

Wine pub of the year breaks record with seventh straight title

BY MARTIN HESP

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To win a national competition once is an enormous accolade; to win a hat-trick would be remarkable; but to be victorious in a major UK award no fewer than seven times on the trot earns almost a miracle status.

Especially when you are a small concern operating in a remote country town and you are up against more than 5,000 other establishments across the country...

That is exactly what Woods of Dulverton has managed to achieve. It has been revealed as the Good Pub Guide's wine pub of the year, for the seventh time running.

Which is incredible when you think of all the posh and trendy wine bars there must be from Land's End to John O'Groats – none of which will actually have entered the annual competition, but will have been scrutinised by judges acting anonymously.

The achievement becomes even more surprising when you learn that, added to his new record-breaking tally, Woods owner Paddy Groves won the same competition on six previous occasions, at two other West Somerset hostleries he once owned.

Here is what Fiona Stapley, editor of the Good Pub Guide

‘This award is about determination and hard work’

Paddy Groves

2017, has to say about Exmoor's most remarkable business...

“There's simply not another pub as a main entry in the Good Pub Guide that can touch Woods for such an exceptional wine list. Patrick Groves, the knowledgeable and enthusiastic landlord, reckons he could put 1,000 bottles on the bar and will

open any of them [with a value of up to £100] for just a glass.

“And as he is there every night, he can offer advice on any wines you might be interested in.”

Paddy, as he prefers to be known, showed the WMN around his pub bar and restaurant shortly after he'd learned of his seventh success – nearly a quarter of a century after he had won the accolade for the very first time at the Fitzhead Inn, near Milverton.

Asked how he originally started upping his wine game, Paddy replied: “It was partly thanks to a chap called Richard Hartley who has just died. He became my head chef after we'd been at Fitzhead for a year, and he revolutionised our menu. I hate the term, but we were one of the first proper gastro-pubs in the Westcountry.

“And we needed good wine to go with the good food, and Richard was good at that – he was the one who prompted me to start, and then it became a labour of love for me.



Woods owner Paddy Groves (left) and manager Jamie Pilkerton

“The sourcing of wine is part of the story. I know a couple of quite unique wine merchants who specialise in getting us some really good stuff no one else has. Then you read about different wines. I used to go abroad around Europe on a motorbike tasting wines, but I don't do that any more.

“Really what this award is all about is determination and hard work,” shrugged the landlord who mixes running a pub with running his own Exmoor farm.

“Sourcing the wines is a never-ending task – by which I mean getting wines of top quality that are also affordable to people.

“That's important because, no matter where you are, you are never going to have a customer base of enough people who can afford £100 bottles – so it's hard work to find the ones which are brilliant, but which cost a reasonable price.

“Then they have to be served correctly at table. The team who work here, like manager Jamie [Pilkerton], have a wide

knowledge so they can talk to people about the wine and food.

“We don't pretend to be masters of wine here – we need to be masters of dealing with customers and keeping them happy.”

Paddy is a modest man – it was only when the WMN was leaving Woods that we learned that, as well as constantly being named Wine Pub of the Year, the place has also been listed as one of the Good Pub Guide's overall top ten UK pubs for the past four years.

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