

Small Independent Merchant of the Year

The shortlist: D Byrne, Les Caves de Pyrene, Hanging Ditch Wine Merchants, Philglas and Swiggot, Private Cellar, The Sampler, The Secret Cellar, The Vineking, WoodWinters Wines and Whiskies, Noel Young (no entry submitted)

Commendation: Palmers Wine Store, Bridport, for its well-chosen and excellent-value range

Winner: The Sampler

Look at **The Sampler's** balance sheet and you would never guess we were in the depths of recession. The north London store has enjoyed sales growth of more than 30% on last year, boasts an average bottle spend of £23 (compared to a national average of £4), and has just secured £1m funding to open two new stores. One of the investors called the company 'the future of wine retailing', and all our judges expressed a desire to see more wine retailers adopt The Sampler's innovative approach.

The secret of its success? The Enomatic sampling machines, which allow customers to try up to 80 wines before buying. The wines available for tasting change every four to five days. It's a revolutionary, and clearly very successful, concept. And yet there's more to The Sampler than wine by the sip. Judges praised the enthusiasm and hard work behind the company, the long opening hours and great email newsletters.

The range spans 1,200 wines, including 50 new wines between £6 and £10, 70+ grower Champagnes and 300 mature wines. Every single wine has an A6 tasting note. The in-store Enomatic machines are supplemented by regular tastings and courses.

There are no online sales, so its reach is limited. But if ever you were looking for an excuse to visit London, this is it. The Sampler is as close you can get to a wine lover's paradise without visiting a wine region.

www.thesampler.co.uk



IT WAS THE SAMPLER that scooped this year's Reader Award for Best Small Wine Merchant, with its devotees clearly eager to spread the word. 'Helpful, not intimidating, and a superb range of wines,' said one. 'The concept of taste before you buy has been taken to a completely new level here,' said another. 'Every wine lover should visit this treasure trove,' was one reader's opinion, while another highlighted The Sampler's 'innovative approach to tasting wine' which 'enables customers to sample a range of high-quality wine at affordable prices'.

'The Sampler is an innovative company, showing great sales growth, an expanding range, a unique concept and huge enthusiasm' *Tim How*

'The business has really consolidated since it burst on to the scene a few years ago. Not only are the 80 wines available to taste as interesting as ever, but they have built a retail list of over 1,000 wines covering the everyday to the iconic' *Tom Cannavan*

RUNNER-UP

Les Caves de Pyrene

Caves de Pyrene has carved out a niche as a unique wine merchant, with its success built upon pure passion and amazing sourcing, said our judges. The focus on natural wines and terroir has helped to build a list of consistently high quality, with

many quirky offerings.

The company is well known in the trade as a supplier to restaurants and bars, but it also has a shop in Guildford. An excellent website gives plenty of information on the wines.

The company's dedication to wines with minimal intervention, from organic and biodynamic producers has resulted in a list filled with (mainly French and Italian) wines with a true sense of place. www.lescaves.co.uk

'Les Caves de Pyrene has grown from, in its own words, "a motley rabble" into a force to be reckoned with, thanks to a commitment to source and sell "real wines"' *Anthony Rose*