



THE GATEKEEPERS:

Beth Willard, wine buyer for Laithwaite's Wine; **Ted Sandbach**, owner of the Oxford Wine Company; **Graham Nash**, product development manager at Tesco; **Simon Jerrome**, wine purchasing director at Matthew Clark; and **Nick Room**, wine buyer at Waitrose

Ask the gatekeepers

Erin Smith caught up with the gatekeepers of the industry to discover what's currently on trend in Spanish wine and what future opportunities there might be for multiples, independent retailers and the on-trade

Q: Where do the greatest opportunities lie for developing Rioja sales?

BW: The exciting thing about Rioja is that it can provide so many different and interesting styles. Our customers love Rioja and so we try to offer them a vast range of diverse wines. We have an opportunity to introduce new producers or more premium styles.

TS: Rioja is becoming synonymous with oak and I like the young vibrant wines that are being produced now – like a younger crianza. I think the modern and fruit-driven wines are the best value and what people are buying right now.

SJ: I think there is great opportunity in the on-trade for Spanish whites and sparkling wines right now, with some really interesting things being done with these styles of wine. In the UK, we have seen some successful Cava bars launching, such as Bellota in Brighton or Copa de Cava in St Paul's, which we supply, which have had success. Our second-biggest-selling wine in our range for Spanish wines is, in fact, a white. A few years ago this would have been unheard of.

Q: How can Rioja achieve cut-through at premium price points? What about Spain?

BW: We shouldn't be afraid to celebrate the quality of Riojan wines, especially when it comes to aged reserva and gran reserva levels. These wines are among the best in the world. The key to Spain's success in the UK is its quality and value for money at all price points. Spain is not about cheap wines; some of the best value wines can be found at more premium price points. We should be talking about the value of Spanish wines even within the premium category.

TS: I think a younger Rioja crianza can compete at £9.99–£12.99 price point at the moment. It has a fruity style that people are expecting and drinking. The older aged styles of Rioja struggle to compete at the £25-and-above price point. There are really great Malbecs or wines from South Africa at that price point that are really vibrant, exciting to try and are good value and the aged Riojas just can't compete.

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NR: Distinctive labelling and really good product. Spain as a whole has achieved this. Notable wineries, notable regions, consistent and highly regarded press comments, trade-up during retailer offer periods, etc, all these help.

Q: Does Spain have an opportunity to 'own' the Tempranillo variety in the way that Argentina has with Malbec? Is this desirable?

BW: In many ways there is already consumer recognition that Tempranillo is quintessentially Spanish. The success of Rioja, and the fact that customers recognise this grape variety in connection with Spanish wine proves this.

TS: Spain has a wonderful opportunity to own Tempranillo. Look at what Malbec has done for Argentina – its fantastic! Spain could do this with Tempranillo.

GN: For many customers “Rioja” is Spain's “Malbec” as they often don't really differentiate the two.

SJ: I think it is extremely important. I would say that Rioja is becoming a brand in its own right. It is positive to have this association, but there is a threat to [brand] Rioja if only Tempranillo is offered.

Q: What would entice you to broaden your range? What are you potentially looking for in a Spanish producer from an emerging region that would make them more attractive?

GN: We always look to offer great value wines, with diverse styles at competitive prices, that look great and entice customers to want to try them.

SJ: We expanded our range this year and are looking to expand next year as well. We have noticed that wines that are not using the traditional ageing brackets associated with label restrictions, like blended wines with a different style, are doing well in the on-trade.

NR: Having a good export strategy, a willingness to be flexible on wine style as well as packaging, and getting a good grip on the competitive nature of this category in the UK would help. ●

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