

# V. A Good Vintage

With almost seven decades of experience in providing quality wines to Australians, The Wine Society is keeping its members at the core of its business by revolutionising the member experience.

Images by Scott Ehler

The Wine Society has been educating, engaging, and listening to Australian wine-lovers since 1946, and its dedicated staff have upheld that core mission over the decades. As the company continues to evolve in the coming years, CEO Peter Wheatley will keep this mission at the heart of everything he and his team achieve. Peter recently revealed his plans to *The CEO Magazine* as The Wine Society embarks on a series of significant transformations.

**The CEO Magazine: As Australia's oldest wine club, how have you protected the legacy and heritage of The Wine Society?**

**Peter:** The wine club was first formed in 1946 by Dr Gilbert Philips as a consumer cooperative. Starting from humble beginnings, the mission for The Wine

Society has been to provide a means by which its members can gain access to quality wine at a good price. Over the ensuing years, we've centred our entire business model on that philosophy.

It's often said that 'life is too short to drink bad wine', and that's something that we definitely believe in. We offer a great quality assurance to our members, and it's much more than just a money-back guarantee. Our tasting panel vets every single wine before it's even offered to members.

The other thing that we've done consistently over the years is understand our place in the industry. While we do offer a range of products across the entire spectrum of the industry, we foster relationships with smaller and emerging producers who value a retailer such as ourselves that will maintain their

brand equity. We do that by upholding price fairness alongside great promotion of those smaller brands to our members.

That leads on to looking at how we position the society against the big players in the industry. Almost 80 per cent of the market is controlled by the two large supermarket chains. We're proudly one of the largest independent operators. We set ourselves apart from the price discounting model by focusing on quality and value to members. This offers a real alternative for consumers who want a wine experience.

Our members are a community of like-minded people spread all over Australia. There's a large base here in Sydney, but we've built a truly national footprint, which is great. It's a large collection of individuals, but they all share a passion and love for wine. >

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**A deep love and appreciation for wine is obviously at the core of what you do. How have you ensured that this culture is spread throughout your entire organisation?**

From a member's first interaction with the society, we present a value proposition which is much more than just selling wine. It's about positioning membership of the society as an experience. Our staff are all talented and passionate people who love the industry and take pride in presenting to our members the great wines that we source.

Our wine education and social events program is somewhat unique in the industry, particularly on the retail side. We do several events every month across Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, and Adelaide. We're also broadening our reach into some of the larger regional areas, particularly in South-East Queensland.

Winemakers frequently visit our head office here in Ultimo, Sydney, to tell the story of their wines, whether it's introducing a new release or talking about some of their back vintages. It's really great that our team can interact personally with the winemakers. There are a lot of different wines on the market, and what sets one apart from another is typically the story behind it: who made it, where it came from, and the unique factors that went into this vintage. That one-on-one interaction with winemakers is very important to us.

We often have the winemakers visit our retail stores for tastings or our wine education or social events to present those stories directly to our members. I think that just enhances the membership experience.

Additionally, our staff have access to regular product tastings that are designed to enhance and develop their palate. This is part of the educational ethos that we employ in our culture. We then want them to bring their enjoyment of wine



back into their work through the interactions they have with members. It's a holistic approach to making the wine journey or experience a more rounded one for all the people that we touch in the marketplace.

**Over the past two years as CEO, how have you broadened The Wine Society's demographic and modernised its operations and processes?**

The Wine Society attracts wine enthusiasts of all ages. While we have a solid base of baby boomers who have been members for a number of years, we also have a growing member base of people in their late 20s through to mid 40s. This is great to see the younger demographic believing in our original premise of 'life's too short to drink bad wine.'

We now have a number of innovative marketing initiatives in place. We recognise that in today's marketplace, the ability to reach out to a lot of people is paramount in consumer marketing. Through social media, we look to use viral methods to build our brand in the wine community. It will be another six to 12 months before we see real benefits flow from current initiatives, but the early indications are positive.

We're constantly looking at new ways to present our products. Earlier this year, we launched My Secret Cellars, which gives access to ultra-premium and aspirational wines available only to selected members. We're also ramping up our range of events, particularly around food and wine, and we're looking at going into areas such as wine travel experiences.

We want to focus our marketing efforts even more sharply so that members don't feel like just a number. We are in a unique position compared to our competitors as we understand exactly what our members want. As a result, we can successfully refocus everyone's efforts here, particularly our management team, on ensuring that the members are at the heart of everything we do—which is consistent with our status as a not-for-profit cooperative. We want to provide the best value and experience that we can for our members.

**How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to create those exceptional member experiences?**

We partner with suppliers to deliver a range of different events and experiences, from smaller tastings instore to creating engaging educational content. The content produced could have the winemaker with someone from our buying team or tasting panel discussing the wine. That's a great way of bringing the winemakers' stories to the members, in addition to our wine education experiences.

We focus on sourcing exclusive, quality wines. Through our relationships with a number of wineries, we often partner directly with winemakers to produce an exclusive range of wines for our members.

**Where do you see The Wine Society going in the future?**

While maintaining the concept of keeping the member at the core of what we do, we'll also go through an exciting revolution with some really innovative programs that will deliver significant growth in our member base so that we can retain our industry relevance. We want to provide positive experiences for all of our members, whether they've been with us for 50 years or just one year. It's all focused on providing that rounded wine experience. ●

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- Peter Wheatley

# EVERY FAMILY HAS A SECRET



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