

WHO'S WHO IN BELGIUM

Belgian journalist Hervé Lalau compiled this survey from questionnaires sent to key members of the wine trade. The results show a market that is as split as Belgium itself, between its French and Dutch speaking populations.

Jules Destrée, a famous Wallon politician, once said to the King of Belgium: "Sire, il n'y a pas de Belges" ('there are no Belgians'). The issue of Belgian identity is still not resolved, but as far as wines go, there is no doubt that the Belgian market as a single entity does not exist.

One of Belgium's most striking characteristics is that average consumption is high for a non-producing country, at 27 litres per head, especially as beer, the favourite drink, is also produced in quantity in Belgium. But these 27 litres are quite unevenly distributed. The Dutch-speaking people of Belgium drink less in quantity, and more white wine, but their overall consumption is increasing; French-speaking consumers drink much more red, but their average consumption, at best, is stable. The capital, Brussels, is a cosmopolitan market defined by the presence of a strong foreign population and a higher income, and has the highest consumption per head.

There are only two wine shop chains in Belgium, which are rather small: the French Nicolas (Castel Frères) with seven stores and the local Maxi Vins, with only five stores, mainly located in Brussels. Going to restaurants outside a person's local area in Belgium is not that usual. If many in the UK, for instance, can name the most prominent restaurants in their country, few Belgians could do that for restaurants outside their own region. This is why, in the case of wine shops, sommeliers and restaurants, we chose to name an outstanding one in each community.

Best National Wine Importer

In Belgium, the line between importer, wholesaler and retailer is not easy to draw. A lot of importers have a

retail arm: Fourcroy, for example, whose original business is brokerage and import of wines and spirits, is also a fine food retailer via ISPC, and a wine store through Le Cellier. Most large Belgian retailers like Delhaize, Champion or Colruyt import wines on their own - some even bottle them - although most also buy exclusive products through agents or importers. Most importers or agents sell either directly or indirectly to both the off-trade and the on-trade, with one of their biggest problems being that they cannot always ensure channel exclusivities are respected. Each year, the percentage of wine sold in the supermarkets increases. Beside the general range importers, whose main offer is composed of French and Italian wines, of which Fourcroy is a good example, there are also specialist importers like Buena Vida, which imports Spanish wines, Licata, the Italian specialist, and Gusto World, which imports anything but French. There are also others who specialise in even smaller niches.

The only nationally-based importer appearing in the ranking is Fourcroy, number one thanks to their impressive list of great names. There are, of course, other national wine importers. Pernod Ricard is partly a wine importer, with a good selection of Australian, New Zealand, South African and South American wines, but it was not mentioned often, possibly because its image is more that of a spirits distributor. Other important names are Brussels-based Cinoco, which has a traditional approach to wine and BleuZé, which offers a selection of great names.

Best Local Wine Importer

For the Dutch-speaking part of the country, the Best Importer is

Portovino, the agency of Jan Declercq, Belgium's only MW. Gusto World and Ad Bibendum were also nominated. For the French-speaking part, Bernard Poulet, in Brussels came number one, though Mostade of Solre sur Sambre and De Coninck of Waterloo were also mentioned.

Best Retailer

Food retailers account for some two thirds of the wine sales in Belgium. In decreasing order of volume are Delhaize, which has a strong wine image that dates back to its foundation, Colruyt, Carrefour, Mestdagh, Cora and Spar.

Delhaize and Colruyt topped the bill, with exactly the same number of votes, after which came Mestdagh, Spar and Carrefour. Rob, a one store trade name, was also mentioned. While it's difficult to compare a single store with chains that have more than 500 outlets, Rob has an impressive selection of wines, given both the fame of the products it carries (great names usually found on top restaurants' lists) and also the variety of origins.

Looking just at groups, it is a draw between Delhaize, which has a very extensive range of products, often bottled at its Brussels' facilities, with a clear focus on drinkable, easy-going products, and Colruyt, which is a no-frills discounter with a very good selection of Bordeaux, but also very competitively priced products from lesser-known regions.

Both are making great efforts to communicate what they call 'the passion for wine' - a real passion, if measured by the competence of their buyers. Both offer mail order and Internet order systems, which allow customers to choose from a larger

BEST SOMMELIER*Andy de Brouwer of Les Eleveurs*

Considered a very keen and competent sommelier with a keen eye for new discoveries, de Brouwer was named Best Sommelier for the Dutch part of Belgium.

