

Beverage®



By ABIGAIL INGALLS

For winemakers, sourcing grapes from outside a vineyard estate is nothing new. Yellow Tail does it. So do Louis Jadot and Verget. But

creating a line of limited-production wines from all over the world, crafted by a diverse group of renowned wine-makers, bottled at the source and then distributed under one label? Well, that's certainly a new one but that's exactly what the concept of the very young but highly acclaimed line of Oriel wines is all about.

Company founder John Hunt launched the Oriel line two years ago. While John always nurtured a personal interest in, and enthusiasm for, fine wine, his entrepreneurial experience has been otherwise focused until now. He studied economics at London University and then worked for Procter and Gamble. After that, he developed a chain of coffee shops, a software company, and an e-business consultancy. Oriel is his first serious venture into the wine industry. Likewise, Kelly Ford, the company's managing director, developed her business savvy in the world of software, and, while enthusiastic about wine, was most attracted to the Oriel business model. She describes John as a "serial entrepreneur" and appreciates the "crooked path" which led him to develop this idea. John's aim was to create high quality, small-production wines, and make them affordable and approachable. This has been possible by keeping all the wines - 27 to date - under one label and overhead. The fact that neither John nor Kelly had specific experience in wine sales and distribution certainly hasn't hindered their efforts. In fact, it may just be that not having any preconceived notions, combined with their unwavering belief in their concept, is precisely how the vision came to fruition. Kelly stresses the ground-breaking nature of the company when she notes that Oriel is, all at once, a producer, an importer and, because the wines are available for sale through their website, a retailer.

THE RESULTS ARE IN The Oriel business model may be an original one but what about the wines? Vincent Monaco, the corporate wine director for Kappy's Fine Wine and Spirits, learned about Oriel wines at a meeting of the Wine and Spirits Guild of America. John Hunt attended the meeting and introduced the product line. Vincent was impressed by the concept of Oriel and eager to see if the wines were as interesting as the idea. They were. Vincent describes the Oriel line as "absolutely tremendous - the proof is in the pudding." After sampling the wine, he immediately contacted John and brought Oriel wines into Kappy's. When asked his favorites in the portfolio, Vincent said he was impressed by all of the wines, and he cited the "Courant" (Cotes du Rhone), the "Sygnet" (Aussie Shiraz) and the "Femme Fatale" (Rose Merlot) as his personal picks. Errol Joseph, of Tosca restaurant in Hingham, is also a supporter of Oriel wines. He comments, "To some, the concept may at first seem gimmicky. But once you taste the wines, you quickly realize the quality is there." MSNBC Today agrees, asking, "Would the quality of the wines themselves match the marketing concept? The answer...is yes." Indeed, Oriel wines have received serious acclaim from national publications in their first two years of circulation. Robert Parker awarded 90 to 93 points to Oriel's 2002 Bordeaux, "L'Exception". wine spectator gave "Etero", a Barolo, 91 points. And playboy cheered "Jasper", a Pinot Noir, with three and a half bunnies!

HAND CRAFTED As Oriel line of wines continues to grow, the emphasis on small production and expert winemaking remains constant. The selected winemakers are given complete control, and they craft wines that best exemplify the style and terroir of their

respective regions. These winemakers come with impressive credentials. For example, Louis Barruol, responsible for Oriel's three Rhone selections, comes from a long history of wine crafting: his family has been involved with the Chateau de Saint Cosme vineyard since 1490. Gerry Rowland, maker of Oriel's Rutherford Cabernet, "Midnight Rambler", was born and raised in Australia, and it was there where he started making wine. He then moved to California for further study at UC Davis and has made wine for Stags Leap and Chappellet. John Duval, creator of Oriel's sole Australian selection, "Sygnet" Shiraz, worked at Penfolds for 29 years and was the Chief Winemaker for 17 of those years. In total, the company has over two dozen world-class winemakers it works with.

Kelly Ford explains that the only way the company can grow is by adding new wines and new regions because they will never mass-produce the wines and risk compromising quality. While none of the releases exceed 3000 cases, most of the wines are at around 500 cases. New additions to the portfolio are a Barbara d'Alba, called "Trifola", and a 2005 Bordeaux, "Iconic". Oriel is also looking to release a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc as well as an Italian Prosecco in the coming year.

