

The relationship between rugby and wine

EP TALKS TO SIMON HALLIDAY TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS UNIQUE BUSINESS

Simon Halliday and Chris Mariner created the Sporting Wine Club to provide wines produced by sportspeople around the world with every bottle having a great story behind it

Simon Halliday is famed as a former England international rugby player who played for both Bath and Harlequins at the highest levels. At the same time he also worked in investment banking and the financial world. He is a strong believer that sporting values can play strong roles in business and has taken skills from both backgrounds to create the Sporting Wine Club.

“The concept of the Sporting Wine Club is to source wines from sporting wine makers,” Simon explains. “Schalk Burger, who played for the Springboks, produces wonderful wine just north of the cape in South Africa. In the wine lands of Wellington the passionate Burger family have been creating their wines for some time. We developed the club to provide bottles, such as these, for people to enjoy. There are many from the sporting world doing this. Golfer Luke Donald has a collection of wines, as does AB De Villiers, one of the world’s best-known cricketers. We aim that all the wines we provide come with a story, and as long as they are good, we can make sure we identify sport with wine.”

Simon thanks his position as Chairman of European Rugby for allowing him to visit

all sorts of interesting venues and form connections all over the world. “It is interesting that most rugby playing nations are wine producers. There are not that many in the UK, although we obviously know about English sparkling wine, but there is a Welsh wine and the most Irish wine is probably the black stuff more than anything else,” he jokes.

On a more serious note Simon is clearly passionate about what he does and explains why he has started something that others have not attempted before. “As an

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ex-international I’ve had my fair share of injuries and when a player stops playing sport it is a challenge for the next leg of their life. It isn’t just rugby, it can be any sport. We therefore want to help support the players who have gone into the wine world. I was lucky enough to be a part of the 1991 World Cup final and also won back-to-back Grand Slams so I was obviously delighted to see England win it again this year. In those days

it was an amateur game and we played more in our spare time so I was able to work in financial markets at the same time.”

It is this experience that has helped Simon form the club and is keen to explain how there is overlap between business and sport. “They are the same because the power of sport fits with so many business parts and ultimate success usually starts with a certain amount of failure. Most sporting people will tell you their biggest moment of clarity was when they were injured or dropped or didn’t go to the Olympics. But they didn’t turn

around and give up. There are values that all sports people identify with because this is the environment they operate in. The business world has similar values to this and so they do cross over each other.

For us it’s about the story, it’s about the experience and it’s about the dynamics. We want to have better experiences and have fun because we are bringing the business of sport, the business of wine and people all together.”

Simon has a strong motivation to raise awareness of charities with the Sporting Wine Club. He explains that while the business is obviously commercially set up



they do also pass over funds from wine sales to charity, sporting or otherwise. “For example, over the last seven or eight years I’ve been a working as a patron for ‘Help for Heroes’. In the past I’ve helped create two big rugby matches at Twickenham and we’ve held a sell-out cricket match at the Kia Oval. Some of the world’s best players played for nothing to help raise awareness of the challenges wounded soldiers face – not just rehab but for the times ahead. These ‘big-name’ days out really brought home to everyone why we were all there.”

“Alongside this charity ambition we also have two further aims for the club. Firstly we want to provide wine for guests at wine tasting evening and sporting or charity events. Not as a sommelier type of approach but more marketing wines that are excellent. We want people to enjoy themselves with boutique, bespoke choices. We are supplying the upcoming BT Sports Industry Awards so we want to make sure everyone has a great evening enjoying a good wine with a sporting story. Finally the club includes membership, which we are constructing at the moment. We want our members to understand the value of business, sport and wine together. It is not a fee but a wine credit – membership ranges between Gold, Silver and Bronze – with the top providing access to visit vineyards who in turn love to welcome guests and share their stories.”

Simon appreciates it can be difficult to enter the hospitality industry with their concept because he has been both a consumer and an organiser. “I remember vividly a Help for Heroes event just after Fusilier Lee Rigby was killed – we all remember that terrible time. Some of the best players in the world were attending the event, which was held in a marquee at the Tower of London – a wonderfully iconic setting in the moat – and I wanted to supply wines from a friend of ours who would donate the money to the charity. The venue was reluctant because wines came in their package; it was part of the commodity. But I knew that if we provided an alternative wine it would benefit the charity and provide a great experience because of its stories. We have all been to events where we’ve said ‘oh I’m not sure about that wine.’ I believe the



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hospitality industry can add a bit more value in the wine area. People are prepared to pay a little more to have a quality bottle especially if it is produced by a sporting great. A Schalk Burger wine can provide the talking point, as opposed to an unknown Spanish something. By embracing this it can add a bit extra to the proposition.”

On whether the bottles could work in the retail market, Simon explains an interesting encounter with a top position in supermarket Sainsbury’s. “They said their set-up was really simple: 200 million bottles at £5 per bottle. I couldn’t believe it.” Simon says, still clearly in slight shock from the conversation. “Duty is already at £2.05 per bottle so unless you bring out a massive slug of wine, it just isn’t possible for small

producers to enter this market or if they do they won’t make any money.”

Being nimble in a competitive market is how Simon explains how the wine club will work going forward. He accepts they will not compete for mass commodity orders and hopes that smaller events, across the whole hospitality industry, are the most effective route. He wants to create spectacular occasions and believes people love the association with sporting players and their wine. He wants to share sporting experiences, bring insight into life through various bottles and showcase the great stories for guests to take delight in.

Sporting Wine Club is at the beginning of a long journey of its own and would like to thank *EP* for all its support.