

of France?

"There is an opportunity for France to develop a relationship directly with consumers. The key is understanding what the consumer is looking for."

Alistair Morrell, Wine Fusion

AFTERNOON
DEBATE



"Retail is really exciting right now for France and there is a lot of opportunity. We can buy directly from the door of small producers and consumers want us to buy small parcels. For me the bottom end of France is fading out and the top end, I find, consumers are willing to trade up."

Ted Sandbach, Oxford Wine Company

"Customers are out there buying French wines, they are enthusiastic about French wines and France is really doing quite well now, France needs to sit well alongside Spain and Italy, which means looking across the regions of France, and Tesco has had a fantastic last 20 months and a lot of [the wine sold] is from beyond the big appellations."

Kevin Smith, Tesco

Wilson continued. "And it's easy to understand the styles that are coming out, so we have been working closely with the producers, and talking to customers and restaurants about Languedoc Roussillon, and that has been very successful as well."

Mike Matthews, from North and South Wines agreed. "My job is to communicate, communicate, communicate," he said. "I have to communicate with my customers."

In the on-trade communicating with the customer is equally important, as French wines have a great story to tell, said Liz Donnelly from Alliance Wine.

"Engaging with the customer in the on-trade is critical. People are willing to pay a premium for wines. France's strengths are diversity, a story, heritage, and that is where France should be focusing and where it can really compete," she said.

Beverly Tabbron MW, from Hallgarten Druitt agreed that the on-trade for France represented a great opportunity, if the consumer could be reassured and could explore the diversity offered within the French category. "The regionality of France is a point of difference," she said. "But we over-estimate what people know or want to know about wines. Wine flights and wines by the glass are a great approach to the on-trade. Training for staff in the on- and off-trade is also vital. Agent partnerships, packaging and wine style are all critical to making the most of France in the UK."

HORSES FOR COURSES

Picking a region to specialise in, or singling out regions on a rotating basis so as not to overload the customer with a whirlwind of unfamiliar names, was often cited as good way to inspire customer

engagement with a wider repertoire of French regions and styles.

"We need to take a multifaceted approach. Not all customers are the same, nor are they all looking for the same thing. So we offer mixed cases of similar styles of wine, typically selling by region," said Abi Hirschfeld of Direct Wines. "A lot of customers go on holiday to France, so they can identify with a particular region or regions. It works very well."

Others, such as Slobhan Astbury of Haynes, Hanson and Clark, where 70% of the range is French, reminded the audience that value is not confined to the further flung regions, but also increasingly exists – for those prepared to seek it out – in more established and traditional regions, including the likes of Bordeaux, the Rhône, the Loire, Provence, Pays D'Oc and elsewhere.

"I can't wax more lyrically about the ability of France to deliver value across price points," said Astbury. "This is particularly true between £8 and £20."

Overall, the message delivered by the Summit debates was a positive one, suggesting that the French category is in good health and it can, with a little extra focus from those in the UK trade, provide a sound platform from which to grow business.

One headline that the French category will face is continuing to build confidence in quality with consumers after a very challenging 2013 vintage. The key to success, it appears, lies not so much in buying skills, but in the ability to communicate with both producer and consumer and to act as an conduit between the two to relay the value and breadth of wines that France can offer. ☐