

moment. We have got some cracking wines from Australia but we haven't rushed to replace – we're just knocking out a few wines at the moment. We will be looking at some point to bring in some more. But the exchange rate hasn't helped, people aren't buying it, there are too many basic, rather crude, overoaked wines at the bottom end of the market. And we're finding the public are getting fed up with it. The public don't want it.

Rural France, Spain and Italy – there's an emphasis on old world wines, with food, and we're finding that customers are tending to buy less, but better quality.

You've won a few awards – how useful are they?

Sandbach: The great thing about awards is that if you don't win them, no one knows, and if you do you shout about it. We've won one or two good ones now but it's taken us a long time to get there – we used to enter these things and get nowhere.

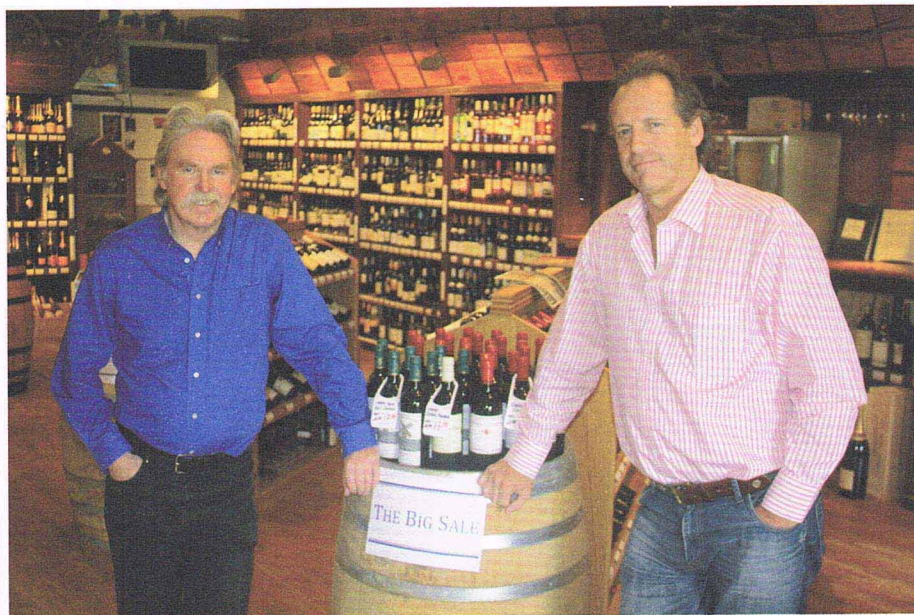
They are useful – it does give people a bit of faith in you. Sometimes it means people think you're doing better than you actually are. But on the whole it's a positive thing. What I don't do is enter awards where we have to pay, because I think that's immoral.

What's your turnover?

Sandbach: About £3.8 million at the moment. It increases every year and we should be, by the end of next year, sort of £4 million, £4.5 million. What I'd like to do is get to about £5 million using a similar model to this. There's room for another £1 million turnover using a similar structure.

Your tasting events seem a big part of what you do.

Sloot: Theo's Thirsty Thursdays are every two weeks at the Oxford shop. I've



Sloot (left) and Sandbach: aiming for a £5 million turnover, but no more shops

been presenting tastings since my Moreno days in '89 and I just love presenting wines in a fun format. I'm not just interested in wine education, I'm interested in having fun with wine. I do a lot of tastings with a format called the blind tasting challenge.

My stuff is all very humorous but it's also informative – people learn a lot but at the same time they have a damned good laugh. I make it into a real stand-up situation. We get about 35-40 people coming along to those now. These are evening events, 6.30pm till 8pm: try three wines, basically.

There's always a theme and all kinds of stuff going on, audio and visual themes, and always a story. I've got quite a lot of anecdotes after 27 years.

I went to Beronia recently and they age their wines to Gregorian chants, as do Montes, so I played some Gregorian chants and put some candles on, that kind of stuff. You've got to make it characterful and interesting.

We do two large wine fairs per year, one in Witney and one in Oxford. The Oxford one is huge, about 500 people. There'll be three this year, with

Cirencester opening, which we're calling the Cotswold Wine Fair. We get principals up to man the tables. There's a big range of stuff that goes on, a large tasting schedule.

Do you detect a lot of pessimism in the UK wine trade?

Sandbach: I think it's a better time for independents to emerge, because people are much better educated about wine.

OK, we're going through tricky times but they're not going to last forever. We will emerge from this and I hope we emerge strong. What's so difficult, unless you've got outside investment, is actually building a business beyond one shop.

We do what we do and we try to do it as well as we can. We make mistakes, we try and put those mistakes right, we try and learn, we try and listen, but we haven't got it 100% right – tell me anybody who has.

But we certainly have come a long way. We now need to consolidate – I've been far too bold and brave, cash flow is tight, I've taken risks that I probably shouldn't have taken. But I think we'll come out of it fine.