

ABS ISN'T A blow-its-own-trumpet kind of company. You don't tend to hear much from it throughout the year, though this did nothing to deter buyers from its most recent tasting back in September. The agent prefers to stand on the reputations of its family-run producers, principally across Australia, Germany, South Africa and Chile, where some of its partnerships go back as far as 30 years.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that its innovative, exclusive, parcel-based initiative is called Australia's Best Kept Secrets (ABKS), a ship-to-order scheme that launched in 2015 with the aim of creating an "instant boutique offering" for independent retailers at key times of the year.

Now in its fifth year, ABKS imports wine from some 17 wineries across four states in Oz, ranging from up-and-coming stars to more established names such as Handorf Hill, which was "instrumental in bringing stock of Grüner Veltliner to Australia", says co-owner Elliot Awin.

In this way, it has enabled the company to remain a traditional agent while also meeting the parcel-driven needs of its core customers in the UK independent trade.

"It's a way to be a little bit more dynamic," Awin tells *Harpers*. "Because we are the sales arm for many of our producers, we don't chop and change our portfolio, but there's more pressure on retailers to revolve their lists than there was 10 years ago.

"They're looking for that exclusive parcel that brings customers into store. Having a launch date also helps build a dialogue, which is the most important thing."

Helping to build that sense of

All quiet on the Australian front

ABS Wine Agencies continues to demonstrate its command of the supply chain with the ongoing success of its parcel-based shipping scheme. **Jo Gilbert** reports

occasion, the shipments come in via ABS between three and four times a year.

To qualify, producers must be family owned, like ABS itself, and produce no more than 10,000 cases a year, while bringing something different to the table in terms of style and region.

Four years on from the first shipment, Awin is weighing up the possibility of looking to Oregon as the next point of call for another Best Kept Secrets range.

For now, however, Australia remains the core focus, with ABS preferring to shine a light on the "value offered by wines produced by [the country's] small, quality growers, which are not often exported further than the state where they are produced".

With its Aussie focus, the scheme is also something of

a return to the roots of the company. Awin senior, Michael (Awin founder), was a key figure in helping to build the profile of Australian wine in the UK, and reach 1m cases at the height of the Oz boom in the 1990s.

ABKS also marks another step in the evolution of a company which has shed its skin many times over the years, including greatly expanding its German footprint with the acquisition of Siegel in 2005. (Its export business and work with Greencroft Bottling on its own-label ranges are another story.)



INDIE EVOLUTION

Proving its worth as an agent and importer to the independent trade is more important than ever, Awin acknowledges. And this is especially true as indies now find themselves going through an evolution of their own, with many choosing to buy direct and grouping together to combine their buying power (more on page 51).

In this way, ABKS is like a "blind buying group", says Awin, where customers are grouped together to facilitate the import of exclusive wines, but without the risks or the distraction.

"I completely understand that indie retailers want to maximise their profitability by selling to restaurants or shipping direct. But we know that specialisms breed greater productivity.

"If a shop focuses 100% on retailing, building offers and engaging with customers, it will sell more than if it devoted 50% to customers and 50% to stock.

"We want to take not all of that 50%, but some of the burden away from them," he says. ■



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