

Peter Richards MW

‘Now is a good time to be a wine drinker in the UK’



Bobby's of Bournemouth is back! This fine institution first opened its doors in 1915 and now, after nigh-on 50 years of being a Debenhams, it returns with a modern twist. Big department stores no longer being in vogue, the plan is for a host of different retail outlets and experiences, from ice cream and coffee parlours to a microbrewery, smokery, market hall – even (get this) a pop-up food hall for dogs.

Ashley Nicholson, who's developing Bobby's, is quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that the idea is to create not a shop but a 'destination'.

In the preface to this year's Decanter Retailer Awards coverage (see p44), I'm quoted as saying that Covid-19 has changed wine retailing forever. The challenges of the pandemic and associated lockdowns were significant – but this has also been a time of opportunity.

Online was the big one. Those wine retailers that had (or swiftly developed) efficient online operations – often in tandem with a nimble 'click & collect' set-up – did well. Virtual wine events thronged the ether, entertaining bored punters and further driving sales.

Entries in this year's Online Retailer and Virtual Wine Experience categories were more numerous and competitive than ever, testament to an almighty pivot by the wine trade. The supermarket category used to be the most exciting and contentious to judge in this competition – now it's a far bigger picture, and much better for it.

We judges also saw a surge in both the number and quality of entries for the Newcomer category. Far from blighting wine retail, the pandemic has created openings for a new breed of ambitious wine purveyor. And more established players also capitalised on a generalised sales surge as people stayed in, but drank better.

These trends are not unique to wine retail. As reported in *The Economist*, over the last 18 months consumer habits have undergone a dramatic shift. From late 2019 to March 2021, spending on services was down by one fifth while spending on goods held up. According to the UK's Office for National Statistics, share of retail sales made

online has risen from less than 20% before the pandemic to nearly 30% now.

It seems sensible to assume we'll carry on buying more online. But the social aspect has always been central to wine – not just in its consumption but also its purchase, be it from a helpful sommelier or merchant. There's good reason why the hybrid wine shop/bar has become so popular: it happily conflates the wine buying and drinking experiences into one engaging, usually sociable destination. Despite on-premise venues being hard-hit by lockdown, this model is proving resilient for precisely this reason.

The widely touted notion that experiences not things were the future has taken a beating during lockdown. But wine is a rare thing that can be both – so its canniest purveyors have prospered of late. In my nine years chairing the Decanter Retailer Awards, I've never seen such a buoyant, dynamic, diverse set of entries. And not just self-serving ones, either: these are retailers that haven't profiteered – quite the opposite, with abundant evidence of charitable giving and support for local communities, staff and customers. (Following this example, the Retailer Awards is also making a donation to charity.)

The future for the humble wine shop seems strangely bright. Business is brisk. There's an emphasis on sustainability, aided by online solutions (fewer winemakers will fly over from New Zealand when a Zoom tasting will do fine). New players are more able now to disrupt the wine establishment than ever: a net positive for a traditional trade. And as in-person activities gradually come back, the hybrid wine shop/bar category will develop further, helping people discover new things and foster wine diversity.

It's a good time to be a wine drinker in the UK. There are more ways than ever to find, buy and engage with wine. But even the best wine shops need our support if they are to survive and thrive. Let's get behind them by raising our glasses and replenishing our stocks where it's a joy to shop. **D**

IN MY GLASS THIS MONTH

Gaia, Monograph Assyrtiko, Nemea 2018

– a beautifully vivid, mineral-infused, food-friendly white served on tap from our Newcomer of the Year Wilding (see p47).

Ideal with the excellent sharing plates, from the sea platter to truffle nuts and padrón peppers. It's great to see wine on tap becoming more and more popular, especially when the wine itself is high quality and a bit different. Surely the best way to be sustainable... (2019 vintage in bottle, as below: £13.91-£14.95 Shelved Wine, Wine Poole, Wine Republic)



Peter Richards MW is Chairman of the annual Decanter Retailer Awards (see 2021 results, p44)