



Anthony Tindal

FEARGAL WARD

“Wine is not a commodity. It’s a product of nature. Wine is my life”



Fiona Ness

Anthony Tindal’s family background is steeped in derring-do, a quality he brings to his own career as a successful wine importer

It is true that man cannot live on craic alone, but wine importer Anthony Tindal has made a jolly good attempt at it – and built a fine wine empire in the process. Tindal Wine Merchants, which he founded with his nephew in 2004, is now one of the top five independent wine merchants in the country, importing 1.3 million bottles of fine wine a year into Ireland – and counting.

Not that Tindal would ever use the Anglophile phrase “jolly good” – although he did spend half his life in London, working at everything from digging a tunnel in Trafalgar (“£100 a night!”), to commodity brokering, to butchering meat on the King’s Road and supplying top hotels with fish so fresh the chefs would swear it winked at them.

And yes, he might speak with a Home Counties accent, but it has had the edges buffed by a bracing Donegal sea breeze. His father was a Trinity scholar who flew with the RAF before taking up farming in Donegal. His grandfather, meanwhile, was an English Protestant who married a devout Irish Catholic and set up home in Meath.

“I speak this way because my father spoke this way,” Tindal says of his father when we meet for lunch in Ouzos in Dalkey on an unseasonably dreary summer’s day.

As everyone peels off their rain jackets, we remark how the blustery wet fug outside is unusual for August, but what’s more remarkable about the day is the absence of wine on the table.

How unusual is it for the Tindals to have lunch without wine? Tindal and his daughter and business partner Harriet concur unashamedly: “Very.”

“Of course,” Harriet quickly affirms, “our message is to drink alcohol responsibly.”

Tindal guffaws. He’s had two knee replacements, two hip replacements and open heart surgery to right a congenital heart defect from which only one in ten people survive into adulthood. He travels the world annually in search of the best vineyards and he’s just completed a seven-kilometre swim off the coast of Sligo. So, to put it in perspective, a glass of fine wine over lunch must be positively beneficial. “There are very few alcoholic wine merchants,” he says pointedly.

In Tindal’s world, alcohol is not a dirty word, but neither is it a mere money-making vehicle. “Wine is not a commodity. It’s a product of nature. It was made by people, not faceless corporations.” Wine, he says simply, “is my life”.

ter of Simon Mangan of Dunboyne Castle and his father being Ralph Tindal-Carill-Worsley, a British naval commander during the Gallipoli campaign and a relative of Charles Darwin, no less.

As a young child, Tindal was imbued with the family’s sense of derring-do. He was tutored at home by a governess and whatever knowledge the governess didn’t impart, he had the sea take care of the rest.

Tindal began in business young, catching lobster in pots he kept five miles off the Donegal coast. “I spent all my time as a little lad out on the land or sea,” he says. There follow tales of landing 20-pounders on a children’s fishing rod, of outboard motors being smashed on rocks, of swimming to safety and of broken bones being set on the kitchen table – neither caution nor hospitals being in the lexicon of rural Donegal.

It all leaves me a bit breathless. And that’s before we’ve even embarked upon his journey in wine, which he says began with an encounter with a kangaroo while he was driving solo across Australia on a mission to import sheep to the Middle East. (Tindal survived; the kangaroo, the car and the beer it was carrying didn’t.)

Tindal had moved to London in the 1970s after attending a Catholic boarding school in Lancashire. He worked at various enterprises until he settled on “selling Australian sheep to the Arabs”. However, after the kangaroo episode, he returned to London having fallen in love with wine. He gave up sheep trading and set up a butchering business of quality Aberdeen Angus meat.

Then Sainsbury’s opened up and “wiped 50 per cent off our turnover overnight”.

“We were thoroughly badly behaved, but we didn’t make any money,” Tindal says, laughing.

But given his stock, weren’t there expectations of him growing up? “My father had great ideas for me. But I was always skint. When I bought the butcher’s shop in London, it wasn’t considered a good career for a lad like me. But I just wanted a bit of craic.”

He says his wife Penny – the family’s “rock” – kept them on course during the implosion of his butcher business. It was finally decided that the family would relocate to Sligo, where it would be cheaper to live. Tindal commuted from Ireland for five years. “The mother was epic,” he says. “She held it all together.”

Then Tindal met Alex Findlater, at the time head of one of the largest wine merchants in the country, and offered to deliver Findlater’s wines in Donegal. “One thing is, I was never shy about working. You’d do anything,” he says.

The people in Donegal remembered Tindal’s family. “I got rid of the distributor up there and became Findlater’s top

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salesman,” he says. “I was paid solely on commission. I had to build the business up quickly but well. I got the business for the mid-west, Cavan, Monaghan and the north-east.”

