

Life after First Quench

A raft of independents are opening following the demise of First Quench. Laura Clark meets one retailer who has changed her fortunes

The collapse of First Quench Retailing was a personal tragedy for Trina Osborne. Having spent 31 years working for the company, and the last six years living above the Putney-based Wine Rack where she was manager, Osborne suddenly found herself jobless and homeless.

But thanks to a group of traders on the same parade, who decided to take on the lease of the shop and its four members of staff, Osborne was thrown a lifeline.

Wine Rack closed its doors for the last time on December 16 and, just five days later, Trina's Wines re-opened as an independent wine shop. OLN met Osborne and senior sales assistant Dirk Hamman to find out how hard it has been to go it alone.

Was it a shock to hear First Quench had gone into administration?

Trina Osborne: I was told by a customer who had seen a report on Sky News the evening First Quench collapsed. We weren't even told directly. I was quite fortunate to know a lot of managers and we all supported each other. It's so sad that there are a lot of people out there who didn't have that sort of network.

Dirk Hamman: We didn't see it coming because our branch was doing so well. It was all very quick and it was terribly handled by KPMG.

When did you realise that the shop would be closed down and you would lose your flat?

TO: In the weeks leading up to the actual closure we were told we were safe and were going into the Venus Wine & Spirit Merchants estate, but in the end we were closed down. We couldn't talk to KPMG and weren't given any details. A lot of local people were devastated when they heard they were going to lose their local shop.

On Christmas Eve I was given notice to quit the flat above the shop. Fortunately by then we had already re-opened. But other people weren't so lucky. I know



Trina Osborne and the shop staff



With the help of local traders, this former Wine Rack was able to re-open its doors

We can do promotions much more quickly now. We can put a deal up in a day

someone who has been with First Quench for 40-odd years, and he was given notice on the same day as me. It's destroyed him, he's going down the council housing route and he's 64 years old so it will be hard for him to find a new job. There are a lot of sad people out there because of First Quench's collapse.

Why did a group of nearby traders decide to step in and save the shop?

TO: They're business people and they've known myself and the staff for such a long time. They thought it was bad we were closing down and thought we had been really badly treated, and then they thought of the business side of things and the benefits of being the owner. They asked me if I would be interested in taking it on as manager.

What obstacles did you overcome to get the business up and running again?

TO: We officially closed down on December 16, and were able to get deliveries in by December 21 and re-open. We wanted to make sure we were open for Christmas and since then we've had an excellent January. It's all very new – we're learning things daily. At least it's a quiet time, we can get everything

up and running before it gets really busy.

DH: One of the biggest things is getting competitive in our market. The head office did everything. Great marketing is a big part of being competitive, and while we used to get provided with things like banners, and POS materials like shelf-edge tickets, we now have to do that ourselves.

In the past my job was to work on sales, but because we've not got the administrative side of head office we've all taken on additional roles. The job is much more interesting now. We get customers that come in and we can give them ideas and our wine range is better. We can go out and get unique wines to compete with the supermarkets and introduce customers to them.

How did you celebrate the opening of Trina's Wines?

TO: We had a grand re-opening with Simon Le Bon from Duran Duran and his wife Yasmin cutting the ribbon. Putney MP Justine Greening also came along with our local councillor. The shop was packed – we had a buffet, Champagne and balloons. Simon and Yasmin, who live a few doors down, stayed for a couple of hours and then we went on partying until 9pm.

What are the benefits of being an independent retailer?

TO: One of the nice things now is we can choose our own products, we can get customer requests, and we're not tied to what head office tell us to stock. We can source from new and different suppliers and we can get what the customer needs as opposed to doing what we are told to

do. We still think our boss will walk in, but, in fact, we're the boss now.

DH: We can do promotions much more quickly now. If we see an opportunity we can put a deal on in a day.

Has it been difficult to source new suppliers?

TO: They are out there and they are interested. They have also had a big loss and they are keen to come on board and help people that have come unstuck by First Quench.

How will Trina's Wines differ from Wine Rack?

TO: One of the things we are planning on doing is stocking ales from local breweries. It's going to be tough to compete with the supermarkets, but we think of ourselves as the local convenience wine store. We'll stock around 60% wine, and 40% beers and spirits. Tobacco, sweets and crisps will also be a focus because they mean footfall. We're also going to run different events around sporting tournaments as we've got a lot of South Africans, Australians and New Zealanders around here.

Get in touch

Are you running a former First Quench outlet? OLN would love to hear from you to find out how trade is going and what your plans are. If you've got an interesting story to share, get in touch at oln.editorial@william-reed.co.uk, or call Laura Clark on 01293 610492.