and find wines in our range that would surprise the sommelier. And that's not just because we're part of Conviviality, it's been a well-thought out strategy over the last five years not something that could change overnight."

This is not only attributable to changes in the portfolio, but also due to sommelier's approach, he notes. "I think the young somms today are more experimental and prepared to buy from different places," he notes.

Jerome also notes growth in the wine ranges available in hotels, as they increasingly up their game to compete with restaurants.

"They've had to adapt their offer – they have so have top end and celebrity chefs and wine ranges which are in keeping with restaurants not just other hotels."

He concluded that the tasting's circus theme – which he admitted many people had thought "strange" was "bang on for what the on-trade wants".

"The trade has to bring that theatre to encourage people out of the home, to enjoy food, wine, beer, gin and all those other things," he said. That's really important and it's the start of something that our customers will care about. People want to find really great products across the spectrum but we've also had interesting things here to see and there is interesting."