

# A word from the buyers

Offering a personal slant on how to boost Champagne sales were the Oxford Wine Company's Ted Sandbach, Zuma's Kelvin McCabe and Matt O'Connor from Planet of the Grapes, as **Gemma McKenna** reports

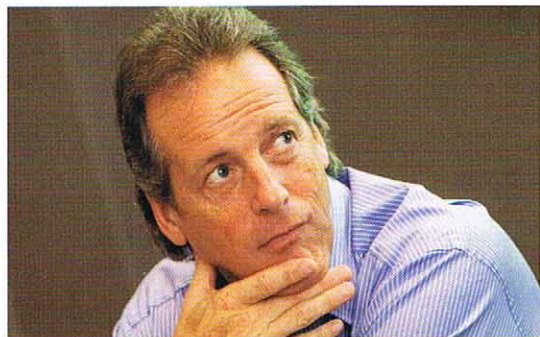
**Sandbach, who owns the Oxford Wine Company, runs four shops and supplies restaurants across the south, south west and the Midlands, said the market outside of London is not so sophisticated in its Champagne tastes**

"In the wholesale market 90% of the Champagne is buyer's own brand," said Sandbach. This means seeking out something cheap which can be sold on to restaurants at £15 plus VAT. These restaurants don't have sommeliers, nor do they have a great deal of knowledge – they just want to hit a price point and deliver on quality.

"We find it very hard to sell grower Champagne – you won't get anyone there who understands it – that doesn't happen in rural Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire." What they're looking for is one basic Champagne and one Grand Marque, said Sandbach – and he will choose the house which offers him the most support, such as glassware or ice buckets. "They want something that looks good that they've heard of," he added.

As for the retail side of the business, Sandbach said he's "often very disappointed by some of the big Champagne houses' attitudes towards independents".

He slammed the activities of some houses, and multiple retailers, where retail prices are lower than the prices offered to his own firm. He lambasted producers who, rather than tell him prices would be discounted at multiples, avoided calls and left him to find out for himself. He would rather have transparency – a call from an account manager to tell him about discounts before they happen and offer to help him with a better price is appreciated. "I want someone to give me a good everyday price, then I'll weather any promotion," he said.



**Planet of the Grapes, which operates four sites in the City, is a different proposition. "A lot of people know and recognise brands and have drunk them for years," said O'Connor. But selling grower Champagne is still a challenge, he admitted**

Heavily discounted Champagne in other retailers proves problematic as customers feel ripped off if they find the same product cheaper elsewhere, according to O'Connor. "Suppliers should work with us and let us continue with our loyal customer base."

Customers buying Champagne made by the main houses are looking for the "cachet" associated with the name, said O'Connor. It's also an issue that Champagne is so strongly linked to celebrations. "Rather than customers coming in on Tuesday or Wednesday and drinking Champagne, that's not how it happens – it's still a special occasion drink," he said.

O'Connor believes that grower Champagne is a really good fit for indies and would like to see growers making more of an effort to talk to them, despite their lack of marketing budgets compared with the big brands.



**Top Knightsbridge restaurant Zuma, where Kelvin McCabe is head sommelier, attracts a privileged crowd**

"Champagne is a luxury product, but I think luxury stops the moment you hit the supermarket shelves," said McCabe.

But he's realistic: "We live in a heavily branded society – how as a restaurant do you balance that without ostracising the consumer?" he asked.

First off you've got to choose something from the consumer's repertoire – but you can move up the scale from the norm, for example, Dom Pérignon or Taittinger's single vineyard selection.

The sommelier can also help by suggesting food pairings: "Champagne has an amazing capacity to go with food – it helps to choose something not so obvious, like a grower Champagne, and match it with a few dishes," said McCabe.

But how can smaller, lesser-known houses get the attention of high-end restaurants? McCabe said any assistance with staff education or trips really helps to boost sales of a product that's not as readily available as other more mainstream ones.

"I don't get bullied by Champagne houses as Zuma is a brand," said McCabe, and a listing there is much coveted by suppliers.

His house listing is Billecart-Salmon, and Krug sells by the glass for £29.50. "It's an amazing Champagne, but not that many people get to try it," said McCabe – this way it's more accessible.

