

## WORTH A DETOUR

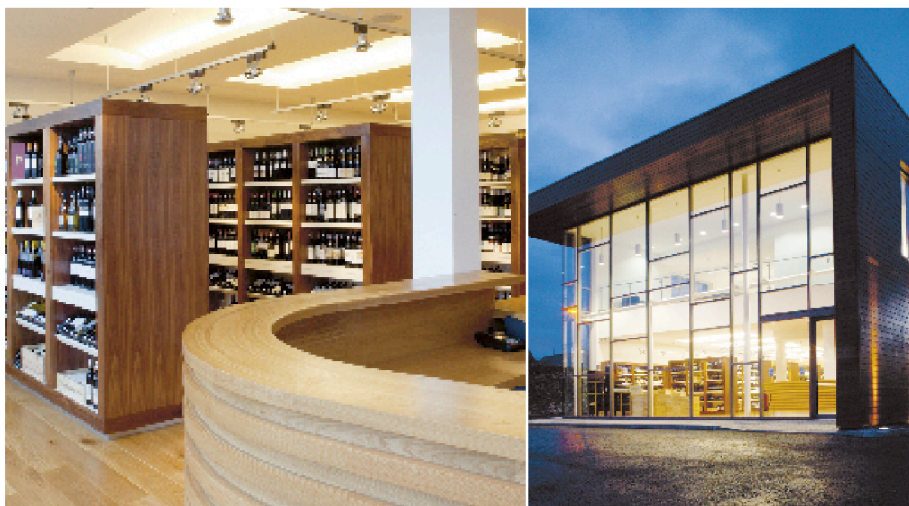
## James Nicholson, Co Down

**MARY DOWEY** finds a surprisingly wide range of wines deep in the Irish countryside

**P**lenty of cities have spread so far in recent years that it is easy to imagine how their suburbs might subsume a village 25km away. Not Belfast – at least, not yet. The 40-minute drive south to Crossgar still traverses rolling green Co Down farmland. So what is a fine wine shop doing out here – especially a vast cube of cedar and glass that is James Nicholson's new HQ?

'We're probably mad,' says Nicholson, who has lived round here all his life. Maybe not that mad, though. The swathe of North Down which links Crossgar to greater Belfast has the highest disposable income in Northern Ireland. His location away from the city has forced him to try harder – building a range of wines 'from £4 a bottle to £400' to lure customers either in person or by mail order.

The new premises have a bright-lights-big-city feel. Purpose-built on the same street as the previous Nicholson outlet, they incorporate tasting room-cum-library (bottles always open, coffee on tap), offices and warehouse in addition to a spacious shop whose well-informed staff are helpful without being intrusive. Schott glasses, estate olive oil and the dark temptations of L'Artisan du Chocolat



add to the positive impression created by 600 carefully chosen wines – everything from Ridge and Rochioli in California to Daniel Rion in Burgundy; Vernay in Condrieu to Von Buhl in the Pfalz; Beaucastel in the Rhône to Boekenhoutskloof on the Cape.

James Nicholson is not just a retailer but also a major importer and wholesaler. When he set up in business in 1977 at the age of 23, experience in the family restaurant prompted him to focus on wholesaling. Even today retailing accounts for just 30% of his business.

Wine-loving shoppers benefit – not only from economy-of-scale prices, but from Nicholson's need to offer restaurants and other wine shops a range with breadth and depth. So that's what Billecart-Salmon, Pesquera, Loosen, Schafer, Norton and the like are doing in his weighty catalogue, along with rising stars like Artadi in Spain and Terra Burdigala, the Deroncourt-Thienpont venture in Bordeaux. The quest for the best keeps Jim Nicholson in vineyards and cellars 12 weeks of the year and in Bordeaux every spring since 1982. *En primeur* is important to his mail order business, selling particularly well in England and Scotland.

On the negative side, more effort is required in Burgundy. California needs to strengthen around £10. The range of inexpensive wines could expand to dispel the shop's lingering 'dinner party-only' feel. Far more 'shelf-talkers' are needed,

## DO TRY THESE AT HOME

**Domaine Bott-Geyl, Riesling Botrytis, Alsace 2002 ★★★★★**

Not quite a sweet wine, this dances across the tongue with delicious orange peel notes and dazzling acidity. **£11.45**

**Jacqueson, Rully 1er Cru La Pucelle 2005 ★★★★★**

Super-smooth, stylish white Burgundy; lovely flavour with subtle oak. **£15.95**

**Rochioli, West Block Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley 2003 ★★★★★**

A hedonist's treat – seductively perfumed, velvet-textured and wonderfully vibrant. **£69.50**

**Artadi, Laderas de El Sequé Alicante 2005 ★★★★★**

Fleshy, characterful Monastrell-Syrah-Cabernet blend worth more. **£5.99**

**Domaine La Monardière, Réserve des 2 Monardes, Vacqueyras 2004 ★★★**

Complex fusion of leather, savoury and mineral tones. **£11.75**

## MYSTERY SHOPPER

We rang Nicholson's to enquire about buying a case of Rhône's at £15 a bottle and were told that somebody would call back. They did so within 30 minutes and were very helpful. Insights into the quirky personalities of the producers whom they had visited helped add colour to the selection. We were recommended two whites: the Domaine de la Monardière 2005 at £17.50, and the Domaine Georges Vernay Le Pied de Samson Viognier 2004 (£14.95). For the reds: Domaine du Grappillon d'Or Gigondas 2004 (£12.95), Coudoulet de Beaucastel 2002 (£13.95), and the René Rostaing Les Lézardes 2004 (£15.95). We were also told to look out for the new range of Domaine du Vieux Télégraphe wines coming in soon. An email enquiry yielded a 48-hour, detailed response.

and the geographical names on the units are so designerish-discreet as to be almost invisible. But these are minor flaws in a vastly satisfying shopping experience.

**+ Wide range of exciting wines**

**- 40-minute drive from Belfast**

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