

The curious wine life of Peter Douglas



He failed his first wine exam. Now Peter Douglas guides wine portfolios across Europe and advises producers on how to open new markets. Meet the man who loves grindcore, plays the bagpipes and has strong views on what really makes a wine market ready.

By Wanda Augustyn

Some stories in wine begin with a romantic sunset in Burgundy, France, or a walk through a vineyard with old vines. Not for Peter Douglas of Douglas Wine Consulting and Sustaina Wines. His story started with a failed wine exam.

“I had As in beer and spirits but failed my first wine exam,” he says with a laugh. He was 17 and working as an apprentice in a four-star hotel on Sylt, the luxury North Frisian island off the coast of Germany. Wine wasn’t love at first sip. It was hard work.

But then came the bottle that changed everything: a 2006 Muskateller Trockenbeereauslese from Staatsweingut Blankenhornsberg which he tasted when attending a

seminar. “One of the presenters said, ‘If you have a beverage you love, make it your job. You won’t regret it.’ So I took his advice.”

Now, 15 years later, he’s built a life around wine, buying it, selling it, sourcing it, explaining it and helping others make better decisions about it. He’s also completed Stage 1 of the Master of Wine programme and says it has transformed the way he analyses wine. “It helped me understand the complete supply chain, including quality assurance and quality management,” he says. “The quality of tasting also improved, as I learned to move away from terms such as Medium+ to a more precise vocabulary.” He also loves the constant debates. “Tasting entry-level to premium

wines and placing them in context and constantly being challenged by peers supported my journey.”

When he launched the agency, Sustaina Wines, his primary goal was to bring sustainably produced wines to market, particularly those with high environmental value (HVE). Today, Sustaina Wines has a hybrid model, sourcing responsibly produced wines from both boutique estates and larger producers. But he doesn't chase organic certifications simply for the sake of it. “Organic was never important as I don't believe it works in all climates,” he says.

Peter's journey in wine spans specialist retail, purchasing, portfolio management, consultancy, and even cellar work. That mix has given him a grounded view of what works in the real world. “By working across so many segments, I learned that the consumer's taste is key,” he says. “My primary focus is sourcing wines that meet consumer demand and sales trends.”

Although he lives for wine, he doesn't always want to talk about tannins. He spends much of his downtime at grindcore concerts around Europe. “It's a small scene, so we have a network and know a lot of people,” he says. He also plays the bagpipes (yes, really!) and goes scuba diving to avoid spending time on beaches.

His go-to pleasure drink? “I like a bottle of dark or Belgian beer,” he says. And if he must pick a wine, it's Famille Descombe 90.10 Crémant de Bourgogne. “It's elegant with a luxurious mouthfeel and a certain depth.”

And the winemaker he wishes he could share a bottle with? “The late Peter Fraser of Yangarra Estate. “I never had the privilege of meeting him in person. He helped me and other peers with our MW studies and always had an open ear.”

He's travelled through Georgia, China and most of Europe, but it's the Italian regions where Prosecco DOCG is produced that have left a lasting impression on him. “The beautiful landscapes with their small, conical-shaped hills, old vines and refreshing, high-quality bubbles had an amazing impact on me,” he says.

Peter's career feels less like a straight line and more like a series of open doors he wasn't afraid to walk through, from retail, buying and consulting to cellar work, studying and sourcing. He basically built a life by asking the right questions. What ties it together is simple curiosity and a willingness to challenge assumptions.

Maybe that's why his favourite saying is, “Fortune favours the brave.”

It fits him perfectly.

Q&A

As the founder of Sustaina Wines, what gap in the market did you set out to address? And how

does sustainability influence your approach to selecting producers and SKUs? The initial goal was to offer sustainably produced wines and fill this gap. I focused heavily on HVE-certified wineries and producers engaged in energy projects, agroforestry and other initiatives. But the actual demand for these wines was lower than initially expected. Today, our approach is a hybrid. We source sustainably produced wines from both small boutique estates and large producers. When evaluating them, we look for ways they make sustainability work beyond the standard processes. If they can't demonstrate a concrete commitment, we won't move forward. I strive to incorporate this concept into all aspects of my business. Personally, I want to make a difference as future generations will also want to enjoy wine.

Your work often involves advising distributors and importers.

What are the most common mistakes you see when companies curate their portfolios? And how do you guide them towards

better choices? Clients commonly look for wines that they personally like. But we need to address consumer taste with especially high-dosage, off-dry, and appassimento-style wines, rather than personal preferences.

You have hands-on winemaking experience. How did spending time in the cellar inform your work in the broader wine trade,

from purchasing to strategic consulting? When we worked in the cellar, we were working with PIWI fungus-resistant varieties in a cool climate. As it required more cellar time, I saw the positive impact it had on the wine. Practical experience, including at a bottling line, helps understand lead times and communicate with winemakers. It also has a positive impact on negotiations. It allows a deeper understanding of the product and how the process works.

The on-trade landscape is evolving rapidly. What trends are you seeing in the catering sectors, and how should hotels, restaurants and bars rethink their wine lists to stay relevant?

I think there are three trends. Firstly, they are evolving from bottled wines to KeyKegs or similar formats, such as PolyKeg and BIB for their by-the-glass schemes. It allows them to purchase cheaper litre prices for reasonable quality, reducing waste and staff costs.

Secondly, there's a move to private labels. We have just created a Champagne label for a theatre in Germany. It allows them to escape the competition of known brands and set their own non-comparable margins. In addition, they're also offering it as a welcome drink, combining the Champagne with VIP packages and much more. Customers now interact with the theatre rather than a generic brand. It drives premiumisation while securing margins and increasing the yield per guest.

Third is small producers who are less common in the market. In more premium gastronomy, they're looking for producers who offer attractive buying prices and allow for high sales prices. This strategy relies on sourcing from wineries that are not readily available online or aren't sold below the recommended retail price, and allows them to secure their margins while offering interesting, upcoming producers whose wines are less common, ensuring a unique premium offering.

Acting as a wine agent, you help clients source specific SKUs at defined price points. What does this process really look like behind the scenes? And what differentiates a good sourcing strategy from a great one?

I like to challenge my clients and see if they really need a product. I take into account market data, past sales with similar products and their current portfolio. It may not be necessary to list a second wine of the same category. Instead, it might make more sense to replace slower-moving wines with a private label or an evolving brand.

A good strategy includes evaluating the quality and price ratio beforehand so they'll always receive a good deal. The volumes, availabilities, required certifications and lead times must be communicated and expectations clarified. Communication is key. ■