

CLASSIC DRIVER

This is what happens when car guys move into natural wine

Lead

It started with a broken Lancia, and it ended with James Bannister and Merlin McCormack opening their own natural wine shop. Of course, they couldn't have normal delivery vehicles - we stopped by ahead of their opening to find out more.



Anyone who has visited the 'classic and supercar hub' that is Duke of London will know that this 51,000-foot former soap factory in the west London suburb of Brentford is about a whole lot more than simply buying and selling cars. In addition to restoring, storing, servicing and detailing, the place is home to the Brewery Tap pub and the Santa Maria pizzeria (voted London's best), boasts events regular such as a drive-in movie theatre and will even rent you a cool studio space.



Leave more than a few weeks between visits, in fact, and there's a good chance that entrepreneurial founder Merlin McCormack will have added a whole other string to the DoL bow - such as the natural wine shop that has now sprung-up there, wittily dubbed 'Naturally Aspirated.'



McCormack launched the new venture with fellow petrolhead James Bannister, a familiar name in the UK four-wheeled world who recently left a role with a top automotive PR agency in search of new, non-motoring adventures - but with no intention whatsoever of co-founding a wine shop.



But as with many great ideas it evolved, shall we say, 'naturally'.

"It all started when I was living in east London and had an extremely unreliable Lancia Fulvia," explains Bannister.

"When it was threatening to go wrong, I would drive across town to Duke of London - which is in farthest west London - where one of the technicians would fix it for me or Merlin himself would do the work.



"On one of the rare days when the car was running properly, I drove it to a barbecue in very trendy part of the East end and, shortly after I arrived, the friend who was hosting said he was going off to buy some drinks. I went with him, and discovered my very first natural wine shop. To be frank, it totally blew my mind.



"Since I was there, I thought I would buy Merlin a bottle as a thank-you for fixing the Lancia so often, and I chose purely on the basis of the label."

Call it intuition or call it luck, but Bannister's choice hit the bulls-eye with McCormack who, it transpired, is a committed natural wine fan who had been struggling to find a good source anywhere in the West London.

"What he didn't realise was that East London is awash with natural wine sellers," says Bannister. "In fact, in many areas its positively frowned upon to drink wine containing chemicals."



The natural recalcitrance of Bannister's Lancia meant several more vinous 'payments in kind' followed, ultimately inspiring the pair to delve deeper into a world they had both grown passionate about. And the obvious next step was to take the plunge and set-up shop in a prominent area of the Duke of London premises - known as The Factory - which was a little too tight for manoeuvring cars in and out of but ideal as the site of a new retail space.



But, in typical DoL style, this was not to be a case of setting-up a table and piling-on a few bottles of wine. Instead, McCormack's brother Algernon, an artisan metalworker, created a bespoke, fully-glazed aluminium showroom equipped with a three-and-a-half metre tasting table topped with Italian Terrazzo tiles.



With all of the remaining work, such as carpentry and sign-writing, being carried out by Factory craftsmen and tenants, the result is as much a feast for the eyes as the contents are for the oenophile.

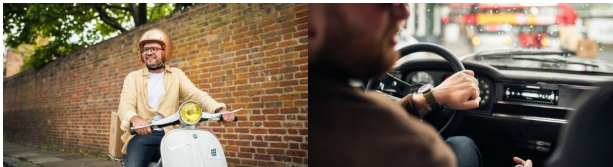




With the help of 'sommelier at large' Jamie Metcalfe - a natural wine expert based in Copenhagen - McCormack and Bannister have stocked Naturally Aspirated with an impressive selection of different bottles priced from £9 - £45 which can be bought both direct from the shop or through the firm's online portal. The trio are also consulting with restaurants to help them build natural wine lists and will stage regular on-site tasting events.



Inevitably there is a vehicular element to the project, which takes the form of a brace of Italian delivery vehicles, one a 1960s Vespa Primavera, the other an early 1970s Alfa Romeo Giulia Super. By coincidence, both had been painted in a similar hue by the same bodyshop and both have now been finished in 'Naturally Aspirated' livery.



"The Alfa has been fitted with stage two suspension, racing brakes and a fully-rebuilt, two-litre engine which we recently dyno tested at 180bhp built by Titus Rowlandson - which is all a bit of an overkill for a delivery vehicle," says Bannister. "But it's very comfortable and it has a huge boot which we will shortly equip with a large-capacity wine cooler. This also caused us to create a new logo, swapping out the Alfa Cloverleaf symbol for a bunch of grapes."



We can expect to see the two machines at car events around the country, where Bannister and McCormack will promote the benefits of natural wines which, they believe, is on the cusp of a boom.

"There's a definitely a shift towards wines that have had as little chemical intervention as possible," says Bannister.



"More and more people are trying natural wine as a result, and they are discovering not only that there is a huge variety available, but that it doesn't have to be expensive. By its nature, this sort of wine also tends to be made by very small producers - and having the shop should enable us to support them, help them get their wines better known and give everyone a future with fewer headaches".

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