

Are you making the most

A simple enough question, but it proved hard to answer in the second cross-industry debate at the France Summit. Erin Smith and Andrew Catchpole report



The benefits of a versatile, well-priced French range are there to be seen in the UK on and off-trades, but how many operators can say, hand-on-heart, that they have cracked the French puzzle when talking to consumers?

It certainly is not through lack of trying, as Kevin Smith of Tesco set out succinctly. "Customers are out there buying French wines, they are enthusiastic about French wines and France is really doing quite well now," he said. "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."

He was quite clear that Tesco sees France as a category which UK wine sellers should be looking to capitalise on.

Lucy Clements, also of Tesco, agreed. She outlined how the retailer had launched 33 wines across its French range recently, ranging from 'Value' wines to the high-end 'Finest' range, including many regional wines delivering good value from places such as Herault, Aude and elsewhere.

"We want to be everyone's wine shop and in week 37 we will be rolling out packaging and shelving, titled Vin de France, heavily focused on regionality," she said. "We will offer new merchandising and will be arranging wines based on regionality more clearly than before. We also communicate directly with consumers through the Tesco Wine Fairs, which have had over 3,000 attendees. The level of engagement has been huge across the five cities and we are focusing primarily on value."

Clive Donaldson from Morrisons felt there were areas that could still be improved when it comes to making the most of the French wine offering in the UK, especially when it comes to communicating with consumers about new regions coming out of France.

"If it is not a big branded region, the market could do more to help promote that area within the UK market," he explained. "I think that France is

"I am really encouraged by newly created packaging and styles of wine coming out of France right now. Varietal is a pseudo name for style that is what we are trying to communicate to our consumers. Style is a more interesting approach and we are looking at arranging in store more based on style."

Clive Donaldson, Morrisons

behind the curve when it comes to new regions and the trade is not being as creative with introducing them. There needs to be a great look and feel and we really need to get behind these new regions and believe in them. If there are better cues in store, retailers need to call them out. When consumers are in-store and looking at the wall of wine, we as retailers, need to give consumers reassurance."

ALL DOWN TO COMMUNICATION

A strategy of branching out and encouraging customers to engage with French diversity – backed by often good pricing for 'alternative' and less well explored regions and styles – can also provide a fertile hunting ground for independent merchants and the on-trade, whose ability to hand sell fits well with the variety of the French offering. The key to being able to successfully achieve this lies as much in communicating the offer as it does in buying well.

France is by far the hero category, for example, for Hal Wilson, managing director of Cambridge Wine Merchants.

"Forty per cent of my wines sales are French, with a lot of emphasis on generics and regions," he said. "We sell a lot through festival periods and events focused on regions. Working in partnership with producers really works, and it can be a good idea to focus on different regions, with Sud de France being an example of something that has worked really well for us. It has grown from nothing eight years ago to be our largest category, accounting for one in 12 bottles sold."

"Half the wines are varietally labelled, which helps build understanding and interest, and then customers can become more regionally focused,"

