



with our customers and want them to hang out in our shops so we've got nice spaces for people to sit."

Sales of wine and food for immediate consumption only account for about 3% of total turnover, but he believes they have struck a good balance.

Allowing customers to try a glass of wine before they buy rewards them he says. "It allows people who are adventurous to be adventurous in a low-risk way."

Wilson adds: "We are very much retail dominated. Those places that have tried to be both end up not selling much retail, but have quite high setting-up costs and are not about to charge as much as they need to."

The participating shops offer three different reds and whites, starting at £3.50 for a 125ml glass of wine while a secret formula dictates higher prices, and there is also a £5 corkage charge.

Wilson lets managers choose which wines to showcase. "We try to offer wines that are interesting and affordable for the adventurous customer, he says."

The shops also offer around half-a-dozen fortified wines, including Sherries, Madeiras and Ports, which cost from £3 to £8 per glass.

The company's Bridge Street branch in Cambridge, where punts can moor beside the shop, has been a particular success. It is now being doubled in size by knocking through into an adjacent property to make a larger wine bar area.

### Going it alone

Ted Sandbach, managing director of the Oxford Wine Company, has gone one step further. In April, following an £80,000, two-month refurbishment, he opened the Oxford Wine Cafe offering a menu that included platters, salads, paninis and pies. Around 10 reds and 10 whites are available by the 125ml glass, starting at £2.95, with a further 60 of each available in the bottle to be opened. Five sparkling whites can be drunk by the glass backed by 10 more in the bottle. Sandbach says: "We're trying to offer different grape varieties, including Riesling, Grillo, Albariño and Chardonnay."

He adds that, although there are up to 1,000 different wines for sale through the Oxford Wine Company's four shops, he is loath to offer more through the cafe.

"We're trying to encourage people to go down to our wine shops and to make sure people know the synergy behind it."

The cafe has a strong spirits offer, with about 60 Bourbons, malt whiskies, Armagnacs and rums, although the only mixer available is tonic water.

Sandbach also credits much of the success of the new venture, which is trading up to 40% more than targeted, to

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one of his sales team, a former pub manager, who agreed to manage the shop.

"She had to be the one to do it. If she hadn't been prepared to do it, I probably wouldn't have been either," he adds.

"It is going to be a damn sight easier to make money in the [cafe] business than the wine business. You get cash in the bank within four weeks and there are no bad debts."

Steve Parker, owner of the Cheese and Wine Company in Hampton, Middlesex, says that since opening the shop two and a half years ago, he has seen strong sales of both, with each accounting for about half of all turnover thanks to their natural affinity with one another.

He adds: "Whenever you go and meet a winemaker, they nearly always take you out in the local town where there's a bar where you buy a glass of wine and a plate of cheese.

"Cheese and wine are such obvious things to go together. I thought, 'Why can't you find a place in Britain where you can get good cheese and wine?'"

The shop sells about 200 wines by the bottle, half of which customers can sample in the shop by the 125ml glass from £3 to £7. A food menu allows customers to taste simple, and largely cheese-based, dishes produced on site.

Parker says that, while the shop is selling quite a lot of Margaux, Nuits-Saint-Georges and Grand Cru St-Émilion, he is also focused on sourcing wines from less well-known regions without the cachet of a familiar name.

Wines on sale cost between £9 and £60, with about half between £14 and £18, and while it might be the more expensive product, Parker sets great store on his cheese sales.

Cheeses are largely European, with a heavy bias towards British cheese due to the ease of shipping. While Parker's most expensive cheese is a Monte Enebro costing £38 a kilo, his cheddar sells at £2.4 a kilo.

Most of all he believes his knowledge and enthusiasm for both products has made the business tenable. "Experience is what we sell. It's impossible to come into our shop if you're in a hurry."

## FROM THE SHOP FLOOR

### Katherine Canfield



#### Hanging Ditch, Manchester

Hosting two back-to-back events is no easy feat for any wine business, and less so for an independent wine merchant who is staring down the barrel of Christmas. Nonetheless, there is no better time to let consumers taste what is available in-store.

But even booking a venue can be a daunting and time-consuming task, which takes a big bite out of the budget and merits careful consideration. Everything from the weather to having a designated smoking area is essential for a successful event.

The next task requires clear and prompt communication with suppliers. Letting suppliers know in advance of large-scale tastings and gaining their support guarantees lower staff costs and ensures, for the most part, that those standing behind the tables are knowledgeable about the product and will communicate it to the consumer.

Then there is stock management. It may not be one of the more glamorous bits of organising an event, but monitoring incoming product and samples before the tasting is crucial to avoiding hysterics later. Some samples are taken out of already existing stock to be credited whilst other suppliers prefer to bring their own stock, making this task even more complex.

And all this work results in just a few short hours of wine tasting and enjoyment for loyal and potential customers alike. Worth it? Definitely.

But despite the enormous effort, the immediate return may not meet expectations. Many guests will come, enjoy the wines and leave without ordering a single bottle. However, this is an advantage of being an independent merchant: it presents the opportunity for a personalised marketing strategy. For most consumers, these events create a memorable experience, an opportunity to enjoy while tasting and learning about the product.

They may not swipe their credit card right away, but that doesn't mean you haven't gained their loyalty.



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