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A Spotlight on Wine Packaging and New Brands

The founders of R.H. Phillips are back in the game, launching four small-production brands; Oriel Wines offers affordable wines by esteemed winemakers.

NATIONAL LAUNCH OF ORIEL WINES

John Hunt, founder of **Oriel Wines**, is seeking to turn the premium wine business on its head by creating one international brand comprised of limited production wines from top winemakers from around the world.

"Wine is a complicated category, and we don't feel it needs to be that way. We want to introduce a broader audience to great wine from all over the world," said Hunt. Oriel currently offers 27 wines from 24 appellations in eight countries.

Hunt has commissioned some of the most esteemed winemakers in the world, including **Philippe Melka** (consulting winemaker for cult winery **Bryant Family**), **Alain Raynaud** (winemaker for small-production wines in Bordeaux as well as consultant to **Colgin**) and **John Duval** (winemaker for **Penfold's** Grange for over 25 years) to make wines under the Oriel banner.

"We don't choose wines, we choose winemakers we believe in and offer them an opportunity to make a wine that *they* believe in," said Hunt. "We don't use flying winemakers. We look for local expertise and demonstrated success in a region. We are now fortunate enough to have top winemakers approach us and ask if they can make something for us. I think it is safe to say we have the best team of winemakers on the planet. We certainly have the broadest, with over two-dozen winemakers from all over the world."

Hunt feels winemakers are attracted to the brand because of the freedom and recognition they get in crafting their wines. Each bottling indicates the regional origin of the wine, the vineyard location (with longitude and latitude coordinates), grape varieties and the respective winemaker's signature on the bottle.

"For winemakers it's a terrific opportunity," said Hunt. "Because we have small lots, if a winemaker favors a particular vineyard or even a patch of a vineyard, our production is small enough that we can maintain the integrity of that vineyard or even that patch. The winemakers can create the wines they want to create. It's rare that winemakers get that freedom and rare that they get the recognition they do with our wines."

Currently, the largest production of any one of the Oriel wines is less than 3,000 cases, most hovering around the 500-case mark. The small quantities are by design. "We believe great wine is one that has a sense of place. After a certain volume, it becomes very hard to maintain that sense of place," said Hunt. "We can never imagine making a wine that's 100,000 cases or a million cases because you can't possibly make a wine with a sense of place at that volume."

Hunt said that no label would be expected to grow beyond 20,000 cases, at the most. But even at small quantities, with 27 different wines, Oriel will produce a significant amount of wine. "We can still be a very meaningful brand, but we don't ever have to lose what it is that makes great wine," said Hunt.

Hunt indicated that while an individual winemaker or winery would not be able to produce such small quantities of high-class wines at such prices, his business model offers economy of scale. Most of the wines retail between $15 and $25, though some will carry a higher price point.

"If you only make a small quantity of wine, you have to bear all of the overhead, so you end up with a very expensive wine," said Hunt. "We share the overhead with dozens of other limited-production wines. It works for the sommelier and retailer just as much the consumer. It allows them to deliver a great wine of great value to their customer."

While the brand was initially launched in 2005, Hunt is now taking the wines to more markets throughout the U.S. The wines launched in New York and California, then expanded to Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Jersey. The company is now beginning to add Florida, Illinois and Texas to their distribution chain as well as a few other select markets.

Because each vintage is tasted by a panel before it's accepted into the portfolio, Hunt feels he can offer a somewhat unusual guarantee: "We have the luxury of being able to pass up a weak vintage. What's totally unique is that we can make a promise to the trade that we are only going to deliver great wines to their customers."

Hunt said the company is targeting "wine ambassadors who believe in our concept." The distribution is about equally split between on-premise in restaurants and hotels and off-premise, usually in independent wine shops. Oriel is especially interested in retailers, restaurateurs and hoteliers that are willing to devote significant space to the brand, such as a page on a wine list or a dedicated section on a retailer's shelves. Typically, restaurants carry three or four Oriel wines while retailers usually offer about seven.

Hunt feels the brand has so far been extremely successful in attracting retail attention. "When we started out, people said we were mad, that we'd never be able to get a retailer to take more than one or two SKUs at once, that we'd never be able to get a restaurant to put so many wines on their list," he said. "But people are getting it and latching onto the wines."