**BEST WINE JOURNALIST***Eric Boschman*

Boschmann writes for the major French-speaking newspapers La Dernière Heure and La Libre Belgique and has a television programme on RTBF.



selection of wines than those present in most stores.

Best Wine Restaurant

Here, we received a lot of entries. Some restaurants were praised for the scope of their range, others, on the contrary, for their limited, but very audacious selection. The Best Restaurant for Wine in Flanders is Pazzo. Located in Antwerp, it offers a masterpiece of a selection chosen by William Wouters, who is remarkable for his curiosity and talent for marrying wine and food.

The Best Restaurant for Wine in Wallonie is L'Essentiel in Temploux, for its impeccable choice of classical wines, and the advice of its top sommelier. In third position comes Bart-à-Vins, in Brussels. The Sea Grill in Brussels was also nominated, particularly for its white wine selection.

Best Sommelier

A whole new generation of sommeliers has emerged in Belgium over the last decade, characterised by a greater curiosity for the world of wine (that is to say, for wines outside of France), and eagerness to share their passion with their customers. Not surprisingly, most of the sommeliers mentioned come from this group. The Best Sommelier for Flanders is Andy de Brouwer, from Les Eleveurs in Halle. Andy is a very competent young man with a keen eye for new discoveries. For the French speaking part, Daniel Marcil of Chez Marie came first. Marcil is a Quebecker, living in Belgium for some 25 years, completely integrated, but not afraid of suggesting New World wines to his Belgian or foreign clients, who may come here from afar. Plus Marcil recently had a feature written about him in the Wall Street Journal!

Five others were also cited: Julien Gionatti, from the Hilton Bruxelles; Xavier Faber, who represented Belgium in the last World Sommelier Championship; William Wouters from Pazzo; Aristide Spies; and Maxim de Muynck.

Best Wine Buyer

There were many entries in this category, including Jean-Michel Jaeger from Mestdagh, Freddy Steens and Eric Van Rysselberghe from Colruyt, Frank van den Bogaert from Fourcroy (ISPC), as well as Alain Pardoms and Stephan Wouters from Delhaize.

But the winner is not a retail chain buyer, but an agent: Mark Schiettekat of Mafribel (Winco). This Flemish entrepreneur started his business with Bordeaux wines in the 1980s, but soon became an authority on many regions of France and then the whole world.

As well as his agency, he has developed his own brands of wine with partner Paul Taks. More than a buyer, he is a wine creator.

Best Wine Journalist

There are no more than 20 Belgian wine journalists in total, and an even smaller number making a living from it. Of course, there are also sommeliers, oenologists and chefs writing about wine, as well as gifted amateurs. But when it comes to real journalism, the group is limited, and newcomers are scarce, so the decision was unanimous. The Best Wine Journalist in the French speaking part of Belgium is Eric Boschman.

Boschmann is a sommelier by trade, who has represented Belgium at world competitions and who now writes for the major French-speaking newspapers La Dernière Heure and La Libre Belgique. He also has a television programme

about food and wine on RTBF and is very talented at popularising his extensive wine knowledge.

The Best Wine Journalist in the Dutch speaking region is Herwig van Hove from Knack. Van Hove is a scientist by trade, who began writing about wine and food in 1978. He still has a cooking show in Flemish on television.

Best Wine Publication

Because of the overlap of French magazines, not just in the South, the two languages and the competition of Belgian newspapers with wine pages, it is not easy for wine magazines to thrive in Belgium. There are only two real contenders in this game: Vino Magazine and In Vino Veritas, with the first being more business oriented, and the second a consumer magazine. Respondents named In Vino Veritas as Belgium's best wine publication.

Also cited was Ambiance Culinaire, a gourmet magazine with interesting wine pages.

Best Promotional Body

The winner, Vinopres, is the publisher of Vino Magazine, as well as a PR organisation representing many regions in Belgium, who organise events, press trips, tastings and so on. Vinopres is also behind Belgium's largest wine show: Megavino. As one respondent put it, "Vinopres - who else?"

Most Influential Wine Person

In the French speaking region, the winner is Eric Boschman, already named as Best Wine Journalist.

In the Dutch speaking region, the winner is the retailer Delhaize, whose communication about wine has always been influential. ■