

# WHO'S WHO IN CANADA

The results of our survey were compiled by Tony Aspler - recently honoured with the Order of Canada - from responses sent to 250 key members of the Canadian wine trade. His insights offer a window into this key market.

The Canadian beverage alcohol scene is fragmented into ten autonomous provinces, each regulating its own pricing, warehousing and distribution of wine, spirits and beer. The picture is further complicated by the fact that one province, Alberta, has been fully privatised since 1993, while British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan have both government-controlled, as well as a few privately-owned, stores. The rest of the provinces are government monopolies. Quebec allows the sale of beer and locally bottled wines in corner stores, but strictly controls imported products in their SAQ (Société des alcools du Québec) stores. Ontario, the largest market in Canada, is completely dominated by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. The LCBO prides itself on being one of the largest single purchasers of beverage alcohol and one of the largest retailers in the world, buying wines, spirits and beers from more than 72 countries. Through its 598 stores, the Board carries annually a total of 19,000 products: 3,500 brands regularly on offer, 6,000 through its bi-weekly offerings at Vintages outlets, the Classics Catalogue of fine wines and premium spirits, and some 9,500 labels through the LCBO's Private Ordering and Consignment programs. So the task of selecting the cream of the crop on a national basis is all but impossible. Each jurisdiction has its own heroes.

## *Best National Wine Importer*

There are 185 wine importers in Canada listed on the website [www.internationalbeveragenetwork.com](http://www.internationalbeveragenetwork.com), but this does include many of the hobbyists who have picked up agencies for wines on their holiday travels to supply a circle of friends. For those who like to play the game of importing, there are more than

500 valid manufacturers' representative's licenses in circulation in Ontario alone. These have a two-year term and cost a mere \$30 (€20).

While there are sizeable importing agencies with offices or business associations across the country, most wine importing is done on a provincial basis. This means that only the very largest wine concerns, such as Gallo, Penfolds, Concha y Toro and Torres, are available in stores across the country. The majority of respondents to the question of 'Who is the best importer?' were familiar only with their own territory, through their dealings with agencies within their provincial boundaries. Of those few that have a national reach, Select Wine Merchants, based in Vancouver, British Columbia, with offices in Alberta, Ontario and Quebec, scored the most votes. Select was cited by one individual as "entrepreneurs who always come with ideas and solutions for their suppliers and customers".

## *Best Provincial Wine Importer*

Most of the respondents to this question were Ontarians, who would naturally pick an agency with which they were familiar. Three stood out for very different reasons: Noble Estates ("great portfolio and superior service"), Rob Groh's The Vine ("Service, service, service") and The Stem Group ("quality of small Italian producers expertly picked"). But the top marks go to Steven Campbell's Lifford Agencies, no doubt, because of the owner's personal initiative to lessen his company's carbon footprint, as well as having a large and eclectic portfolio of producers. Campbell recently introduced a series of three wines called 'Plantatree', bulk-shipped to Ontario from Ironstone Vineyards in California's Sierra Foothills and packaged in PET bot-

tles. Line-priced at \$13.95, \$2.50 from the sale of each bottle will be donated to plant a tree. This brand will be rolled out across Canada in the coming year.

## *Best Wine Buyer*

There were many contenders for this title and the range of reasons given speaks volumes about the frustrations that importing agents have when dealing with monopolies. Buyers from private stores were deemed to be more approachable and open to new products. One has to be sympathetic to the buyers who work for the monopolies, though, because they are bombarded daily by agents who want their products listed.

Certain names kept cropping up: Chris McDonald of the New Brunswick Liquor Board, Courtenay Wint of the LCBO, Benoît Beaudet of the SAQ and David Hopgood of the British Columbia Liquor Distribution Branch were all cited for their professionalism (and Hopgood for his French). But the name most mentioned was Javier Santos, Business Unit Director of the LCBO ("knowledgeable and open to new business").

The top buyer for private stores is John Clerides of Marquis Wine Cellars in Vancouver ("an impeccable palate for the unusual wine").

## *Best Wine Store*

There was little argument here when it came to the best stores owned by provincial monopolies. In Ontario, the LCBO's flagship store at Summerhill is housed in a converted railway station measuring 35,000 square feet. The original fabric of the building has been maintained, including the ticket windows. This store has the greatest selection of wines anywhere in Canada.

