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Going up

- ★ Outrageous mark-ups
- ★ Varietals
- ★ Chablis
- ★ Sancerre
- ★ South America
- ★ Champagne
- ★ Sherry

Going down

- ★ Vlognier
- ★ Post-prandial aperitif
- ★ Brandy
- ★ Lunchtime drinking
- ★ Liebfraumilch
- ★ Bag-in-the-box
- ★ Oaky Chardonnay

Flight stimulators

Chablis is still hot (sadly), but oaky Chardonnay is not (hurrah), and wine flights are proving popular with customers. Fiona Sims looks at other recent trends

FIRST, the good news: customers are definitely becoming more adventurous, says independent London restaurateur Morfudd Richards. She opened Lola's in 1996, so she has seen it all. Her list has chopped and changed over the years (she buys the wine), but the majority of sales still went to the usual suspects. But then, a couple of years ago, she introduced a "Personal Favourites" page, adding short descriptions to the more obscure wines on the list. Suddenly, wines such as Bandol and Marcillac were starting to shift.

Encouraged, she started to offer wine flights, highlighting less well-known wine regions and producers, or focusing on a particular grape. After a slow start, the flights picked up, thanks to a review in London's *Evening Standard*, and now staff can barely keep up with demand. "Customers are having great fun with it," she says, revealing that the sherry flights sell best.

At Ullswater's Sharrow Bay hotel, sales of oaky Chardonnay seem finally to be dropping off, says James Payne, head sommelier and Ruinart trophy winner. And, contrary to current trends, German wine is selling very well at Sharrow Bay, where Riesling rules. Payne even offers a Pinot Noir from Franz Künstler at £49 a bottle, which has had a fair few takers – "it tastes just like Gevrey-Chambertin but it's £10 cheaper," he says. And there's some particularly good news for South America – Chilean Cabernet is on a

roll at Sharrow Bay, although Payne will try to steer you towards a more characterful Carmenère.

Elsewhere, Liebfraumilch is also on the way out. The pub staple has finally been shunted on to a branch line – and we can thank Jason Danciger and his team for that. The new director of food and wine operations for the 1,400-strong Spirit Group has been shaking things up somewhat. Wine sales are up by 18.8% from the end of last year. When he arrived last autumn, bag-in-the-box and Liebfraumilch ruled the roost – "gallons of it," he recalls. He introduced new, young, vibrant wines from the south of France and Italy, and *The Five Minute Wine Course* for staff (a cartoon-style manual). "It'll get people who don't drink wine to start drinking it," he says.

Now, though, the bad news. Chablis rules – still. What's wrong with that? Well, the vast majority of customers are buying solely on the strength of the region's reputation, not on who actually makes it. And, like any region, it has its highs and lows (Chablis more pointedly so than its neighbour, Sancerre). The appetite for Chablis has become so huge, says London wine bar operator Andrew Edmunds, who prides himself on his innovative list (chilled Loire reds are currently going down a storm), that he actually removed Chablis from the list completely, in exasperation, only to put it back on again when his customers complained.

With money in mind, there's the subject of hefty mark-ups – another worrying trend (*Caterer*, 1 November 2001, page 56) in the opinions of every individual interviewed for this article. "People are getting more aware of the prices they are being charged for wine," says wine consultant Phillippe Messy, who has spent the past five years working with Oliver Peyton's Gruppo bar and restaurant group. If Messy had his own way, then his mark-ups would remain low. "People are resentful when they have to pay more," he believes.

One final bit of bad news – all the restaurants we spoke to report that people are drinking less, particularly at lunchtimes. "And people are definitely being more careful with their money," says Edmunds, who has seen London's Soho suffer huge job losses and cut-backs in the past couple of years. Payne, meanwhile, is finding the digestif a particularly hard sell these days. He reports: "I sell as much port with cheese and dessert as I do on its own after a meal." ■