

Selling sunshine

CHILE, SOUTH AFRICA AND ARGENTINA ARE ALL BIG PERSONALITIES IN THE DRINKS WORLD. SO HOW DO YOU SELL THEM? **LUCY BRITNER** REPORTS

When it comes to actually selling Chilean, Argentinian and South African drinks, independents broadly agree on how consumers perceive the three countries, and this is mainly in wine terms: Chile is a safe bet - for many customers, its entry-level wines do the majority of the work, with a few premium shoots starting to appear. Argentina still attracts Malbec-mad punters but it has also got people interested in other grape varieties outside of the usual suspects. South Africa is largely one for enthusiasts interested in the experimentation happening among a new generation of winemakers.

None of the specialist retailers I spoke to specifically grouped these three countries together, insisting that they all have their own personalities, though Chile and Argentina are often next to each other in the shop, as they are on the map. Few, either, had thought about the potential to harness these wine categories to expand consumer engagement with a wider range of drinks from these countries (see special feature addressing this on page 15).

"You have to think about what customers already associate with these countries," says Simon Gardener, retail co-ordinator for SH Jones.

Kicking off with Argentina and Chile, he says: "Malbec is a good starting point, then we look for producers we can champion because they are good, interesting and different. We have just started doing more with Montes Alpha in Chile and its Kaiken Malbec from Argentina."

Incidentally, Gardener tells me, a kaiken is a migratory bird that travels across the Andes between Chile and Argentina.

Ted Sandbach, managing director at the Oxford Wine Company, agrees that Malbec is a good starting point when it comes to getting customers to explore the country further and he is excited about Argentinian wines. "Argentina hasn't dropped its prices and people are prepared to trade up. The interest in Malbec means people are interested in grapes and they are starting to see there is more to Argentina than Malbec. A good Torrontes is great, for example. Trouble is, there are a lot of bad ones around, too."

In his bar concept the Oxford Wine Cafe, Bonarda has proved a hit, but it has to be hand-sold. "Customers like to experiment with different tastes and flavours but they have to be guided by knowledgeable staff," he says.

Argentina is performing well in the off-trade, according to Wines of Argentina UK director Andrew Maidment - more than 20% up in the past year, he says. "Argentina is traditionally far stronger in the smaller retailers than the larger ones, but some key larger retailers have been catching up recently, which is excellent."

Wines of Argentina has done some research with Kantar Worldpanel, which showed Argentina has a younger demographic profile than most countries. "Interestingly, convenience stores and off-licences have one of the youngest demographic profiles of any drinks retail environment in the UK - so we match well and do well in this sector," says Maidment.

Like the kaiken we go back across the Andes and, generally, customers seem much more familiar with Chile as a safe bet. Oddbins buyer Ana Sapungju says: "Customers see Chile as a reliable source of entry-level wines, often single variety."

"It has been bastardised a little bit - like Australia," adds Sandbach. "But people know it's a reliable option, especially in a pub environment. Our job is to get people to trade up from pub-style Chilean wine. At £9-£15 in retail you can get top quality and it represents much better value for money than a Bordeaux at this price point." For Sandbach, big brands go to the on-trade, while small brands can be hand-sold in a retail environment.

At SH Jones, dedication to Chilean wine won the team a trip to Chile courtesy of Wines of Chile. Last September, the company held a Chilean Wine Fair at the Cellar Shop in Banbury. Tickets were £5 and customers could try wines from the length of the country - from Bío Bío to Limari. And enthusiasm for the country's wines has not waned. "On an average Saturday afternoon there might be half a dozen bottles open," adds Gardener. "Different Chardonnays, for example."

Meanwhile, South Africa is a "difficult one", according to Sandbach. "There are some exciting wines and exciting winemakers but apartheid means it has taken time."

Sandbach, who has travelled to South Africa, says the next generation is exciting. "There is a group of older families who are fairly traditional and the second generation is travelling and coming back with new information and ideas. There is massive potential."

People who have visited South Africa or are wine devotees tend to be attracted to purchasing wines in a retail environment, according to both