

first hand and its approach to independents was appealing," she says. "The trip was also an opportunity to talk with other independents."

WELCOME SURPRISE

The breadth and diversity of the wines available from GCF was something that surprised the merchants. "I thought it was all going to be bottom of the market," Yates admits.

Similarly, Forward concedes that "when I heard they were a fairly large group I was not expecting to find much that would impress me".

And Jenkins was not sure how GCF's offer was "relevant to our needs" before the trip.

The reality was very different. Ruth Yates explains: "It was a complete surprise in terms of what they can offer. It really opened my eyes. I was impressed by the quality-price ratio and the depth of their portfolio. I got a lot out of this trip in such a short space of time."

She was particularly impressed by the wines she tasted from "Bordeaux at both levels, the Loire, the Rhône and the south of France". She had not appreciated, she says, how easy it would be to pick up wines from right across the GCF properties around France.

Sandbach agrees. He says his initial premise for coming on the trip was to "look for entry-level clarets", but in the end he had a whole list of wines from across GCF's French portfolio that he wanted to go back and taste with his team.

"I wanted to find something that is fairly unique for us and good value for money with a good margin," he says "and I am sure I have found that here."

Sandbach adds: "It is the breadth of range and depth of quality that is so interesting." He even signed an exclusive deal on the trip to be the UK distributor for GCF's range of Downton Abbey French wines. He has already had to order a second pallet to keep up with demand.

Richard Yates says he was excited about the quality of wines he had tasted on the trip and, importantly, their value for money. "You can't just charge more because it's French. It has to be able to compete on price and style."

For Forward it was GCF's Loire wines that were the find of the trip. "The Loire wines stood out in my mind as exceptional," he says. "I can't fault them at all. They tick all the boxes in terms of quality, presentation, story, price, and price-to-quality ratio."

Ruth Yates agrees: "We were all very impressed by the quality and diversity of the Loire wines."

"I have learned to go on all trips with a completely open mind, and this trip exemplifies why this is so important. Never in my wildest dreams would I expect to go on a trip to Bordeaux and be impressed with such a comprehensive portfolio of Loire wines"
Stephen Forward, Essentially Wines



The Top Merchants with the Grands Chais de France team



Ted Sandbach, the Oxford Wine Company

"I did not appreciate what Les Grands Chais de France can do before coming here"

Ted Sandbach, the Oxford Wine Company

Hard at work: the Bordeaux study party 2014



Jenkins adds: "I shall follow up with GCF on Bordeaux and the Loire especially, as we can make use of their distribution hub in Alsace."

ONE-STOP SHOP

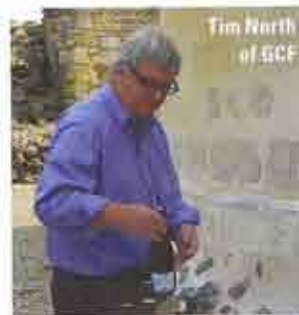
But it was the opportunity to ship a large range of wine from one producer from right across France that really hit home to some of the merchants. "It is a one-stop shop essentially," Sandbach says.

Forward agrees: "Most notable, for me, was the possibility of importing a range of wines across France from one supplier. It's something I've not done from France before. While I import 80% of volume sold from France, there are some appellations that are more difficult to ship from as they are typically expensive slow-moving lines, where importing two pallets is not possible for a business of our size.

"But now I am able to import these slower lines in smaller quantities and do it in a way that makes commercial sense. The more we ship, the better our margin. It's business basics. Our average margin is 45% gross, based on shipping eight out of every ten bottles we sell. We currently ship 20% of our list, but it is this 20% of our list we sell 80% of the time."

Meanwhile, North notes that GCF is able to offer both cellar-door or duty-paid delivered terms "which should meet most people's demands".

So after a busy three days of travelling and tasting, what do the merchants really think? Forward sums up the mood of the group and the trip perfectly. "It can sometimes be a lonely occupation running indie wine shops. Trips like these are a good reminder of what a thoroughly nice bunch of people there are in the wine industry. Trips are never without a few good laughs and it's always a pleasure to make new friends."



Tim North of GCF



Jella Jenkins of Flagship Wine