

THE INTERNET SENSATION

He has eaten dirt and licked rocks on US national television. He has 750,000 followers on Twitter, and his Internet show attracts 90,000 viewers per episode. Is Gary Vaynerchuk the most influential man in the US wine industry? Maggie Rosen reports.

The story of wine personality Gary Vaynerchuk, whose family moved in the 1970s from Russia to the US, is a good-old fashioned American immigrant's tale – except Vaynerchuk's version has a modern twist. The eldest son takes a bricks and mortar business and turns it, and himself, into a national dot com brand worth many millions of dollars, in just a few years.

In addition to his \$50m+ wine sales business, Vaynerchuk has written a popular wine book, *Gary Vaynerchuk's 101 Wines: Guaranteed to Inspire, Delight, and Bring Thunder to Your World*, and is just releasing one on business – *Crush it! Why NOW is the time to cash in on your passion*. He has a PR firm and several agents who juggle speaking engagements, appearances and interviews. At one point, he was the most followed person on Twitter in New York City, and he recently accompanied over 200 of his fans – known as 'Vayniacs' – on a week-long wine-themed cruise. He is under 35, and none of this could have happened without the Internet.

Rising sensation

"I'm a genetic entrepreneur," says Vaynerchuk. "I've been working since I was a kid, when I did typical kid jobs – shovelling snow for neighbours, lemonade stands, selling baseball cards – but always in a more serious, professional way."

It was inevitable that Vaynerchuk should be "dragged" into the family business – his parents' Shoppers' Discount Liquors in Springfield, New Jersey – when he was in his mid-teens. Because of his tender age, he was relegated to administrative tasks, heavy lifting, and making ice. "I have to be honest, I really didn't love it at first," he admits. "I guess I've never been satisfied being behind the scenes." This is a rare understatement for an über-extrovert who found his calling when

he reached legal drinking age and was put on the shop floor. "Customers would walk around, pick up a bottle or two. But then they got attacked by me," he says. "I realized that some people had a passion for collecting wine that wasn't any different from my excitement about collecting baseball cards. I would insist on engaging them in a conversation, and get them to talk about what they liked – and then get them to buy it."

At his suggestion, the store was re-branded the Wine Library and in 1998, age 22, he took over the business. Annual turnover went from \$4m to more than \$45m in five years. That's just for starters. For in the US, where highly restrictive laws governing the commerce of alcohol make it very tough to build a national reputation, Vaynerchuk and Wine Library have achieved the previously unthinkable, becoming national brands. Only a handful of US wine merchants have succeeded in expanding beyond their four walls. And it has taken them many decades.

Electronic magic

With his preternatural business acumen and predilection for technology, Vaynerchuk saw early on that the Internet and tools of social media offered a golden opportunity to take a steady, but perhaps staid, business like Wine Library to the next level. "Around my thirtieth birthday, I was restless and unhappy," says Vaynerchuk. "I needed a new project, and I decided to do my own Internet TV show about wine."

Vaynerchuk saw a gap in the market for a straightforward, egalitarian wine discussion vehicle that didn't patronise those who knew little or nothing about wine, and who were open to learning. He set out to enlighten and entertain his audience by introducing what he calls "thunder" – a high octane combination of excitement, passion and humour. With not a little hubris, Vaynerchuk says his goal is to

get as many people drinking wine as possible, by eliminating the mystery and intimidation, and raising their "wine self esteem". Launched in 2006 as *The Thunder Show*, and now called *Wine Library TV*, Vaynerchuk's show is posted every weekday on the Internet. Each installment now attracts 90,000 viewers – not counting those who find the link on other websites, or who watch archived episodes.

"Gary is an example of someone who has created a personal brand with a lot of trust attached to it," says Rob McIntosh, a UK-based wine communicator and consultant. "He has a very forceful personality but is accessible to his fans. He's just 'one of the guys' who happens to love wine. He doesn't presume everyone – or anyone – has the same palate as he does, he just gives them the tools and the confidence to trust their own instincts, without talking down to them." McIntosh points out that the latter is a particularly tricky achievement, as wine's important social, cultural and historical associations don't necessarily lend



Gary Vaynerchuk creating thunder on tv.winelibrary.com

themselves to simplification. "It's important that when we democratise wine, we don't destroy this completely," says McIntosh. "Even Gary – who has given himself the task of encouraging everyone to drink wine – advocates doing it properly. His fans appreciate him because he respects them. Producers support him because they want to have their samples on there."

