



TASTE OF THE VINE TEAM (FROM LEFT): FRANCIS GIMBLETT, PETER GENTILLY AND RICHARD OATLEY

LABOUR OF LOVE

A PASSION FOR WINE INSPIRED FRANCIS GIMBLETT TO START A SUCCESSFUL EVENTS BUSINESS. AMANDA MARCUS MEETS THE MAN BEHIND TASTE OF THE VINE

As you approach the offices of Taste of the Vine, you feel as if you're at the start of an escapist weekend rather than arriving for an interview with a man who has built up a thriving events business. As I – quite literally – reach the end of the road and gaze at the footpath into the woods ahead of me, I begin to wonder if I'm in the right place. But, within seconds, founder Francis Gimblett bounds out to greet me, clearly used to the surprised look on visitors' faces.

Five minutes later, I find it hard to imagine this man working anywhere other than in such an idyllic setting. I certainly can't picture him in a suit. The Taste of the Vine HQ also happens to be Gimblett's home; it's staffed by a small team of like-minded souls who manage to combine hard-nosed business acumen with an 'in it for the fun of it' approach and a passion for what they do. The front room of the office

is just that – a sitting room with a PC and lots of books about wine. As we walk through the door, one of the team is singing.

I meet Peter Gentilly, one of Francis's two right-hand men, who has a love of classic cars, fly fishing and, of course, wine. Richard Oatley is the third of the trio and knows all there is to know about cocktails, as well as wine, of course. He's also a DJ and a musician (about to release an album, Francis says proudly). I can't meet him, they laugh, because he's currently touring Vegas on a Harley and may be some time...

Formalities (if they can be called that) dispensed with, Francis makes us tea and leads the way upstairs to a room with breathtaking views of the woods beneath. Self-effacing and modest from the outset, he directs me to the one formal leather chair in the room and perches on a wooden dining chair, taming his mass of auburn curls in the process.

The walls are covered with maps of the

world's wine regions and there are lots more books about wine on the shelves. Wine is this man's *raison d'être*.

Founded 10 years ago, Taste of the Vine offers bespoke wine-tasting events with a difference. 'Think game show with wine attached,' says Neil Griffiths of Motivation and Marketing Resources, who has been one of Francis's satisfied customers for some time. 'I've come across many wine connoisseurs but Francis does it with the most humour. I really like his style and have a lot of respect for him. We've used Taste of the Vine for everyone from City bankers to "rough and ready" warehousing staff in the north-west and everyone absolutely loves the events. He's also a very honourable guy and great to work with. The events really have universal appeal.'

The company's repertoire extends to beer, whisky, cocktails and Champagne tastings for between six and 1,200 people at anywhere



THE RETURN OF THE SOMMELIER



While Taste of the Vine has pulled off events for 1,200 people, its core market to date has tended to be smaller groups. To secure a foothold in the larger-volume events market, Francis has a new concept in mind. Called the Return of the Sommelier, the audience will still learn a thing or two about wine, Francis says, but there'll be lots more props and action on stage, interactive theatre-style. 'It'll give us a lot of fun,' he says.

Francis doesn't want to give the whole show away but as a taster... Think wine education *Star Wars*-style, an audience recruited to self-transform into sommeliers within an hour and take on an army of celebrity chefs, a sommelier who turns to the Dark Side (he bears the Bad Sommelier's trademark of a superiority complex), and an Extreme sommelier who opens bottles with swords. Oh and there are balaclavas and chainsaws (the teeth blunted, Francis adds quickly). May the force be with them.

from famous UK venues to wine cellars and French châteaux. There are no sales pitches, no lectures, and no sponsors. Instead, Francis, Peter and Richard offer a kind of stand-up interactive show which is at once funny, educational and very entertaining, both for them and the audience. If, in the process, just a hint of their own love of wine rubs off on those attending, that's clearly a huge bonus.

Francis entered the sommelier's world in his teens, following a brief flirtation with a hotel and catering course, which he soon



the right time to make sparkling wine in this country,' he insists, his big blue-grey eyes twinkling with excitement. And then he's off, explaining the pros and cons of winemaking in England, what makes a good wine, who does it best, how, when and why. I learn more about wine from Francis in the next 10 minutes than I have from my entire collection of wine manuals, and it's clear that this mix of passion and expertise, mixed with a thorough understanding of what makes people laugh, is what makes his business such a winner.

Some 80,000 people have now experienced a Taste of the Vine tasting. Or should I say tasted a Taste of the Vine experience? 'We go much further than classic wine teaching,' explains Francis. 'It's more about spontaneity and improvisation. There's no secret to entertainment. It's getting inside the minds of the people present, talking about them and enjoying the process. You can't engage with a group of 500 for an hour and a half just by talking about wine,' he insists (though I suspect he probably could).

Despite the concept proving so successful, Francis has resisted advice to diversify into



a more general events company, sticking to what he loves. 'We have something unusual and I don't want to make the company as big as possible. "Turnover is vanity and profit is sanity" is a philosophy I've stuck to. It's important to have a life as well.'

To Francis, that means writing 500 words of his novel every morning as well as dedicating time to fly fishing, woodturning and regular columns for the London Datebook. Then there's wife and companion of 18 years, Pamela, and their two children Alexandra, five, and Oscar, four. 'They take up most of my time,' he grins. Whether he'll one day get his own vineyard remains to be seen but, if he does, one thing is for certain: those bottles will be worth looking out for.



realised was not for him. At 19, he became the youngest sommelier of a five-star hotel in the UK (the Grand in Brighton). But once at the top, it was time to move on. 'I get bored very easily,' he admits. 'Once I reach a certain level, the challenge diminishes and I have to look for the next one.' That search has taken him pretty much around the entire wine circuit, from wine merchandising and marketing, to hands-on wine making.

It soon becomes clear that Francis's real dream is to own his own vineyard. 'It's just

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