

MARKETING: BRAND BUILDER

Made to fit

Having designed a brand that caters for exactly what UK consumers look for, Portugal's Tagus Creek is seeing excellent returns, writes **Gabriel Savage**



FOUR YEARS ago, Nick Oakley of Oakley Wine Agencies was nursing a real headache. Convinced that Portuguese wine had an appealing offer for UK consumers, he was constantly dispirited to find these wines failed to sell and were soon delisted. It was not difficult to identify the weak commercial link in Portugal's offer. "There are three things that sell wine: brand, grape and appellation," explains Oakley, pointing out that "Portugal had none of these". Without one of these factors, positive reviews alone could not persuade the UK consumer to pick the wine off the shelf and, as Oakley notes, "You can't have slow movers in this market."

Frustrated by the fact that Portugal was not realising its potential, Oakley took matters into his own hands and developed Tagus Creek. In its earliest days, this new brand received valuable support from Suzie Cornwell, then wine buyer at Morrisons, who gave Tagus Creek its first major listing. With the foundations in place, Oakley asked Sam Harrop MW to bring his expertise on board as a consultant to refine and balance the wines' final blending process. "Sam was a natural fit for us," comments Oakley, explaining, "We had some momentum but needed that extra dimension and strength."

Based on the weaknesses identified in Portugal's approach, Tagus Creek first of all offered consumers the accessible brand image more usually associated with

New World producers. Oakley's second step was to ensure the wine also identified itself by grape variety. In a bid to balance Portuguese character with the need to create a wine that would have immediate recognition with consumers, Oakley settled on "a policy of dual varieties, one Portuguese and one international". As a result, the Tagus Creek range includes a Touriga Nacional blended with Cabernet Sauvignon and a Fernão Pires-Chardonnay mix. Of the six wines currently in the range, the best seller by far is the Shiraz-Trincadeira blend, which Oakley views as confirmation that "people are looking to Portugal for nicely drinkable red". The rosé also performs well, boosted by the fact that, as Oakley proudly highlights, "It was the first rosé to be awarded an IWC medal in the history of the competition."

Four years down the road, and Oakley's bold strategy for creating a commercial proposition with a Portuguese wine appears vindicated. Tagus Creek now stands second only to Mateus in Portuguese wine sales to the UK, selling 100,000 cases there each year. Its original listing in Morrisons is today bolstered by additional accounts with Tesco, Majestic, Waitrose, Booths and, for the on-trade, Nando's. The brand is also showing a strong performance in several other export markets, including Japan, Sweden and Canada. While Oakley describes Portugal as "a very conservative country", with not all producers embracing his approach, outright criticism has also been muted, in all likelihood as a result of the

sales this branded strategy has achieved. "We've got a very pragmatic approach," says Oakley. "At the end of the day, we're trying to sell Portuguese wine; it's just putting a different piece of paper on the bottle. I couldn't see any other way."

Looking to the future development of the brand, Oakley feels, "It would be nice to have a single varietal Aragones or similar", but is naturally cautious about abandoning too prematurely the support offered by international varieties. The brand is also seeking to establish itself more firmly at the £5.99 mark, which would provide both greater flexibility for promotional activity, as well as a buffer against the chancellor's duty increases. Nor does Tagus Creek represent the end of the road for Oakley's desire to gain commercial recognition for Portugal's wines. "We have more branded ideas too, which are ready to be launched," he mentions rather enigmatically, revealing only that, "Hopefully it'll happen this year. We're looking for something that's going to be more of a footfall driver for the off-trade."

As chairman of the Association of Portuguese Wine Importers, Oakley is also working more widely to improve the country's UK performance. "The last two years have shown marked rises in uptake; without question, Portugal is on the up," he says. If Portugal can indeed capture consumers' imagination on its own merit, then it may no longer be necessary to adopt such a dramatic approach as Oakley was forced to use. Whatever happens in the future though, Tagus Creek stands as a demonstration of what can be achieved if the market is used as a guiding framework rather than an obstacle course. **dlb**

