



## Back to business

By Andrew Catchpole  
Published: 16 January, 2019

Bibendum PLB is reasserting itself as a major premium player on the UK wine scene. Andrew Catchpole meets chief executive Michael Saunders to discover what's in store

Six months back into his old role at the helm of Bibendum PLB, chief executive Michael Saunders is going full throttle. Brought on board by new owner C&C Group's chief executive Stephen Glancey to re-establish the London-based merchant's credentials, Saunders has already done much to reassure suppliers and accounts that the damage wrought by the widely reported fall of Conviviality (and his subsequent departure) is history.

The new Bibendum, he says, is fighting fit, back making a profit, ready for whatever Brexit may throw and – courtesy of its new owner – has settled all debts large and small owed to suppliers in the wake of Conviviality's collapse.

It's clear, though, talking to Saunders at Bibendum's reinvigorated Primrose Hill HQ that he doesn't want to dwell on the past, but rather talk up his vision for the future, for which he has already implemented much and with plans for more to come. And having been so instrumental in growing Bibendum from a small north London merchant to a leading national supplier, one senses that fully re-establishing the brand is personal for this highly driven individual.

Saunders' overarching reading of the UK market is that it will continue to become increasingly polarised in terms of suppliers and that, despite being a notoriously tough environment, plenty of opportunities still exist for those at the top of their game.

Being at the top of the game, says Saunders, means adapting and evolving what Bibendum PLB and its allied arm Walker & Wodehouse (which serves the independent merchant sector) have already built a past reputation on.

"There's polarisation in the market between companies like Liberty [Wines] and ourselves, that are doing quite well, and small specialists at the other end of the scale. Being in the middle is quite uncomfortable – what are you?" he says.

Adding that he has the full backing of Glancey and C&C Group, Saunders is redoubling the focus on the premium end of the market to ensure that on-trade-focused Bibendum and its off-trade wing PLB can capitalise on its newfound freedom.

"We are now being peppered with new opportunities and have a hell of a portfolio, a whole range coming in for 2019, which will focus on artisan, smaller, modern, family-owned businesses that can really help with the premium route that I'm taking Bibendum down.

“We are in the same family as Matthew Clark [also owned by C&C Group], but now separated. Conviviality tried to push them together, but now I want to work in a complementary way to them, not chase those accounts, but differentiate ourselves at the premium end.”

Asked where this premium business will come from, given the stagnation in the wine market, Saunders is clear about the opportunities, citing trends he believes will play to Bibendum’s advantage.

“One is a number of customers that do want to consolidate their suppliers for financial and efficiency reasons, and we can offer a very broad church of wines from entry to super-premium, along with premium spirits,” he says, adding that he’s just signed up a “first-class striker” to head up the premium spirits sales.

The second reason Saunders cites is down to loyalty, giving credit to C&C Group for paying up and paying up fast to settle outstanding invoices post Conviviality which, he says, has engendered new levels of loyalty among Bibendum’s customers.

Saunders also speaks of the need to inspire people that are at the point of sale, to imbue the bar people, sommeliers and servers with the same sense of personal involvement, education and confidence with regard to wine, bringing in a little theatre and interaction that is more common in the cocktail and beer worlds.

Another shift, he explains, is from emphasising and building the company name to making the product the hero.

“In years gone by we put the emphasis on marketing the company, which worked, but now we’re putting the emphasis on the product. And we try and take a position of thought leadership, to challenge the market, ideas, the sommeliers, you [the press]. I’ve said to the team, ‘I’m very happy to stand alone on issues, to stand up and be counted’.”

On Brexit, Saunders would rather keep his personal misgivings out of print, but from a professional perspective he is keen to reassure customers that stock is in place, plans have been made for a worse case hard Brexit and that with C&C Group behind it, the company is capable and ready to continue to ensure smooth supply.

“The wine trade has a habit of moaning about our industry; we’ve got to stand up and be counted and not wait for someone else to do it,” he concludes, clearly ready to take up the fight.

## Keywords:

- wine
- Bibendum
- Michael Saunders

## Other articles of interest

- [Michael Saunders returns to Bibendum as chief executive](#)
- [Saunders spreads his wings](#)
- [Bibendum appoints new head of technical](#)
- [On-trade wine trends for 2019](#)
- [Enotria poaches Bibendum directors to fill new MD roles](#)

Comments (0)