

The Oxford Wine Café

Anne Krebiehl meets the team behind the independent merchant where customers are not always local, but they are definitely loyal

Where?

The Oxford Wine Café, 38 South Parade, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7JN; 01865236959.

Who?

Ted Sandbach, managing director of the Oxford Wine Company, and Louise Ferreira the café manager, a South African who fell in love with wine during her time at Stellenbosch University. Ferreira has been promoted from the sales force because of her valuable experience in hospitality. "There's no way I would have done this without having somebody like Louise," Sandbach says. Callum Peaston, sommelier, cut his teeth in swish Cotswold establishments like the Feathered Nest in Nether Westcote and worked a vintage in South Africa. He then started in the Oxford Wine Company shop where his talent was quickly spotted.

Why?

This is the first wine bar opened by the Oxford Wine Company. Sandbach explains: "It is a very popular site and was a successful wine bar in the past. We've now spent a lot of money to put our own stamp on it." It's a bold integration and he concedes: "It's been an interesting development – our whole company has moved a lot over the past few years, from having just one warehouse we've now got four shops with wholesale as well and now a wine bar – but I could see the synergy."

Who is the bar catering to?

"People come in before they go to work for coffee, and they come after – we open at 8.30am, so we also get a lot of coffee drinkers who just want to use the Wi-Fi, and we close at 11.30pm. People are not necessarily local but loyal," says Ferreira.

The clientele is open-minded and wine-curious and the company's



From left: Louise Ferreira, Ted Sandbach and Callum Peaston

IN A NUTSHELL

Food: simple meat, cheese or seafood platters, paninis and pies, all sourced locally

No of bins: 129

No by the glass: 32

No of suppliers: own supply

No of wines under £30: 79

retail mentality pays off. "Of the wines by the glass that we recommend," says Ferreira, "60% of people take a bottle home with them." It is a bonus that you can buy wines at the shop price in the café. Peaston adds that "a lot of people pop in here on their way home, tell me what they're cooking and I recommend something".

Organising the list

The list was designed by Sandbach, Peaston and Oxford Wine Company fine wine manager Theo Sloom. Thirty-two wines are available by the glass, and the list is structured under style headings that really encourage customers to experiment.

The most expensive wine is Tignanello at £109 but the wine list is exceptionally strong at the below-£30 mark with many eclectic choices, like Esk Valley's subtle Verdelho and a Cabernet Franc from Trapiche – but Peaston thinks that the café is also trading off the

palates they have already developed with the OWC. Customers are happy to try things and trust the team behind the bar. The café works on the basis of percentage margins but switches to cash margin for the top-end wines.

What sells best?

"Everything we recommend works well," beams Ferreira, but Guy Allion's Touraine Sauvignon and De Chansac Old Vine Carignan are the top sellers, as well as Prosecco, particularly when the sun shines. Ferreira says: "People are very open to suggestions and don't go for house wines all the time."

Who's supplying the list?

All the wines are supplied by the Oxford Wine Company, "which doesn't mean we are not open to special offers now and then", Sandbach quickly adds. "In one sense we are cutting out a layer, which means our prices can be pretty keen, we are starting at

£2.95 a glass. I don't want this place to become a refuge for wine snobs. I want the reputation that we are open to anyone, whether they want simple house wine or a top claret. And despite the fact that we have things that are fairly inexpensive, people are trading up."

Will you have wine events?

"We are running quite a few activities here, tastings for our keener patrons who try a range of wines or featuring a particular producer. Heather Miller from the company's sales team will also be running a blind tasting club on Monday nights, and she likes to involve people in the art of tasting," Sandbach says.

Desert-island food and wine match on the day's menu

Ferreira picks the cheese board with the Delheim Pinotage; Ted picks the cold meat board with the Morandé Gran Reserva Pinot Noir; Peaston also picks the meat board and the Tres Picos Garnacha from Spain. ■