



In the somewhat eventful economic conditions in which we find ourselves, many might question the wisdom of launching a new company, and one that devotes itself to the merchandising of what may be considered a 'luxury' purchase from, though not solely, something as apparently anachronistic as a retail shop. I could be proven wrong, but I differ. I am sure I am not alone in having not enjoyed the last few years. I am no lover of brashness, swank and bling, and as everything was swept away and replaced in the me-too gold rush of the credit boom I was dogged by a sense that we had rather lost track of things that were actually important, not least some element or sense of humility to our cultural traditions. I cannot but wonder that within this period of retrenchment lies opportunity.

I have reflected at length on the effect of this surreal period on the wine business, by which I mean that of growing grapes, making wine from them, and selling it. I suppose I could be easily accused of being a romantic, but I feel that whilst much might have been gained through the advantages of capital, much too has been lost as the role of wine has changed from being something at once essential yet special, to becoming at one extreme a mere beverage, and on the other a commodity to be traded or a label to be held aloft as a trophy. In western, and some eastern cultures, wine has a unique place which sets it apart from water, or from ale or cider, for it has been deeply interwoven with our religious, spiritual and cultural existence from when it is first recorded as having been made, some 4000 years ago. This uniqueness, and the vitality which it bore, remained pretty much intact when I first worked in France in the late 1970s. Bordeaux was in one of its many periods in the financial doldrums, with a string of indifferent vintages and a long period of poor investment behind it. There was something magical and intimate in the faded chateaux and the immaculate rows of vines stretching as far as the eye could see, simmering gently in the August sun. There was charm, and familiarity, and warmth, and deference to the past. It was there 15 or so years ago when I stood with Raymond Trolat in St. Joseph one bitter February day in his dark, ancient, dusty cellar below the stone and wooden shed high up above the Rhône river, and from a barrel so old that it was black he carefully drew a substance that glinted bright and delicate ruby in the dim light, and which offered such intensity and delicate complexity of perfume that it made the head spin, and I knew that I was experiencing something that had a direct line of ascendancy to that peasant in the mountains somewhere north of Persia who found that his grapes, left in an earthenware jar, had performed the identical natural alchemy.

In the intervening years most of the old Bordeaux families have been swept away by death duties as the value of their land has increased to untenable levels, and the banks, insurance companies and multinational megaliths that have replaced them have sunk vast new barrel cellars and installed helicopter landing pads and perfumed air hostesses to give guided tours of the ranks of gleaming stainless steel fermentation vessels. Raymond Trolat has succumbed to time or tide. The supermarket shelves groan with identikit, soulless, Chilean Merlot, Australian Shiraz, and ladies-who-lunch Pinot Grigio, wines designed by committee and sold to a price point, and intended not to be noticed, not to engage. Few drink wine to feed the soul, and those that want to are ill served by the output of the multinational drinks companies that own the big brands, and probably cannot afford the wines once revered as the finest and most thought provoking, mindlessly quaffed as they are (or have been) by expense account bankers and corporate whizz-kids speculating for the next deal.

For those of us then, as we unscrew the cap of another bland 'could-it-be sauvignon blanc' and wonder why we bothered, is all lost? I believe not, for even if the way most of us perceive wine has changed, so the quality of those produced by the budding generation of qualified, knowledgeable, deeply enthusiastic (and yes, very often reverential) small growers has exploded, and it is upon the identical ancient traditions passed down through old Raymond Trolat that they bring this bounty of knowledge to bear. Whilst a few of these people might be found in Bordeaux, and many more in Burgundy, most are practising their art in the Rhône, the Midi, the Loire, and relatively unknown corners of Spain, Italy, Austria, Hungary, indeed across the globe, in places as far flung as Idaho or Tasmania. If they are searching for something in common, it may be perhaps seen as an originality, by which I mean a faithfulness to the unique origins of that wine, and a therefore sense of place, or a place. And in our experience, one tends to find that that 'place' tends towards the more marginal regions, where natural acidity leads to nuance and delicacy rather than weight, alcohol and brute force. A perception that such wines are by definition expensive is not necessarily true. Sure, they are unlikely to be found for £3.99, but frankly, with sterling languishing close to parity with the Euro, and Mr Brown's excise duty (and its attendant VAT, the infamous tax-on-tax) at approaching £2 per bottle, not much worth drinking is. The space between £6 and £12, in fact that now occupied by many of the biggest-selling brands, is still replete with wines that are (unlike such brands) unique, delicious and even exciting. Many will of course be by necessity more expensive, and whilst we will make more than a passing nod to them in our lists, it is on the more affordable that we will, for the time being at least, concentrate. Our task, as independent wine merchants, is to close the gap between those producers and you, our customers, and to try to bring to you some sense of that vitality which we hold dear. I believe that the present period of retrenchment, in which reflection and humility may regain some of their earlier place in our lives, gives us a unique opportunity to ponder and take advantage of this bounty.

