

IN VINE FORM

McAlindon Wines and Direct Wine Shipments are one of the most respected wine distributors in Northern Ireland. LCN spoke with Neal and Peter McAlindon to find out the secret to their success.

DUNCAIRN WINES LTD

Edward McAlindon started Duncairn Wines Ltd in 1954. Originally a pub manager, Edward opened up his first wine shop where he sold his own spirits and bottled his own Guinness. Unfortunately Mr McAlindon passed away a few years after opening his shop and his son Kevin took over the family off sales, then based in Duncairn Gardens.

Whilst Kevin remained in the family business, educating himself on the vast world of wine, Kevin's brother Dennis, who had travelled extensively with the Foreign Office, became an expert on European wines and passed his knowledge onto his younger brother. Soon a little wine shop on Duncairn Gardens in the 60s was selling the best European wines they could find, all sold from their 'wine showroom' which was better known as "The Continental Wine Room".

During the 1960s and 1970s Kevin, was then joined by his brother Ciaran, and Peter Giffender who has now been with the company for over 40 years. These were the days when wine and sherry was bought in by the cask and bottled on site. The off sales housed a bottling line as well as a sterilising line and had the capacity to bottle up to gallon jars. This business grew strong throughout the 60s and continued through until the 80s.

As with many businesses caught in the cross fire of the troubles, Duncairn Wine's location was proving detrimental to its survival. Sandwiched in conflicts between the New Lodge and Tigers Bay the family moved their business to the relative safety of Corporation Square in 1979. Direct Wine Shipments was born - the model was to deal directly with the grower and usually they were family owned businesses.

DIRECT WINE SHIPMENTS

In the mid 80s and early 90s Kevin was joined in the business by his two sons Peter and Neal who later developed the wholesale side of the business.

"Something that sets us aside from the competition is wine education," Peter begins, "Our Dad along with the likes of Denis Broderick and Jane Boyce MW, where the first graduates in Ireland of the two year WSET Diploma. This added an impetus to start our own wine courses, tastings and dinners. Currently we have five staff members at Direct Wine Shipments that hold their diploma.



Kevin McAlindon with sons Peter and Neal

That's a very high ratio for a small company. We have put about a dozen staff members through this exam in the last twenty years. It has become a really important tool for us in developing our business."

The wine courses and tastings are open to both the public and the industry alike. Future events include; an Italian Wine Tasting Night in the new Lyric Theatre hosted by Michael Palij MW, an Italian Wine Dinner at Coco Restaurant, a Bordeaux Wine Dinner at Shu restaurant, a Santa Ana Argentinean Tasting and a Port & Madeira Tasting.

Neal mentions, "In 2003 we became purely a retail business for a while and sold the wholesale business to Woodford Bourne. This allowed us to evolve and



become more of a specialist. During this time we developed our portfolio to incorporate more of the small and medium sized growers.

CREU CELTA

"Another thing that sets us aside from most other businesses in our field is the fact that we have our own vineyard," Says Neal.

"We make a wine called Creu Celta in the Priorat region, North Eastern Spain. Its first release was the 2003 vintage, which was exported to the USA and highly praised by wine experts. "Great big beefy powerhouse reds to warm an Ulsterman's heart in the depths of the Belfast winter. And it's smashing. Well done, lads. Slainte." Oz Clarke

Neal continues, "The current vintage is the 2006 and it was chosen as one of the top 100 Spanish wines imported into the UK at the New Wave Spanish Wine Award 2010! We were delighted with this success considering this was only the third vintage of this small production wine."

MCALINDON WINES

Neal and Peter decided to re-enter the wholesale business and quickly made a name for themselves with McAlindon Wines.

"Our feeling was that, globalisation, mass marketing and standardisation has filled wine shelves and restaurants with too many wines that taste the same. It is self evident that small to medium sized growers who strive to make the best, produce wines with more character. Many of them work both in their vineyards and wineries - some even label their own bottles!"

Thankfully all their hard work paid dividends as Peter explains: "Over the years Neal and I have worked closely with many of the great local restaurants. It was a natural place for us to restart our wholesale business. Often the vineyard, the importer and the restaurant have the same ideals of quality and bespoke production. In these tougher economic circumstances it is even more important to have wines that are not homogenised, but have a story, character and of course quality. Fortunately many have supported us and our selection of



Peter Rossiter

"The biggest thing that sets us aside from the competition is wine education"

new wines have been enthusiastically received."

Having restarted their wholesale business three years ago Neal and Peter are not ones to rest on their laurels and have been constantly researching and updating their extensive portfolio. Earlier this year the team were delighted to be joined by Peter Rossiter, previously of Woodford Bourne. Peter R has joined as Trade Account Manager and has over twenty years in the business.

"Peter is probably one of the most well respected and well liked Trade Managers" declares Neal. "When he decided to move

from Woodford Bourne I know there were four or five other companies interested in employing him. But he sat down with us and really liked what we were doing. We were over the moon when he decided to join us."

Peter Rossiter adds, "When the opportunity arose to return to work with DWS /McAlindon Wines I was absolutely ecstatic. Having worked with them for over six years, I knew of their passion for wine, and that their focus was customer driven. I was very much aware of their expertise and of their fantastic and eclectic wine portfolio.

In the intimate setting of the family business I find that my input is highly valued and that Peter and Neal's response is always prompt and proactive. Our direct communication with the small wineries enables us to respond quickly and efficiently to our expanding customer base.

I am one of the fortunate people that really enjoy my daily work and interaction with our customers, I am privileged to work in the wine industry and have been totally overwhelmed by the support from my peers, independent wine merchants and loyal customers."

McAlindon Wines source their wines from all over the globe and carry an extensive range that is award winning and diverse. Wines that have made an impact recently are Corinto, Villarrica (Chile); Finca La Estacada, El Camino, Entreflores Verdejo, Hazaña (Spain); Cristia, Le Clos, Vallon d'Arche (France); Masi Renzo, Paitin, Tor Del Colle Brindisi Riserva (Italy); Hunter's, Stoneburn, The Jumper, New Zealand; Man Vintners (South Africa); Cranswick Sarus Shiraz, Heritage Cabernet, Tamar Ridge (Australia); Vidigal (Portugal) Bosca, La Linda, Santa Ana, Character (Argentina).

They are also working to further their portfolio in 2012 with plans to extend their coverage to include a number of small growers from the up and coming wine regions of Turkey.

"We are constantly tasting and researching during the year," concludes Neal, "We want to keep our portfolio at its best. You have to go through a lot of average wine to find something remarkable." LCN

