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Strive to help the indies thrive



By Richard Hemming on 12 December, 2013



This year, for the first time ever, I've managed to keep a new year's resolution. They're usually doomed to fail. Call Mum once a week. Call Mum once a month. Call Mum, like, once. But in 2013, I resolved not to buy any wine from supermarkets.

It's far too easy to bash the supermarkets - so let's do just that. They use misleading prices to create artificial discounts, they screw suppliers on price, they drown kittens and their expansion into convenience stores is driving independents out of business.

None of which matters one jot to their millions of satisfied customers, of course. And besides, it's not all true. Perhaps you noticed the little untruth I slipped in there - because in actual fact, 2013 has been a great year for many independents. My resolution to not buy wine from supermarkets wasn't a protest against them, rather it was in support of independent wine merchants: to drink their esoteric ranges, to back smaller producers and to keep our wine industry diverse and passionate.

Looking to 2014, how can we continue to keep indies healthy? Scorning supermarkets isn't the answer. Much better to communicate something positive and proactive instead; to make sure that engaged wine drinkers hear that their local merchant refreshes the parts that multiple grocers can't reach.

There are already some great initiatives dedicated to exactly that. Wine Car Boot was an innovative consumer tasting that brought together nine independent London merchants in an accessible, unpretentious way that generated great buzz. Larger scale events such as Three Wine Men and The Wine Gang continue to reach big audiences around the UK.

Unity is the key to making independent voices heard. To capitalise on the boom in consumer tastings, a national roadshow of Wine Car Boots (or equivalent) could travel the country, with different local merchants participating in each one. Maybe trade tastings such as the Dirty Dozen that champion independents could open their doors to consumers too.

Behind the scenes there are buying collectives that help smaller shops to operate more effectively. Perhaps they could come up with a private label range available only to independents, to rival the popularity of supermarket equivalents.

How about a national wine merchant's day, where local indies offer special discounts and events? In the US, Record Store Day has been doing great work for independent music retailers since 2007, and the UK version was launched in 2008. National gift vouchers for wine merchants could work too - like book tokens.

By working together, independent wine merchants have a fantastic opportunity to harness the current momentum and continue to thrive. Now, I really must call my Mum.

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