

Tony and Barbara Laithwaite

What a Team

Tony Laithwaite started in the wine industry in 1969 but it is working in partnership with his wife, Barbara, that has brought about the phenomenal success of their company. Tony claims that it was he who had the bright ideas, but it was always Barbara who put them into action.

Back in 1965, he went off to Bordeaux in France for a student holiday job working in a vineyard. The owners, an elderly couple, took a shine to Tony. They 'adopted' him and proceeded to teach him all about wine as well as making him improve his schoolboy French. In 1969, taking the name from a road sign, he set up Bordeaux Direct and started bringing wine back to the UK.

This was a time when wine was only sold by wine merchants and was not commonly consumed in most households; wine merchants, and even wine waiters, were perceived as rather intimidating. There was simply not the choice available and Tony helped to change this. At the same time, British people started to travel and experience wine drinking in casual, friendly environments and wanted to imitate this at home.

In 1971 he re-met Barbara who he had known at university. Subsequently, he lured her away from a very good job to help run his fledgling company and, of course, married her. They celebrated their ruby wedding anniversary two summers ago.

First came a 'lock-up' under the railway arches in Windsor. Then, fortuitously, Tony spotted an item on wine fraud in the Sunday Times that he very much agreed with. He shot off a letter to the editor which generated a full mailbag of enquiries, and was, in turn, invited to do a 'special offer' to their readers. Thus, the UK's most successful wine mail-order service was born.

As the more organised of the two, Barbara took on the role of Managing Director, with Tony as Chairman. Shops and concessions followed and their expansion continued even further with the advent of internet shopping. Their turnover grew to £17 million in the first 15 years – it is now a staggering £350 million with a large staff and buyers all over the world.



Tony's search for wines to bring to the UK market has taken him much further afield. His travels have taken him virtually all over the world in pursuit of good wine – to the US, Australia, New Zealand, South America, even India. Before the break-up of the Soviet Union, it also meant dealing with Eastern European governments to buy their wines. With this expansion, it became very apparent that the name Bordeaux Direct was no longer appropriate – and 'Direct' became used by so many

internet/mail order companies: it was time for a change. With an unusual and memorable name, it wasn't difficult to choose the company's new name – Laithwaite's Wine.

It was inevitable that they should go on to have their own vineyards and now have them in France, Australia, in Windsor, as tenants of the Crown Estate and, of course, Wyfold. Tony is happy to share his wealth of knowledge of wine growing: he will explain the impact of different soils and climates on vines, even the impact on grapes of bush fires in Australia. He also believes that climate change is most definitely occurring – he says that wine growers are the experts as they have always kept records of temperatures and harvests. While Tony travelled the world, Barbara not only ran the company but also brought up their three sons. All three, Henry, Will and Tom, went to Peppard Primary school and, with Henry's two children as the latest family additions, they all now live reasonably near to their parents in Peppard. During discussions about the future, the boys, as teenagers used to tease their parents: 'One day we'll just sell up and buy a Ferrari each!' Happily, they have changed their views and are now all involved, one way or other, in the industry. When, or indeed if, their parents do retire then all three sons have stated that they wish to carry on with the family business.

Barbara is equally passionate about the Wyfold vineyard and is rightly very proud of its award-winning sparkling wines. According to Tony, she is extremely rigorous in pruning the vines in order to obtain the best possible grapes – and will sacrifice the quantity produced to achieve this.

Now 70, Tony says that eventually the 'Old Man' will have to learn to pull back from work a bit but in the meantime, he says 'Wine? Why would I want to give it up? I love it'.

CBE for our local Wine Merchant

Tony Laithwaite, who founded the UK's leading home-delivery wine merchants 50 years ago, has been made a CBE for services to the UK and the global wine industry in this year's Queen's Birthday Honours list.

Tony, who runs the company with his wife, Barbara, started the company in 1969. Living in Bordeaux, he borrowed a van and travelled between Bordeaux and Windsor to share French wines with friends and neighbours. Initially called Bordeaux Direct, the company sells wines from across the world. Laithwaites now sells more than 1,500 wines from almost every wine region in the world including from Barbara's own vineyard in Wyfold.



Tony Laithwaite

He set up the business when people were just starting to travel abroad for holidays and experiencing wines they had never tasted before and then, for the next 20 to 30 years, he travelled to every wine growing region of the world. Says Tony modestly 'I was in the right place at the right time.' He never envisaged that the business would get so big.

Rita Hadgkiss and Sue Nickson