Quebec's top-of-the-line outlet is the Signature store in Montreal on Sainte

**BEST WINE BUYER FOR PRIVATE STORES***John Clerides of Marquis Wine Cellars*

*Considered approachable and open to new products, John Clerides of Marquis Wine Cellars in Vancouver came top thanks to his "impeccable palate for the unusual wine".*

**MOST INFLUENTIAL WINE PERSON***Javier Santos of the LCBO*

*As the man responsible for the LCBO's purchases, or about \$1b worth of wine a year, Javier Santos is responsible for the wines that more than a third of all Canadians find on their dinner table.*



Catherine near the university. Its knowledgeable staff sell verticals of first-growth Bordeaux and Grand Cru Burgundies; top wines from other appellations; more affordable small lot products, and a selection of high-end spirits, all set out in luxurious surroundings.

Of the privately-owned stores both Marquis Wine cellar (for its extensive European selection and knowledgeable staff) and Liberty Wine Merchants, with its eight stores around the Vancouver area, were well regarded, as was Willow Park Wines & Spirits in Calgary, Canada's largest private wines and spirits retailer. The most unusual wine store in Canada turns out to be Banville & Jones in Winnipeg, founded in 1999 by sisters, Lia Banville and Tina Jones. Their Tuscan-inspired boutique operates over three floors, with the lower level cellar accommodating 80,000 bottles.

*Best Wine Restaurant*

There was no contest in Quebec for Bistro à Champlain in the tiny Laurentian Mountains village of Sainte-Marguerite-du-Lac-Masson. Rimrock Café battled it out with its neighbour, Bearfoot Bistro in Whistler, for top honours in British Columbia. But for sheer volume, Toronto takes the prize. There are three restaurants boasting cellars with over 40,000 bottles - Via Allegro, Opus and Barberian's Steakhouse. Respondents were doubtless influenced by Barberian's new 19 foot cellar with its cathedral balcony where a dozen people can dine amid the magnum selections.

*Best Wine Magazine*

Canada has three national wine magazines: Montreal-based Tiding, owned by the co-op wine buying club, the Opimian Society, which has chapters

in major cities; Calgary-based Wine Access; and Vines, operating out of St. Catharines, Ontario. The popular vote went to Wine Access. In Quebec, the major publication is Vins et Vignobles. While all have their own following, their potential subscriber base is compromised by the free magazines published by the provincial monopolies. These suck up a lot of advertising revenue, particularly LCBO's lavish quarterly 'Food & Drink' with a print run over 250,000 (there is also a French edition). Many Canadian wine lovers, however, also turn to Decanter and Wine Spectator.

*Best Sommelier*

The profession of sommelier, while entrenched in Quebec, has suddenly become the career choice of many young people in the rest of Canada. No self-respecting restaurant can afford not to have a trained sommelier on the floor, even if they do double duty by waiting tables. Community colleges across the country offer certification courses either run by the International Sommelier Guild or the Canadian Association of Professional Sommeliers founded by Jacques Ohron in 1989. The only Master Sommelier currently working in Canada is John Szabo.

The top sommeliers are: Veronique Rivest of Ottawa, Guenuël Ravel of Montreal, April Kilpatrick of Toronto, Christopher Sprague of Winnipeg, Zoltan Szabo (no relation to John) of Toronto and Mark Davidson of Vancouver.

*Best Wine Journalist*

The provincial nature of the beverage alcohol industry in Canada means that the choice of Best Wine Journalist by respondents tended to reflect their regional bias. British Columbia's John

Schreiner, author and [www.appellation-america.com](http://www.appellation-america.com) correspondent for that region, edged out Anthony Gismondi, editor of Wine Access. In Ontario the choice was David Lawarson of Toronto Life Magazine and Beppi Crosariol of The Globe & Mail. Writing in French in Quebec, Jacques Benoit of La Presse was the first choice for his investigative journalism, breaking the SAQ price-fixing scandal last year. Several respondents also noted Michel Phaneuf for his influential annual wine review book.

*Most Influential Wine Journalist*

The most influential wine journalist in Canada is an American: Robert Parker's wine notes and points are used by the LCBO and other agencies as a guide. Parker's notes and scores are also used in the LCBO's catalogues and on shelf talkers to influence consumers. Anthony Gismondi in Vancouver takes the laurels as the most influential wine journalist in Western Canada and Beppi Crosariol, whose weekly wine column appears in the national newspaper, The Globe & Mail, is tagged as the most influential in the country.

*Most Influential Wine Person*

This category created a plethora of names that included buyers for the provincial monopolies, winery owners (Anthony von Mandl, John Peller), wine personalities (Donald Ziraldo), winery executives (Jay Wright of Vincor), wine writers and even this writer. Several people nominated Robert Parker (see above for reasons).

But the majority of votes went to Javier Santos, as the man ultimately responsible for the wine purchases of the LCBO, which sells about \$1b worth of wine a year. ■