



A young Kevin McAlindon

Wine route to success

The pioneering spirit which gave birth to a family-run drinks business in the 1950s is still very much alive in the McAlindon brothers who lead it today, says **Amanda Ferguson**

DIRECT Wine Shipments is Belfast's oldest independent wine merchant. Run by trailblazing brothers Neal and Peter McAlindon, the business was started in 1954 by the brothers' grandfather, Edward.

Direct Wine Shipments moved from Duncairn Gardens to its current location at Corporation Square in 1979. The business incorporates retail and trade sales, and it supplies restaurants and independent wine shops.

"Our dad, Kevin, one of the

middle of a big family of eight, ended up staying in the business until he retired in 2001," says Peter, (49). "His older brother ended up in the Foreign Office and travelled widely. He got into wine and he got dad into wine.

"The first linkage with wine was bringing in Italian wine to sell to the Italian families who had ice-cream shops and cafés.

"Our uncle Dennis spoke Italian, which they loved, so that created a good connection.

"The area dad pursued was with Queen's University, because in those days you had

a lot of lecturers who were not from Northern Ireland and they drank wine.

"In those days people here drank spirits, beer and fortified wine, so a fledgling wine business started and in 1962 they set up a room above the shop which was called The Continental Wine Room. It had a display of wines from around the world — quite remarkable in those days."

The wine was and is bought from family-owned small to medium-sized wineries to avoid the big-brand mass-producers.

Neal, (44), said: "I could have

chosen a life in academia but I got enthralled by wine.

"I realised the world of wine is not just about this drink made from grapes — it is about history, culture, geography, people and food.

"There is an outdated view in Britain and Ireland that wine is the preserve of the upper or middle class but in the European continent it is for everybody. It is a very democratic drink.

"We want to get really good-quality wine, drunk by the ordinary people of Barcelona, Tuscany, Bordeaux, Lisbon —

that is what our ethos is. That led to the whole idea of anti-globalisation — wines which are produced by small, family-run businesses, so the guy who has his name on the bottle was also in the vineyards pruning the vines and washing out the bottles. It is an artistic creation. It is part of their heart."

Direct Wine Shipments was among the first to educate staff through London's Wine and Spirit Education Trust and has run wine-tasting events and wine courses since the 1980s.

Wine education became the focus for the specialist business, finding interesting growers early on, such as Torres, Hugo, and Brown Brothers.

Research, development and finding the best growers is the McAlindon brothers' passion, which has led to the business winning a series of awards. In 1999 and 2001 it was voted the best Spanish retailer in the UK by Wines of Spain and the Which? Wine Guide and was recently voted the International Wine & Spirit Competition's best independent retailer in the UK.

In 2003 the McAlindons' dream of buying their own vineyards in Spain to make their



Located in Corporation Square, Direct Wine Shipments, which was started in 1954, is today run by brother Neal and Peter McAlindon, pictured below

own wine, Creu Celta, became a reality. The brothers sold their wholesale wine business a decade ago and started a new one in 2007.

McAlindon Wines now accounts for 70% of the business turnover. Its 15 staff work with restaurants across Northern Ireland, including James St South, Mourne Seafood, Home, Le Coop, 4th Wall, Titanic Belfast, the Lyric Theatre, Harry's in Cushendall, Browns in Derry and Roe Valley in Limavady. The company has experienced year-on-year growth over the past five years.

Wine consumers have never been better informed, with the growth in popularity across the UK and Ireland in part down to wine production within the New World, simple labelling, supermarkets making it more accessible and the increase in air travel.

Peter said: "We have always wanted to be the shop that can serve the post-man who



comes round from Tomb Street or the Lord Chief Justice, and we do.

"So anyone who walks in, we will look after well, whether it is one bottle or 10 cases. The [price] range is dramatic, from £6 to £400 a bottle.

"We introduce people to things they may not have tried before, to up and coming regions and producers. Our job is to always be one step ahead of the market."

The brothers believe the success of Direct Wine Shipments is down to the "really good people" they have worked with over the years. "Peter Gilfedder, who has been with us for 50 years, for one," Peter said. "There was also dad's contribution for so many years, then the hard-working team we have

who are real wine enthusiasts. We have lots of fun, good craic and banter about football, rugby and wine."

As for the future, he said: "We will grow the company in a way that's manageable and enjoyable."



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