

net gains

It takes a lot of bottle to drag a traditional industry into the 21st century, but, says Greg Duncan Powell, internet companies are changing how we deal in wine

Remember when cyber-fever first hit? The e-believers claimed we would no longer read paper books or glossy magazines, and that wine shops would disappear into the ethernet. It didn't happen. Thankfully, the paper novel still exists, as do glossy magazines. However, numerous wine businesses that fell for the e-spell are no more. There are a host of reasons why the 'e-tailing' of wine didn't take off as predicted. There's the primordial fear of giving out credit-card details, the desire to pick bottles off shelves and choose the one with the pretty label, and the simple fact that it all happened way too quickly.

But the biggest problem was that it wasn't clear what internet-based wine services offered that old-style shops didn't. It took a while before it became apparent that the internet's best asset was providing access to wines that were not readily available elsewhere.

While bricks-and-mortar bottle shops do sell new and unusual releases, the internet is increasingly a resource for wines that aren't this year's model – specialist, old, rare and expensive. The internet also offers opportunities to get involved in wine trading, a traditionally exclusive and difficult-to-understand business.

Internet wine is a rarefied world. However, if you find yourself inheriting a cellar full of wine but have nowhere to put it, want to buy a bottle the same vintage as yourself, or just enjoy the thrill of bidding for a bargain, there are a number of sites that can be really handy.

LANGTONS.COM.AU Services include buying and selling through auctions and what it calls 'exchange'.

WHERE IS IT? Melbourne and Sydney. Purchases and bottles for sale can be dropped off or picked up during office hours or delivered at a cost.

ADVANTAGES Its size, reflected in the vast range of wines.

DISADVANTAGES Auctions only take place about once every two weeks. Lots cannot be split, so you can't purchase a single bottle unless that is the lot.

WINEARK.COM.AU Wine Ark's cellaring facilities are state of the art. The online shop also sells prestigious local and imported wine.

WHERE IS IT? In Sydney – at Alexandria and Chatswood.

ADVANTAGES It offers the unique option of wine vaults holding 10 to 10,000 cases. A more traditional cellarage facility is also available for members.

DISADVANTAGES The wine vaults are not cheap. For instance, a space for 10 to 12 cases is \$33 per month.

CRAYSONLINE.COM.AU An auction company that takes advantage of winery gluts.

WHERE IS IT? Based in Sydney, with an office in every state except Tasmania. All wine purchases are delivered anywhere in Australia – at a cost.

ADVANTAGES The daily auction is simple and offers some real bargains – the reserve price is only \$9 per case.

DISADVANTAGES With a fairly limited range, this is a website to peruse for bargains rather than specific wines.

STERLINGAUCTIONS.COM.AU Based in Perth, this company runs a monthly online auction that lasts for 12 days. It also offers a limited wine-exchange service.

ADVANTAGES The site offers a history of auction prices so you can judge your wine's value or what to expect to pay.

DISADVANTAGES If you happen to live in the eastern states, freight can be quite expensive. **VE+T**

