

GCF FACTS:

• Founded in 1979 by Joseph Helfrich, who continues to run the business from its central distribution hub and headquarters in Alsace.

• Owns and produces wines from 35 properties spread across seven regions, including the Loire, Jura, Beaujolais, the Rhône, Languedoc and Bordeaux.

• Access to grapes grown on over 1,500ha of land.

• Buys in grapes from over 1,100 winegrowers, who work with a network of 20 regional winemakers.

• 15-strong UK team run by Tim North.



It helped that the trip was to one of the most valuable countries in any independent store. "France is very important to us," Ruth Yates says. "It is our biggest in terms of volume and value. Including Champagne, France is 26% of our total sales and growing – mainly in the Champagne, Loire and Bordeaux areas."

Stephen Forward agrees: "Our French category is our most important offering, amounting to over 40% of total sales."

France, Jenkins explains, is becoming more important because "increasingly the quality-value balance has swung back in its favour".

INDEPENDENT FOCUS

The merchants were also keen to hear about GCF's trading strategy in the UK, where, by its own admission, it has made its name supplying the supermarket sector.

North, who heads up the UK division, was quite clear. Yes, the supermarket part of its business would continue to be massively important to the growth of the group, particularly around building brands such as JP Chenet, but it was also equally committed to growing its independent business.

So much so that earlier this year it agreed to sign up to the Harpers Best Practice Guidelines and commit its trading strategy to set out clearly which of its wines will be exclusively for independents.

"Yes, we started off in supermarkets in the UK, but we now want to grow our profile in independents and that is why we are here," he says.

He admits it would be a steep learning curve for GCF to make sure it maintains and delivers the level of service that independent merchants are looking for. Which was why, for him and colleague Chris Davies, this trip was the perfect opportunity to discuss such issues in detail with the merchants.

"We really want to learn how we can work with the independent sector. We appreciate the need for us to be as transparent as we can, but we also need to understand what independents are looking for from companies like us," he explains.

North hopes that by being as clear and honest as it could be about which channels certain wines were aimed at, GCF will be able to build strong relationships with independents.

Sandbach is certainly open to a transparent approach. "It is all about being clear. Providing we know and can plan accordingly, that's what makes the difference," he says. He blames a "lack of clear direction from the top" at many wine wholesale and distribution businesses for so many wines "leaking" directly in to on-trade accounts.

"Or they will blame the fact wines are in certain accounts because it is 'historic'," he adds. "You just need to decide which approach you are taking and then communicate it and make it clear. It is your business after all; but at least we can decide if we want to do business with you."

"A worthwhile, constructive few days with plenty of visits, tastings and discussions enabling me to give thought to GCF and its offering"

Julia Jenkins, Flagship Wine Company



"I don't think any of us really realised the scale of GCF before the trip"

Richard Yates, Corks Out

QUICK TO JUDGE

As a journalist looking in, it was interesting to see how quickly the independents made up their minds about the wines they were interested in.

Decisions were being taken not based on points out of a 100 for particular wines, but rather on a very clear business focus about where that wine might fit into the rest of their portfolio.

Ruth Yates explains: "Yes, the quality of the wine is paramount. But we are not just looking to write an interesting tasting note or score the wine. We have to know exactly how that wine is going to perform in our business and whether it is suitable for our retail stores or for online."

Jenkins agrees: "We can only carry a certain range, so every decision we make has to be carefully thought through about where that wine will sit in our business."

Sandbach wanted to stress that it was very much a team decision across all of Oxford Wine's senior team about any new wines it takes on. But ultimately it would come down to "quality, value for money and the margin".

Forward says his principle aim when looking for new lines is to "source interesting wines offering superior value for money and an intriguing story". He continues: "That doesn't mean cheap. It means good value in the £8-to-£15 price points. For France, our most important areas are the Loire, south-west France (excluding Bordeaux), Burgundy and Rhône."

It was the first time some of the merchants had visited Bordeaux for a number of years, such is the demand on their time to explore and discover new regions of the world.

Jenkins says she enjoyed enormously both returning to the area and the chance to see such quality wines at key price points for her business.

Ruth Yates was attracted to go on the trip because she was looking to get some "regional exclusivity from Bordeaux" – an area that Jenkins was also "seriously reviewing" prior to the trip. "I was also keen to ascertain how GCF works at →