

DAWN DAVIES, SELFRIDGES

Selfridges wine purchaser: Dawn Davies

By Giles Fallowfield

The wine list at Selfridges is dominated by the French section, which occupies around half the 31-page list. But in the two and a half years or so since she has taken over the buying at this famous London department store, whose frontage in Oxford Street is reckoned to have the highest shopping footfall anywhere in London (especially in the run-up to Christmas), former sommelier Dawn Davies has overhauled the list and the pricing.



It's not really fair to call her a 'former sommelier', as she brings a fresh sommelier type approach to the wine buying department, something which Ewan Venters, Selfridges Food and Restaurants Director wanted when he first employed her back in March 2007 but also because she oversees the team of expert wine waiters in the Wonder Bar for those customers that prefer to have table service rather than select their own wines from the 50 or so that are regularly offered by the glass there. What's more when I speak to her in early November she is working flat out as maitre sommelier in the 'pop-up' restaurant which brings the celebrated cooking of Michelin-starred chef Pierre Koffmann's La Tante Claire back to the capital. So she has left the day-today running of the 2,000 sq ft wine, Champagne and spirits shop to her capable team for the moment (although La Tante Claire was only meant to be open for a fortnight the restaurant is now in its second month and doesn't close till the near the end of November).

Champagne as a category is a good example of Dawn Davies' approach and over the past two years she has reduced the number of major international brands represented, introducing several smaller, lesser known quality houses plus an exciting selection of some of the best growers' Champagnes that are available in the UK. This has been an entirely deliberate decision by Davies: "We can't really compete with the High Street on price, so we have to offer value in a different way." That is by selling more wines that aren't that widely available outside restaurants.

Currently 14, roughly half the selection of non-vintage Champagnes, come from individual growers, with prices for these wines starting at £29.99 for the Veuve Fournay Blanc de Blancs that's made by the Fournay brothers Emmanuel and Charles-Henry based in the premier cru of Vertus, one of the southernmost villages in the Côte des Blancs.

While prices for some of the growers' non-vintage styles are below the £50 mark, growers also account for six of the eight most expensive non-vintage styles including the most pricey – Jacques Selosse, Substance Blanc de Blancs at £160, that's £25 more than Krug Grande Cuvée. The other three grower producers in this group are also people who have an international reputation. Pierre Larmandier of Larmandier-Bernier who is also based in Vertus; his friend Jérôme Prévost a disciple of Selosse whose tiny production of oakaged Pinot-Meunier Champagnes have their own cult following and Henri Giraud whose Code Noir Pinot Noir comes from the Grand Cru of Aÿ and is priced at £95.

The wines from quite a few of these growers have little or actually no dosage – like the Larmandier Terre de Vertus non-dosé style priced at £49.99-- so they are not exactly the sort of Champagnes that many people will have experienced. "The selection is really down to my personal taste," says Davies, "but I like to work with the growers, they are the sort of people you can believe in and you can scrutinise every aspect of their production."

She concedes however that they are outside most consumers' experience of Champagne and "selling them is really down to my staff getting enthused about the wines. But we have training every week on Friday and people like Nick Brookes at Vine Trail are very good at coming in and talking about the wines, so the staff are knowledgeable enough to speak confidently about the wines to customers."

It also helps to deal with someone like Vine Trail who have more than ten different growers' represented on their list as this enables Davies to get quite a range from one supplier. "We couldn't use a supplier just to get one growers' Champagne otherwise the whole operation would become a nightmare. Vine Trail makes it logistically possible. We've taken on four Gosset wines

Suppliers:**Champagne:**

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Imported by Thorman Hunt & Co
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Tel: +44 (0)7736 364460

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All seven imported by Vine Trail
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www.pichonlongueville.com

Château Pichon Comtesse de Lalande
Tel: +33 (0)5 56 59 19 40
www.pichon-lalande.com

Château Pont St Martin
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www.chateaupontsaintmartin.com

Château Lafite
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50 FLAVOURS FROM FRANCE

recently – Grand Réserve white and rosé, vintage and Celebris Blanc de Blancs – but we also buy Frapin Cognac from McKinley Vintners.

"We do have quite a few of the big brands too, Perrier-Jouët Belle Époque, Mumm Cuvée René Lalou and Dom Pérignon but it's purely for gifting although while growers account for nearly half the non-vintage list they don't represent half our sales," says Davies. "Veuve Clicquot, Moët, and Laurent-Perrier rosé are our biggest sellers, but sales of growers' Champagnes have risen by over 200% over the past year. It's a personal choice, but you have to still have the big brands."

However prestige Champagne sales have dropped since the recession started and with prices of rosé going up and up this has also encouraged people to go back to non-vintage styles," Davies says. "We've taken on Bérêche rosé which represents much better value than many of the houses, but we've also added Pol Roger and Charles Heidsieck's pink styles. Cristal sales have disappeared and Krug is down too, while Dom Pérignon

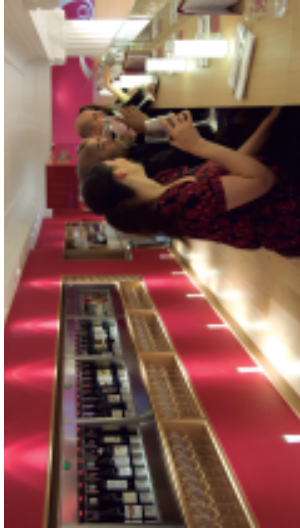
has held up partly because we have a good value gift set. People continue to buy Champagne, which still represents more than half our wine business, but they are going more for things like Gosset and Charles Heidsieck and Charles Heidsieck vintage than the most expensive prestige cuvées."

It is similar picture with the red wines of Bordeaux and Davies has introduced more 'better value' wine here too. Although there are still five vintages of Pétrus and Lafite, two each of Cheval Blanc, Mouton-Rothschild and Latour, plus three of Margaux on the list that runs to five and a half pages, there are

more examples and better sales to be found in the £60-£200 bracket.

"Lynch-Bages [priced at £95 rising to £645 for the '61] and both the Pichons [Longueville-Baron and Comtesse de Lalande] do well and we've taken on some new wines like Château Port St Martin a Pessac-Léognan 2006 which comes from an organic producer and we also buy from Vine Trail which is great value at under £30."

The first growths are doing a bit less well, fine wine sales have generally dipped from last year but not horrendously. A lot of Chinese customers drink Lafite and Château Pavie has a big Asian following too. Plus things like Château Eglise Clinet (Pomerol) which we buy from Farr Vintners who are one of our four main Bordeaux suppliers (along with Corney & Barrow, Armit and Berry Bros) the '99 vintage of which is a great deal at £120 and underrated. Farr have sold us five of six wines like this which are very good deals for our customers," says Davies. "But overall Champagne still easily outsells Bordeaux because of the gifting."



The Wonder Bar in Selfridges Oxford Street store where there's a 'jukebox of wine' – an Enomatic Wine System with more than 50 different styles that allows people to serve themselves with prices ranging from £3.45 to £1.60 for a 125 ml glass.

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