A word or two to those who knew us, or me, in our earlier incarnation as Tremayne & Webb. Some three years have now passed since we closed our Epping shop, and on a personal level the intervening period, and indeed that immediately preceding, has been something of a trial by ordeal, one that whilst mild by the standards of others, and not uncommon in its characteristics, has been rendered somewhat exhausting by virtue of its length and persistence. I have been in receipt of an enormous amount of goodwill during this period, and I would like to extend my thanks, as well as my apologies and pleas for understanding to those for whom such goodwill has not been repaid by service as sparkling and attentive as I would like it to have been.

My decision to lay the Tremayne & Webb moniker to rest was one borne less of necessity than a sense of wanting to evict a number of ghosts from the past. I also, again upon much reflection, as well as the urging of my son who took me up as a case study for his Business Studies course at school, recognise that the T&W brand, with its slightly Victorian connotations, is one that could too easily be perceived by a modern audience as being rather hidebound and patrician, and I suspect when we were in Epping led to some perception that we were only in the business of dealing in rather expensive and eclectic wines, when in fact the majority of our turnover in terms of volume lay well south of £10 a bottle. So was born Black Dog, a name not necessarily to be credited to the famously Churchillian state of mind of that title, but as much to a devotion to Labrador retrievers, both black and golden. The personality of the present incumbent, Field Marshall Sir Archibald Wavell (or Wavy) suggests that he will undoubtedly take his self-appointed responsibility for customer relations seriously.

Ashlyns Organic Farm Shop

After many delays, those most recent revolving around the topically delicate matter of finance, we are finally ensconced in the barn adjacent to the Farm Shop. That Ashlyn's is largely devoted to organically sourced produce should not lead to the assumption that we are similarly constrained, though increasingly the output of the new wave of artisan winemakers is produced organically, or as 'near-organically' as commercial expedience and informed pragmatism will allow; but more of this later. The synergy between Ashlyn's and Black Dog Wines is obvious, and not only in terms of our philosophies. It needs hardly be said that no business is a business without customers, and it would be fair to assume that those who flock in increasing numbers to Ashlyn's do so because they seeking something far beyond the standardised product of the supermarket megaliths, where the sort of real flavour and quality that you can find here has long since been replaced in the greater part by the illusion both of choice and of true value. We, like Ashlyn's, offer something different, something that for many people is increasingly essential to the quality of modern life, rushed and ephemeral as so much of it is.

There is of course a matter of a more practical nature. In Epping we were dogged by the stupidity and shortsightedness of the district council, whose members, shut away in their virtually windowless bunker from the community that they nominally served, completely failed to understand that ordinary people's experience of aggressive and largely unnecessary 'traffic control' regimes, leaves them feeling, at best, deeply upset and alienated. Whilst once bustling high streets struggle, innovative and interesting shopping destinations such as Ashlyns are thriving. It is easy to get here, and there is plentiful and of course free parking once you are here. There is a restaurant offering delicious, freshly cooked meals, or just a cup of coffee, and as well as the two shops with their range of wonderful artisan foods and wines, there are farm walks and nature trails, plenty to keep both adults and children occupied and relaxed. If there is such a thing as stress-free shopping, you should find it here.

Toby Webster, December 2009.