

Wine

A toast to Liberty Wines' David Gleave

'He does not play the high volume game. All of his producers create seriously interesting wine'

Jancis Robinson



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18 MINUTES AGO by: Jancis Robinson

If you were to poll the British wine trade as to its most popular member, chances are it would be a 60-year-old Canadian with an apparently indefatigable sense of humour, a fine appetite for both good food and good gossip, and an eye permanently on his phone — to judge from the speed with which he answers emails, even though for almost half the year he is abroad in vine-growing parts of the world.

Others may be admired for various specific qualities but David Gleave, founder of Liberty Wines, is a successful all-rounder who does not throw his weight around, is unfailingly polite and knows when to keep his mouth shut. This year his company celebrates its 20th anniversary. In 1997 it had four employees. Today it has more than 140 and turned over nearly £54m in the last financial year.

Some of their peers notch up higher turnover but, with a few exceptions, Liberty does not play the high-volume, tiny-reward game of supplying supermarkets. All of its 330 producers in 21 countries produce seriously interesting wine. Furthermore, years before other companies, Gleave saw the growth potential of restaurants and bars, and the mushrooming of small, independent wine retailers.

Liberty has assiduously courted all of them, particularly London's swarm of young, often foreign sommeliers. The crowd at Liberty's recent anniversary tasting in the Oxo Tower was much younger, less British and less conventional than the typical customers of the traditional wine trade.

I first came across Gleave in 1986 when he worked in our local deli in north London as he was studying for his Master of Wine exams. He never meant to end up in the UK. The plan was to drop out of his university course in Vancouver to travel around Europe for a year but he was diverted by the contents of the cellar while working in a gay bar in Dublin in the early 1980s.

Gleave's mentor in the London wine trade was Nicolas Belfrage MW, an American who patiently explained Italian wine to us all in the 1980s. This has left Gleave as one of the UK's greatest experts on Italian wine and, inter alia, one of the best friends of the team at London's [River Café](#), including the now famous chef Jamie Oliver.

By the mid-1990s he was deputy managing director to one of the leading lights of the old-school Italian wine trade in Britain, Remo Nardone, emperor of Enotria Winecellars. This was not a natural fit for the

forward-looking Gleave, whose choice of name for his own new company was not incidental.

The anniversary tasting arranged producers' tables chronologically according to the year they joined the Liberty portfolio. Of the 14 originals, 11 were Italian, one Australian, one from New Zealand and one French (Domaine Richaud of Cairanne, thanks to an introduction from Tim Johnston of Juveniles wine bar in Paris).

Gleave's other great area of enthusiasm and expertise is Australia — and with it a predilection for [screwcaps](#). Over the years he has been directly involved in winemaking, not just in Italy but in both [Australia and New Zealand](#). One of his earliest backers was Michael Hill Smith MW of Shaw + Smith, one of Australia's most prominent independent wine producers.

Jeffrey Grosset, of the Clare Valley, is Australia's [king of Riesling](#) and exports to more than 20 distributors around the world, including Liberty. What impresses him particularly about Gleave is that "he's a visionary (a bigger picture guy), innovative, even-tempered (as far as I know!), hard-working and has great wine knowledge".

It's true that Gleave has always understood what's happening in the wider wine world, presumably helped by his association with John Ratcliffe, a former Oddbins executive who now seems to be involved in just about every significant merger and acquisition in the wine business, and who has been a minor shareholder in Liberty since 2011.

It was typical of Gleave that he prefaced the anniversary tasting with a presentation on the (less than buoyant) state of the UK wine trade. Wine sales have fallen, with Prosecco a rare bright light. Those of us aged over 60 are still doing our bit but youngsters are drinking notably less — not least because a phone rather than a bar is all they need to socialise.

Presumably because of Gleave's eye on the future, the substantial Portuguese family-owned company Sogrape, built on Mateus rosé but now with a portfolio of interesting brands, took a 25 per cent stake in Liberty earlier this year.

Mark Shannon of A Mano, an outfit that basically put ambitious Puglian wines on the map internationally, told me how he came to sign up with Gleave way back in 1999. "We met up in a pub and he just seemed to know what was going on everywhere in the wine business. He is seriously smart — and he's a very good people person. He hires very good people and lets them do their own thing. They stay."

One employee who was called away by motherhood is Francesca De Paolis, daughter of a prominent fine-wine adviser. For her, "David's incredible knowledge and passion about every single wine in the portfolio is so deep and true that it inspires every member of staff to learn more every day."

But she also acknowledges the key role played by Luciann Flynn, Gleave's wife, mother of three of his four sons and Liberty's communications director. "She is the one who pulls it all together. Firm, yet warm, supportive and encouraging, she is the maternal figure at Liberty." Flynn was also personally responsible for the witty custom-built premises in Clapham that replaced Liberty's old dungeon-like base in New Covent Garden Market (the fact that anyone stayed working for them there is perhaps sufficient testament to their qualities as employers).

Flynn is a runner, Gleave now a devoted cyclist whose exertions presumably justify the time he spends at various well-laden tables. His trips around Italy with handpicked groups of his 2,500 customers are legendary — particularly those to Piedmont in the truffle season.

Flynn frets that he is far too generous to his customers but he must be doing something right.

Some fine Italians at Liberty Wines

To celebrate its 20th anniversary, Liberty invited about 120 producers to show two wines apiece, one classic and one potential future classic.

I restricted myself to the Italians, the core of the company's portfolio. Although I concentrated on those wines not already tasted for my website, the crowd was too great to do them all justice. These were my top scorers, with Liberty's recommended retail price per bottle.

Whites

- Bellavista, Satèn Brut 2011 Franciacorta £48
- Cà dei Frati, I Frati 2016 Lugana £19
- Franz Haas, Manna Schweizer 2015 IGT Vigneti delle Dolomiti £28
- Pieropan, La Rocca Classico 2015 Soave £29
- Specogna, Ramato Pinot Grigio 2016 Friuli Colli Orientali £18

Reds

- Allegrini, Classico 2013 Amarone della Valpolicella £65
- A Mano, Imprint Appassito Primitivo 2015 IGT Puglia £15
- Capezzana, Villa di Capezzana 2013 Carmignano £24
- Capezzana, Ugo Contini Bonacossi 2013 Carmignano £55
- Petrolo, Bògginanfora 2015 Val d'Arno di Sopra £68
- Poggio al Tesoro, Sondraia Superiore 2013 Bolgheri £37
- Bruno Rocca, Rabajà 2014 Barbaresco £90
- Selvapiana, Bucerchiale Riserva 2013 Chianti Rufina £26
- Selvapiana 2013 Pomino £18
- GD Vajra, Coste & Fossati 2015 Dolcetto d'Alba £20

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