ON THE MARKET The first year of production involved concentrated test marketing. Oriel has not launched any national print or television advertisements. Publicist Katherine Jarvis explains that, "It's PR, lots of in-store support and events with retailers, keen focus on effectively merchandising the range with restaurant features and centralized retail displays, direct marketing/communication to trade and consumers." Currently Oriel wines are available in 13 states and they only recently expanded to Massachusetts in 2006 - carried by both restaurants and retail stores throughout the state. Oriel works closely with Kappy's. Vincent Monaco explains that in Kappy's retail outlets, the wines are interspersed by region with all the others, but there is also a large display as well. A potential buyer might be drawn to the display in which there are laminated fact sheets about each wine and bios on the individual winemakers. Kappy's also hosts tastings at all of their retail venues to promote the wines. During the month of October, Kappy's ran a promotion called "Zin Fest", featuring quality domestic Red Zinfandels. Vincent remarks that "Hugo", an Oriel selection included in the promotion, sold exceptionally well. It is also important to note that, in addition to being a large retail chain, Kappy's is a distributor. Vincent remarks that Oriel has also been very successful from a distributor perspective.

Keith Mills, owner of Esprit du Vin in Milton, loves the wines themselves, but has mixed feelings about the branding. His wine shop is organized by region, and Oriel wines are merchandised as such - never in a large display. He describes all the wines as solid and well made, but wishes there was more variety in the labels so as to better express the uniqueness of each wine. As for restaurants, Tosca's initial interest in the Oriel line is a prime example of the success of their hands-on marketing process. Errol describes his introduction to Oriel saying, "The wines were presented to me during the summer of 2005 by the local distributor, Baystate Wine Company. Baystate was a brand new company at the time, and Oriel was just entering the market. I had not previously heard of Oriel, but I immediately found

the concept to be amazing. There are many collaborations in the wine world involving wineries from different countries, but I had yet to hear about wines from so many regions being produced under one brand name. It was right then and there that I told Rob Gillooly of Baystate Wine Company that we needed to get the founder of Oriel, John Hunt, to Tosca as soon as possible for a wine dinner." The wine dinner was a success, and afterward Tosca continued to feature Oriel selections on their list. At present, Tosca serves the "Portia" Italian white blend, the "Etereo" Barolo, and the "Palio" Montepulciano d'Abruzzo.

Although, so far, Oriel wines are more readily found off-premise, Kelly actually is seeing an increasing amount of restaurants, among which are Sotheby's Cafe in New York and 510 Ocean in Miami, switching to Oriel-only lists. She notes that Oriel wine lists are convenient particularly for restaurants without a full-time wine director.

BREAKING IT DOWN One can spend hours learning to decipher wine labels from around the world. Sure, it's pretty simple in America: Cabernet is Cabernet, and Riesling is Riesling. But what about old world labels? Not everyone knows that Cahors is Malbec or even that red Burgundy is Pinot Noir. It's even trickier in Italy! Pinot Grigio is a grape, but Barolo is a region producing wines made of the Nebbiolo grape. Montepulciano is a region out of which comes the celebrated Brunello (made of Sangiovese) but go a few miles south and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo is a grape unto itself. It's all fine and well if you take the time to study the unique wine-making/classifications of each wine producing region in the world, but what if you don't have the time or the interest and just want to drink a good bottle of wine? Oriel's labeling is clear and succinct - it identifies exactly where the wine comes from, how it was made and who the winemaker is. And incidentally, by eliminating much of the guesswork, Oriel's unique approach to production encourages experimentation on the part of the consumer. Errol Joseph at Tosca believes that, "To appreciate the Oriel concept, you need to be willing to try different varietals from different countries. For example, if you tend to always drink California Chardonnay, you need to be willing to sway from that and try the Oriel Pinot Grigio / Chardonnay blend from Italy, the Albarino from Spain, or the Riesling from Germany. This is the only way to appreciate the diversity. The same can be said for red wines." Keith, from Esprit du Vin, agrees, "That is the good thing about branding." He also observes that one Oriel wine usually leads to another. Kelly Ford explains that people might try a California selection first and then branch out into less familiar territory. In this way, Oriel wines initiate a learning process. People come to trust the label and are more likely to venture out of their comfort zones.

Oriel wines may be a young enterprise but the concept seems to be catching on quickly. As they continue to expand their offerings - and as more prominent winemakers begin to seek them out to participate in this endeavor - it is clear that this is not a flash-in-the-pan fad.

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