By the time Alex Findlater sold his company, Tindal was responsible for 10 per cent of Findlater’s turnover. “Half of my bosses there work for me now,” he says, chuckling.

“In 2002, I worked as an agent for Neil Cassidy. They sell to supermarkets and do a lot of off-trade [off-licences]. I said: ‘You realise when I leave I am going to take half your business with me’, and he said: ‘I’ll take my chances’.”

In 2004, Tindal did just that, when he and his nephew set up Tindal wines. “I left him [Cassidy] with the off-trade, but not the restaurants or the hotels,” he says.

It is testament to Tindal’s character that, a year later, his old bosses were some of the people pitching in to help his company when €100,000 worth of wine was stolen from its warehouses in Blanchardstown just before Christmas 2005.

“It was a massive hit for us, but we are the sole agents and distributors of many of the wines that were stolen, so they are very traceable,” he told this newspaper at the time. However, today, he says that the majority of the wine was never recovered.

How did the company survive? Friends loaned them money, while others in the trade offered them stock. Tindal and his children all remortgaged their homes. In 2006, he sold his home to refinance the business and has lived in rented accommodation since. He has just bought a house in Avoca, Co Wicklow, so that “Penny can at last have her own garden”. He tells the story without a glimmer of anger or regret.

“You couldn’t get money from the banks at that time. We sold the house and put all the money into the business. If we hadn’t, we wouldn’t have survived. To run a business of this size, you need a lot of cash.”

He warns that penal excise increases on wine of 62 per cent over the last two budgets have pushed the industry to the brink. At the same time, hotels and restaurants outside Dublin are struggling to stay afloat – many of the wine trade’s customers are experiencing little of the much-hyped economic recovery.

“I pay a monthly duty bill to the Revenue of €650,000, but the duty only becomes due to us from our customers when we take the wines out of bond for delivery; we are essentially collectors for the Revenue,” Tindal says.

“If our customers fail to pay us, we still have to pay the Revenue, which is a pretty draconian law. We personally guarantee the Revenue that money... non-payment from us and we lose our guarantee of about €1 million. More draconia!”

“There are lots of people lobbying the government about its taxes on alcohol, but I don’t think the government will listen. Alcohol is being demonised, that’s it.”

Despite the turbulence in the sector, Tindal emphasises integrity and honesty in business, and is disgusted by “the morality of people who will live on borrowed money and quite happily walk away from it if the business fails”.

He is effusive in his praise of his children, their business sense and fortitude, along with their expert knowledge of wine. “We put all our hours into it. We’ve never been wealthy, but we’ve always been a close family. If we went bust tomorrow, the whole family would go,” he says.

The family-run limited company now comprises Tindal and his children William and Harriet, who own 88 per cent of the equity along with other family members, with Tindal’s old boss owning the balance. Wife Penny is the creative brain and designer of the firm’s own-

brand wine labels. Tindal’s son Henry, meanwhile, has just finished cycling from Ireland to Australia.

Last year, the company entered the wine retail trade when it spent close to €1 million taking over the wholesale customers of rival wine distributor Charles Searson. Tindal also bought the lease on Searson’s shop in Monkstown, Co Dublin, from which Charles Searson continues to trade.

Tindal also took on the majority of Searson’s employees, bringing the company’s staff number to 25. Tindals is known for its staff retention and it is not a mystery why Anthony Tindal commands such loyalty – he displays a combination of charisma, honesty and incredible hard graft. “I don’t say this is a family business,” he says. “It’s a business of families.”

The company is targeting sales of two million bottles of wine on the Irish market by 2018, mainly through the hotel, restaurant and independent off-trade sector.

CV: Anthony Tindal	
Profession:	wine importer
Age:	62
Family:	wife Penny and children Harriet, William and Henry
Hobbies:	wine and swimming
Home:	Avoca, Co Wicklow
Favourite wine:	“It might be the bottle I open tomorrow”
Favourite wine region:	Burgundy

he says.

Of these own-label wine imports, nearly 50 per cent are organically produced – a percentage which Tindal says is growing “as we all become more aware of the potential dangers of pesticides and other chemicals”.

Tindal is also planning further expansion into Europe as a fine wine supplier, “a project under intense discussion as we speak”.

“We import some of the great names in wine into Ireland. We are one of the best lists in the country. People know we are not bullshitters. This company is founded on knowledge – the knowledge of delivering wine, tasting wine, drinking wine, loving wine.”

Does he, like every second wine lover on the planet, also harbour dreams of owning his own wine château one day? “Not a château, that would be beyond us,” he concedes, “but Harriet, William, myself... and at least half our team want to be wine-makers.”

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