

# BUSINESS

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**MONTH**

A photograph of two men in suits standing in a wine cellar. The man on the right is holding a large bunch of red grapes high in the air, and both men are smiling and looking at each other. The background is filled with wooden wine crates, some of which have labels like 'FLORESTA' and 'ALION'.

## A NOSE FOR SUCCESS

From small Belfast off-licence to their own vineyards in Spain - the McAlindon brothers have a good sense for business

**PLUS:** How solid are the foundations of our property market? See Pages 32-34

# A VINE IDEA

The McAlindon brothers tell **Rebecca Kincade** how an off-licence established by their grandfather in 1954 has matured to realise a longstanding family dream

**O**NE tends not to leave an off-licence in need of a stiff drink, and yet after an afternoon with the McAlindon brothers, Peter and Neal, at their Direct Wine Shipments retail warehouse, I admit I felt a slight urge. In the space of a few short hours, both directors had passionately and enthusiastically covered more topics than is possible for a human brain to keep up with. From the philosophical to the political, historical to the musical, they would, at times, talk over each other to hammer home the same point, before moments later correcting each other in a way that only family members can get away with.

When Edward McAlindon opened his off-licence in 1954, it was to forge his own step up in the world and to provide for his family of eight children. Three generations later his company has developed into a dynamic, independent wine merchant, known for their award-winning high-quality wines. Yet this growth has not taken place without some challenging times, times which Peter McAlindon said has made them even more focused, or “borderline obsessed”, on driving the company forwards.

“We have learned that as an independent company no one is going to help you. You have to work for your own survival and you have to adapt quickly when situations change. In 1975 the Troubles forced our father to abandon the original shop in north Belfast and we then had to pay to have it knocked down. Our own progress was heavily disrupted when Northern Ireland Water closed the main road outside our off-licence for three years in February 2007, forcing passing trade away and causing our sales to drop around 20% each year.”

Their iconic building in Corporation Square has since regained its passing trade and this turnaround in fortunes has been bolstered by the success of

## Vintage years for the McAlindons

**1954:** Edward McAlindon opened an off-licence in Duncairn Gardens.

**1979:** Direct Wine Shipments relocated to their iconic warehouse in Corporation Square.

**1983:** Kevin McAlindon became one of the first people in Northern Ireland to attain the Wine & Spirit Education Trust Diploma. This was the start of a trend to educate all Direct Wines Shipments sales staff to diploma level.

**1996:** The Spanish government acknowledged Kevin McAlindon's efforts to promote Spanish wine and culture for almost 40 years when he was accepted into the prestigious Gran Orden de Caballeros del Vino.

**2003:** The McAlindon family purchased their first vineyard in north-eastern Spain and started to produce their own wine, Creu Celta, which they export all over the world.



Peter and Neal's decision to re-enter the trade and wholesale side under the name McAlindon Wines. Neal believes that this was an important part of expressing their company philosophy to clients and McAlindon Wines now makes up 50% of their business.

“We wanted to highlight to our customers that we aren't like the larger companies, in that we are family-run, slightly quirkier with our offering and often share the same mentality as the restaurants and vineyards we work with. In the wine business, most families will have worked from generation to generation to create products which are an artistic expression of their background and we feel that by using our family name we are showing that we share this philosophy within our own company.”

When dealing with the restaurant trade again, the McAlindon brothers have spent a lot of their time listening to what exactly was required from their wines and what margins their clients would work with. By taking everything they learned on board they feel that they offer quality, bespoke and specialist wines at competitive prices. Their trade service is additionally backed up with the support of ongoing staff training days, which both men believe help to establish good relationships with their clients.

Neal said: “It feels like we have got it right at the moment. With the recession our buyers were trading down so we have had to source fine wines for restaurants around the £12-£20 mark, and retail wines at £6-£9. As a small company, we can change our model and products quickly to suit demand.”

In 2003 the McAlindon family realised a lifelong dream with the purchase of their own vineyard in the mountainous areas of north-eastern Spain. Peter and Neal's father Kevin spends much of his time at the vineyard, overseeing the



Peter and Neal McAlindon, who have worked together since 1992, say that 99% of the time they can avoid sibling squabbles

production of their own award-winning wine Creu Celta. They are the only wine merchant in Ireland to produce their own wine and both Neal and Peter visit Spain regularly to work on the blend for the 3,500 bottles they produce annually.

The McAlindon brothers have worked together since 1992 and admit that 99% of the time they can avoid sibling squabbles. It was easy to see during our conversation that both men have strong personalities, enthusiastic ideas and a need for them to be heard but each recognises in the other qualities missing in themselves.

Neal is credited with a detail-orientated approach while Peter prefers a broad stroke viewpoint.

They continue to socialise outside of work together and in the coming months they are taking a step back to more musical days when they reform a punk band they had in the 1980s for a charity gig in the Pavilion bar. While both say this is the beginning of their "mid-life crisis", supporting causes which are close to the hearts of their whole family is something which has been a running theme throughout their lives.



"In a family business you really do feel like it is us against the world." Neal went on to say. "We are all so passionate about what we do and we believe that we have been brought up to be proper wine people. We understand how wine should be."

While our conversation moved

rapidly, everything that was said by both Peter and Neal demonstrated a vast knowledge of their company, their extensive range of products and the direction and business model they intend to follow.

There is a noticeable determination in both men which has

come from their struggles during tougher times, when valuable lessons were picked up and carried forward.

As opportunities arise, this company will adapt to fight for them. History has taught them that this is the only way to succeed.

## What do you look for when choosing a conference venue?

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