

The independent is dead. Long live the independent, writes Peter Bourne.

The demise of the independent wine retailer has been loudly heralded for many years. The concentration of retail power in the hands of gigantic rivals Woolworths and Coles has squeezed many small players out. But while a few big operators control the bulk of the market, there is still room for small businesses to find their own niche. Thankfully, in the wine business, there are signs of a revival of the independents, with a number of new wine stores popping up and some of the traditional retail sites being recycled.

These stores are owned and managed by enthusiasts who, like a good sommelier, are keen to discover the new, the innovative and the exciting – be it a winegrower, variety or region. And it's not just about Australian wine but exciting (and affordable) wines of the world. Independents spend their time tasting and travelling to unearth these vinous gems.

The great wine merchants of yesterday may be gone – Roseville Cellars, once paradise for the north shore wine cognoscenti, is now a downmarket Woolworths BWS store and a similar fate has befallen Edgecliff's iconic wine store Jarmans – but a number of stalwarts are still standing. Top of the list is the 30-year veteran Jon Osbeiston's Ultimo Wine Centre, an Aladdin's cave chock-a-block with the world's best wines. You name it, Osbeiston (see *Food Hall of Fame*, page 74) stocks it. And Paddington's Ian Cook recently celebrated 20 years at his Five Ways Cellars, which overflows with splendid rieslings and pinots.

In 1987, David Matters took over the East Sydney wine store Best Cellars. The name says it all as it features Sydney's best selection of New Zealand wines, with a focus on David's "special subjects", pinot and shiraz. And a blast from the past is the regeneration of The Oak Barrel, back in its old digs at the Central end of Elizabeth Street.

Up on the peninsula, North Avalon Cellars and the Palm Beach Wine Company wave the independent flag, while the eastern suburbs plays home to Tim Carr's Vaucluse Cellars. Aided by his trusty lieutenant, Sam Hughes, Carr oversees a store oozing with goodies.

There are some newer faces, too, such as experienced sommelier Ben Moechtar with his Spanish-focused wine bar, Delicado Foods at McMahons Point. Former corporate lawyer Michael Loth runs Annandale Cellars, a pinotophile's dream, and Cremorne Cellars. At North Sydney Cellars, David Cochran, Ben Ryan and Jules Gutierrez educate and advise both corporate accounts and wine lovers alike.

Other new arrivals include Pyrmont's Harris Street Cellars, while over in Zetland, Victoria Park Cellars has just opened its doors. And Lisa McGuigan, who created the wine label Tempus Two, has opened Lisa's Wine Vaults, in Kent Street near The Rocks, and City Cellars at the Lime Street Wharf. Accessibility is her mantra – not stuffy, old-fashioned and out-of-date drops but wines of interest, character and style.

For the independents, discovery is the key. You may not always get bottom-of-the-barrel prices but independent stores offer friendly staff with the knowledge and enthusiasm to guide their customers through the vast and often confusing maze of wine – recommending wines that suit their style, their needs and, yes, their budget.

Disclaimer: Peter Bourne spent the first half of his wine life as an independent wine retailer – and loved every minute of it.



Photography **Jennifer Soo**

wine

bottle shops



2006 Cloudy Bay Te Koko (Marlborough, NZ), \$59
Recommended by Lisa McGuigan, Lisa's Wine Vaults. McGuigan is no shrinking violet and nor is this complex, savoury dry white. It's made from sauvignon blanc grapes but meticulous winemaking has "tamed" any of the variety's inherent herbaceous traits – and added tremendous depth and character.



2007 Nittnaus Kalk und Schiefer Classic Blaufränkisch (Burgenland, Austria), \$50
Recommended by Jules Gutierrez, North Sydney Cellars. Blaufränkisch is a red wine with blueberry and black cherry flavours and a tight tannin structure. This wine is all those things with an underlying chalkiness (kalk) and hints of minerally slate (schiefer).



2007 Pyramid Valley Kerner Estate Waihopai Valley Pinot Blanc (Marlborough, NZ), \$50
Recommended by David Matters, Best Cellars. A long and complex name for an equally long and complex wine. Luscious and textural, almost unctuous, its ripe stone fruit and black fig flavours are restrained by a taut seam of bright acidity.



2005 Mount Gisborne Pinot Noir (Macedon Ranges, Vic), \$39
Recommended by Michael Loth, Annandale Cellars. This wine shows intense, savoury aromas of dark cherries and damson plums with hints of black truffle complexity. Its equally dense fruit-rich palate is lifted by some sweetly spiced oak and framed by velvet-like tannins.



2001 Château Tour du Haut-Moulin – Cru Bourgeois Haut-Medoc (Bordeaux, France), \$47
Recommended by Tim Carr, Vaucluse Cellars. The bouquet of this semi-mature cabernet sauvignon is a delightful amalgam of dark berry fruits, warm earth and freshly ground coffee. The palate is full-bodied and vigorous with rich fruit flavours.