Small wineries, big crossroads

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Wine consultant Jim Silver argues that distribution is a filter, not a sales engine – a provocation that cuts to the heart of a question many small wineries face daily. Building genuine commercial presence costs money and method. The real strategic choice is between investing in a lean sales structure or accelerating disintermediation toward direct customer relationships.

Jim Silver is a US wine observer and consultant, author of the Jim Silver on Wine newsletter on Substack. In a recent reflection with a deliberately provocative title – *Distribution is Not a Sales Strategy* – Silver zeroes in on one of the most sensitive issues in today's wine market: distribution is not a commercial strategy. Or, as he puts it, it is "a filter, not an engine": it moves what is already

moving, rewards what is already proven, but on its own it does not create demand where there is none.

It is a phrase that struck me because it perfectly captures a question that, as Wine Meridian, we are asked almost every day in conversations with many small and medium-sized wine businesses: **how do we organise ourselves better on the commercial side?**

The question arrives in different forms, but the substance is increasingly the same. “I’ve found an agent, but they’re not satisfied with commission alone: they want a fixed fee, financial support, an initial investment.” Or: “I’m talking to an export manager, but to really follow us they want a more structured mandate.” Or again: “I have a distributor, even in the United States, but they do little. The importer is there, but doesn’t push. They order occasionally, but they don’t build a market.”

This is precisely where Silver’s provocation lands: perhaps we have asked distribution to do a job that distribution, on its own, can no longer do. For years, many wineries could convince themselves that entering distribution somehow meant being sold. You just had to find the right importer, the right distributor, the right agent. In a growing market, that system seemed to work: placements generated rotation, perhaps inconsistent, but enough to make it seem as though the machine ran almost by itself.

Today that is no longer the case. In a more selective, more crowded, and less expansive market, the simple availability of a product is not the same as commercial presence. A wine can be on a list and remain invisible. It can be orderable and never actually be proposed. It can be distributed and, in practice, never really be sold.

This is where Silver strikes hard: if wines are not actively sold, then they are not truly sold at all. The point is not to

demonise distribution, which often remains necessary, but to stop assigning it a function it does not have. A distributor can accompany demand, not always build it. It can amplify momentum, not necessarily generate it.

This also gives rise to the critique of the commission myth. Many companies, faced with the need to strengthen sales, look for the apparently least expensive solution: commission-based figures, multi-mandate agents, export managers paid only on results. The logic is understandable: if I sell, I pay. If I don’t sell, I take no risk.

But this model works best when demand already exists and simply needs to be captured. If instead you need to build a market, explain the brand, oversee reorders, get into the right accounts and stay there, you need representation. You need someone with the time, the responsibility, and the priorities aligned with those of the company. And this, inevitably, costs.

This is also where my own difficulty lies, because I understand both sides. I understand wineries, especially small ones, that struggle to sustain fixed costs and are afraid to invest in a commercial figure without immediate guarantees of return. But I also understand agents, export managers, sales professionals who cannot take on alone all the risk of building a market from scratch, perhaps for a still little-known brand, with tight margins, long timelines, and results that are far from immediate.

Silver’s provocation, then, opens an even more fundamental question. If distribution is a filter rather than an engine, and if selling requires presence, continuity, and representation, small wine businesses above all must ask themselves with great realism whether they are truly in a position to sustain a commercial structure, even a lean one.

It is not simply a matter of deciding whether to hire a

salesperson. It means understanding whether the company can afford a real commercial function: someone who follows markets, cultivates clients, builds relationships, oversees reorders, supports intermediaries, and transforms product availability into actual demand. Even in its most essential form, this function has a cost, requires method, and demands continuity. It cannot be improvised in spare moments, nor entirely delegated to external figures with other priorities.

This is where the reflection becomes strategic. For many small wineries, the question is no longer simply “how do we sell more through distribution,” but whether the traditional distribution model is still compatible with their scale, their margins, and their organisational capacity.

If they lack the resources to build adequate commercial presence in intermediated markets, then it becomes inevitable to accelerate all those disintermediation processes that in recent years have often been discussed but not always tackled with sufficient resolve. Starting with direct sales at the winery, of course: wine clubs, visits, tastings, hospitality, relationship with the end customer, loyalty. But not only.

Disintermediation also means developing proprietary channels, working more effectively in digital, collecting data, building communities, strengthening e-commerce where it makes sense, creating direct relationships with restaurateurs, wine shops, and buying groups, covering proximity markets, turning every point of contact into a measurable commercial opportunity. It means, in essence, reducing dependence on a system that no longer automatically generates demand and increasing the share of the market the company can control directly.

This does not mean abandoning distribution. It means stopping treating it as the only possible path. For some wineries it will continue to be indispensable, but it will need to be accompanied by a real commercial presence. For others, the most coherent path could be a deep rethinking of the model:

fewer markets, less dispersion, more direct relationship, more margin retained, more control over the customer.

In this sense, Silver’s provocation is not only about the need for better salespeople. It concerns the overall sustainability of the commercial model. Because if the distributor is a filter, not an engine, every winery must decide where it wants to place its own engine: in a proprietary commercial network, even a minimal but accountable one, or in a more direct, more proprietary sales system that is less dependent on intermediaries.

The real question, for many small companies, is no longer only: can I afford a salesperson? **It is also: can I afford not to build a direct relationship with the people who buy my wine?**

Key points

1. **Distribution is a filter that moves existing demand**, but does not create it from scratch.
2. **Commission-only models work when demand exists**; building new markets requires dedicated representation.
3. **Small wineries must assess whether they can sustain a real commercial function**, even a minimal one.
4. **Disintermediation — direct sales, digital channels, wine clubs — reduces dependence on intermediaries** and retains more margin.
5. **The core question: can a winery afford not to build a direct relationship with its end customer?**