

# France still holds all the aces

French wine is the lifeblood of a good independent business. But as the five top merchants who joined Harpers on a recent tour with Les Grands Chais de France discovered, there is still much to learn, even for the most experienced retailer. **Richard Siddle** reports

**I**ndependent wine merchants, by their very nature, are not afraid to have an opinion. They have to. After all it is down to them to decide which suppliers or producers they are going to work with, what wines to stock and at what price.

They also have to decide if they can spare time away from the day-to-day running of those very independent businesses to go on wine trips. Time, as they say, is precious.

So it was with a little nervousness that Harpers invited five independent merchants to accompany it on a study tour of Bordeaux this summer with French wine group Les Grands Chais de France (GCF). The trip was designed to give the merchants the chance to have a close look at potential gaps in their French wine offer, not just Bordeaux, since GCF makes wine in all the main regions of France.

But would they find the trip useful? Would they all get on? Would they go back with new ideas and, hopefully, wines, to sell in their stores and online?

As it was, there was no reason to fret. The group quickly gelled and all were keen to make the most of their time away. The merchants included Ruth and Richard Yates, founders of the Corks Out group of stores, Ted Sandbach of the Oxford Wine Company, Julia Jenkins who runs Flagship Wines and Stephen Forward of Essentially Wines.

Accompanying them were Tim North and Chris Davies from GCF's UK team and Jean-Marc Dulong of GCF's Bordeaux negociant arm, Crus et Domaines de France. GCF operates 400ha of Bordeaux vineyards across 12 châteaux, including four of its own properties: Château Cantin, Château Faizeau, Château Lestage Simon and Clos Beauregard.



Jean-Marc Dulong of GCF's Bordeaux negociant arm

