



Bristol Food and Wine History

Background

Wine has been coming through the port of Bristol since the 12th century (Norman times). It was fuelled by extortionate taxes imposed during wars between England and France and smuggled in by pirates evading the tax in a similar way that cigarettes are often smuggled in today. The taxes on wine were lowered in the 1860s which helped to end the illegal trade in wine.

To the west of the UK, from Bristol to Liverpool to Glasgow, was an important route for goods to come into the country as they didn't have to pass through the dangerous English Channel, and it is no coincidence that these three cities built their wealth on the back of tobacco, slavery and alcohol imports.

Harveys and Averys have been the longest established wine merchants based in the city. In 1968 Harveys left family hands and became a part of Allied Domecq, in 2005 Harveys was bought by Beam Global, the parent company of Jim Beam.

Rise and fall of the World Wine Fair

The World Wine Fair was originally run by Bristol business man Ray Purnell, with the event being held annually at the Exhibition Centre on St Augustine's Reach.

It was first held in 1978 with 1,000 wines from 26 countries including UK. Tickets cost £2.50 and included a souvenir wine glass. The Regatta of Boats held in the harbour since 1972 was moved to coincide with the festival.

At its peak some 80,000 visitors attended the event, but after a decade the decline started - tickets rose to £8 a ticket and Harveys, who were Bristol's top wine company at the time decided to pull out. Added to this were reports in the press of disorderly behaviour, and what had been a ten day celebration was cut to five.

In the final few years Ray Purnell was no longer involved, and by the late 1980s Bristol City Council and the JT Group, the event backers, announced that they had lost £100,000 over two fairs and then closed the event. From 1989 -1992 a smaller event tried to revive the glory days but didn't last.

Author Mike Manson, whose new novel *Where's My Money* is set in Bristol in the long hot summer of 1976 remembers the festival.

"The old wine fair started as a very classy affair, but gradually became a bit of a booze-up for Bristol over the years. Which is a shame as historically Bristol was very much associated with the wine trade through Harvey's and Avery's.



“The Bristol docks were very different then, beyond where the Watershed is now there was nothing except for the Exhibition Centre which was a great big cavernous concrete building. I remember in particular that people were very sniffy about the new world wines and Chilean and Australian wines were really looked down upon. It was only French wines in those days.’

History of Averys

In today’s world of big brands and multiple retailing, Averys has maintained independent wine merchant status since 1793. Their current premises at 9 Culver Street is a stone’s throw from their original premises in the Mauritania building at the bottom of Park Street.

The firm prospered locally until the 20th Century when, flourishing under the guidance of dynamic chairman and buyer Ronald, the business developed an enviable reputation as one of the finest wine merchants in the country and a serious rival to the equally famous traditional merchants in St James’s in London.

New wines from the previously little-known appellation of Pomerol were the first to be imported by Averys, including the now legendary Pétrus. This pioneering was a hallmark of both Ronald and then his son and current Chairman John, as the firm was amongst the first to introduce wines from New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and California.

Gaymers Cider

Another company involved with the festival that has a long history is the Gaymers Cider Company that has been trading since 1770. Originally based in Norfolk, the company is now based in Shepton Mallet.

Historically most English ciders were grown on farms as part of the workers' remuneration, each worker in the west of England receiving a gallon of cider per day.

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