

A businessman with a corkscrew

Hamish Anderson has what many in business strive for – respect – and has spent the past 11 years buying wine for the Tate. Rebecca Gibb reports

Hamish Anderson must have a secret. He's been working at the Tate as wine buyer for more than 11 years, but doesn't look old enough to have been on the payroll for a fraction of the time.

While most see two years' service as a good stint, Anderson has far surpassed that marker – collecting four of the most highly acclaimed awards on the UK restaurant scene along the way, including Best UK Wine List from Les Routiers. And with the Tate Modern planning to double in size for 2012, he doesn't look like he'll be putting his feet up anytime soon.

Since joining as sommelier in late 1997, he has worked his way up to beverage buyer for the Tate's nine sites, including the Tate Modern, St Ives and Liverpool, and is now an integral part of the business. Rather than being a glorified wine waiter, he is making decisions far beyond the wine list. He claims this is the major reason behind his long service.

"I sit down with the accountant and the chef and am part of the business. I bet most sommeliers don't look at the accounts at the end of the month. We are looking after 40%-50% of the business and

while the pay is not as rewarding as it should be, perhaps sommeliers are not doing as much as they could. They ought to be aware of staff costs and how much a bunch of Riedel glasses costs when they order them," he explains.

Climbing down from his soapbox and back to business, times are tough. With restaurants going into administration left, right and centre, Anderson is fully aware of the situation he faces. Customers who were happy to splash out on a bottle of Meursault 18 months ago are reining in their spending and value is more important than ever.

"We buy a lot in euros and from a necessity point of view we will have to change core listings," he says. "I have been getting new lists from suppliers and there have been 15% price increases. New Zealand and Australia have increased but not as much so they will take up a few slots, particularly by the glass," he says.

Good news for the Antipodeans but with others bound to follow suit, soul-searching times for European producers.

Back to the Old

Ironically, the inevitable rising cost of European wines comes at a time when customers are moving back to the Old World. Anderson reports a strong movement away from the exuberance of the New World toward more restrained, food-friendly wines. "Our Tate Modern customers are a fashion-led crowd and they are shifting back to the Old World, particularly France and Italy. Many of our Tate Britain customers are much older – usually in

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their 50s – so their tastes are set in traditional-producing countries.”

The call for more elegant wines is inextricably linked with demand for lower-alcohol wines. Anderson added the alcohol level to each wine on his list 18 months ago and has seen a massive increase in the consumption of lower-alcohol wines. "When people know the alcohol they tend to choose a 12.5% rather than 15%," he says.

But forget the general trends; it seems the best way to sell wine at the Tate is to recruit patriotic international staff. There is a troop of South Africans working in the Tate's restaurants and, surprise, surprise, South African Chenin Blanc is flying out of the doors at the moment. Funnily enough, English wine is not enjoying so much success.

The Tate has a host of suppliers including Alliance Wines, Liberty and Mentzendorff buying direct and doing plenty of ex-cellar work.

Looking for more

So what does Anderson look for in a supplier? He claims good service and delivery are now taken as a given and he is looking for the added extra. As in any business, personal relationships play a major part. "My suppliers take the time

to look at my list and find out what I like. I don't want any messing around and expect people to give me the best prices they can.”

Training is an added bonus. If winemakers are in London, it makes all the difference if they pop down to taste their listed wine with the staff before service, says Anderson. Staff training is a massive part of the Tate's success when it comes to wine. "All our staff have to do the WSET's foundation level. It's as important as telling them where the fire escapes are.”

Health and safety will be pleased to hear that. Anderson admits that the Tate isn't a Gordon Ramsay and most waiting staff it attracts don't view fine dining as a career. However with unusual wines by the glass like Tallarook Roussanne 2006 from central Victoria and Thalassitis Assyrtiko 2007 from Santorini, it's not an easy sell.

He adds: "We have to get people enthused about Assyrtiko by the glass even though they might only be working for us for eight months. Once a week, Jade (Koch, the Tate's sommelier) opens a bottle of wine and staff talk about it. If they are not wine people, anything more than that is too much information.”

Anderson intends to continue service with the Tate but now also consults for the Chelsea Arts Club and several gastropubs, writes a column for the Saturday Telegraph and has two small children. He'd better stick with that anti-ageing secret of his. ■

Anderson: in charge of the taste of the Tate

THE TATE

- Nine sites
- 2,500 cases of house wine sold annually
- 6,000-7,000 cases sold a year
- £13.5 million turnover
- 43% drink; 57% food