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From packing boxes – to wine deals worth millions

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By Dina Medland

When a painfully shy young woman contacted a fine wine merchant and said: “I have no qualifications – can I help?” she got the job – and today is signing deals worth millions of pounds.

Julia Scales, at 31, is already “experienced sales manager” at the Antique Wine Company in London. In just six years, she has moved from packing boxes, answering phones and dealing with any administrative task that cropped up, to dealing with sophisticated clients and multi-million pound deals.

She says she loves the personal interaction with clients who are “passionate” about wine, whether it is to drink at the Christmas dinner table, or as an investment.

Her own passion is for a glass of white Bordeaux and she speaks enthusiastically and knowledgeably about notable sales successes: “I think we at AWC hold the record for selling a single bottle – for £75,000. It was an 1811 sweet wine, Chateau d’Yquem – and the guy who bought it wanted to drink it with his wife in five years. People like that are so fascinating and wonderfully eccentric.”

Her knowledge comes from a course she took at the Wine and Spirit Education Trust. She booked herself on to it after passing a Bibendum wine shop and being fascinated by its innovative approach towards selling fine wine directly to customers. She began researching wine and made reconnaissance trips to the likes of Berry Brothers in London’s Mayfair.

“At that stage I was still so shy I couldn’t say boo to a goose,” she says. “But I did the course and called around asking wine companies if I could work for them – doing anything – stacking cases. Through internet research I found AWC, and called – and six years ago, they took me on.”

Her unexpected move into the wine world marked a radical change of career plan. She

grew up a “shy and creative” child with her three brothers, as part of a tightly knit family. But at the age of nine she was sent to boarding school in Scotland – her mother’s homeland.

She explains why: “Dad worked for an oil company and we moved countries every few years which was great fun. But during the Gulf War we were in the Middle East and were evacuated. Our parents decided to leave us children behind after that.”

A career in fashion seemed to be beckoning after she graduated in fashion design from Newcastle University: “At that point I wanted to be a shoe or handbag designer,” she says.

Her first role took her to New York, where she spent just less than a year: “I was working with a one-woman business, learning how to make handbags. It was very good for me. I lived in Brooklyn and had dreams of working in a trendy designer business,” she says.

She went on to work for Beatrix Ong, the London-based fashion accessories designer. “I was doing jobs no else wanted to do,” she recalls. “But increasingly I found I didn’t warm to the industry. Everyone said I wasn’t ‘thick-skinned’ enough – and I wondered why I should change.”

She next worked in a shop in the Primrose Hill area of North London for 18 months “earning peanuts” before the wine trade captured her imagination.

The Antique Wine Company, founded a quarter of a century ago by Stephen Williams, buys and sells fine wine in quantities ranging from entire cellars to cases and individual bottles.

In the last three years the company has grown rapidly, especially in Asian markets. Creating portfolios for clients who want to invest in wine “in bond” – buying wine but not taking immediate delivery – is popular, as are bespoke deals with private clients. Ms Scales attributes her success at AWC to the belief her parents showed in her as she worked out what to do for a living – and the strong support she had from colleagues: “Laura Ealing, a senior director, took me under her wing. She really helped me build my confidence and suggested how far I could go if I tried.”

When an opportunity arose in the sales department, Ms Scales asked: “Can I give it a shot?”

Another role model has been Kathryn Rainer, a fellow sales manager at AWC: “I have always looked up to the women in the industry – there haven’t been many but they have been inspiring. I feel you learn with your eyes – I watched them and thought ‘I can do that’. And it helped that they agreed,” she says.

Flexible working has helped, too: much of her contact with clients has been by email and telephone. “I am young and I look younger than I am – it can be a bit of a problem. I used to say I wish I looked older,” she says.

“I can sign deals worth millions of pounds by clients I have never met, and then I meet them and am very jolly and they say – who is this child?”

The UK wine industry has traditionally been dominated by men. But Ms Scales says: “The old-fashioned, bullish sales person has died away and clients are looking for genuine people who are not going to rip them off – the demand for being genuine has come at a good time for me.

“There are places I go to network and as a woman and a little bit younger, I walk in and there are all these men in their 50s and 60s and I do feel a bit intimidated. But then I think ‘I’m here now and I’m doing OK and the world is changing. Who knows where I’ll be at that age?’”

Her more immediate goal is to develop an idea she has championed and which management is expanding – finding wine properties for international clients: “We have a Russian client looking for a place in Bordeaux – and there is a lot of interest from clients in China,” she says.

Secret CV

Who were your mentors?

My parents, for all their support – no matter what I thought I wanted to do.

Your first big break ?

There have been a lot of “mini-breaks”, where I have taken the opportunity. I’m hoping the “big break” is still in front of me. My plan is to do the Diploma in Wine next year and maybe I’ll manage the Master of Wine by the time I am 36.

What else might you have done?

I can’t think of anything else I could be doing right now except being in the wine industry.

Best career advice to others?

It is important to be confident and take a risk and challenge yourself. But be yourself as people can smell a fake a mile away.

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