A low-tech production, Wine Library TV features Vaynerchuk sitting against some kind of impromptu backdrop, behind a nonde-

script table with some bottles, glasses and a spit bucket (sometimes). Bantering with his cameraman about whatever comes to mind – which is frequently a recent sports game or TV show – he'll pour himself a generous glug and give the wine his trademark “sniffy sniff” before launching into the discussion (or monologue).

Whether offering praise or a diatribe, Vaynerchuk is unfailingly dynamic, and sincere rather than slick. He speaks at 100 miles an hour in an insistent tenor that ranges from growl (to evoke the “oak monster”) to squawk, when he is particularly enthusiastic.

Along with all the “right” wine words, he evokes American snack foods and sweets, mixing in sports terms and slang – all of which makes his fans feel more at home.

“I knew nothing about wine before I found Gary,” says Chris Hadley, who manages communications for Hunt Construction Group in Indiana, and heard Vaynerchuk mentioned on another Internet program. “I had tried wine here and there, but was really more of a

“Occasionally, I'll look something up in *Wine Spectator* or the *Wine Enthusiast*, but for the most part I stick with Gary because it's what is most comfortable for me.”

International reach

Vaynerchuk appeals to more knowledgeable drinkers as well, and although most are in the US, some of his fans hail from abroad. Marc Sierens, a conductor with the Akademos Symphonic Orchestra in Brussels, has been following him for about a year and a half. “At first I thought ‘what a weirdo’ but I liked him and now I watch him nearly every day,” says Sierens. “He is not as highbrow as many. When people talk about wine, they always take themselves very seriously. For Gary, wine is for everyone, not just for those who know a lot about it.”

Professionals, too, have tremendous respect – not least because he can help them sell their wares. “I hadn't heard of him at all,” said Rob Newsom of Boudreaux Cellars in Washington State, “and one day I started getting calls about my 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon.” After the third caller mentioned Vaynerchuk, Newsom looked him up.

“One of my customers, a guy who lives in Ohio, had sent him a bottle. He tasted it on his show and went crazy. Within an hour or so, my phone was ringing off the wall. I sold all I had – 60 cases – within 48 hours.”

Newsom says Vaynerchuk “takes the pomp and pomposness” out of wine, and appeals to people who have been overlooked by the majority of the wine media – “the majority of people in general”.

“I think most people in the trade, too, think he's terrific,” says Newsom. “We all love to get high ratings in *Wine Spectator* and other magazines. I certainly hope to get a Parker 100. But we want to sell our wine and we realise it takes a lot of avenues.”

Marcio Ferreira, marketing manager at ViniPortugal, agrees. “As a marketing person, I have to keep on top of all channels and figure out which ones are going to be important. Robert Parker and *Wine Spectator* are very good, and have been very powerful for a long time,” he says. “But there is a shift in consumer perception toward more informal sources, independent blogs and other less traditional opinion-formers. The biggest thing we need to build Brand Portugal is to educate people, and this is exactly what Gary does.”

Not everyone is unreservedly fulsome about Vaynerchuk, however. After UK wine writer Jancis Robinson appeared on his show and wrote about her experience, one of her readers succinctly summed up why many British wine buffs just don't get him – and probably never will. Calling him ‘an ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder] wine hypemaster’, the reader derided his approach as “egregious” and congratulated Robinson for “putting him in his place” and teaching him to “drop the pretense”. (sic)

In fact what Robinson says she found at Vaynerchuk headquarters was the opposite of pretension. After pursuing him for an interview, and despite the difficulty of reaching him, she agreed to appear on his show and ended up in his messy office and recording studio. She was visibly startled by the volume of his introduction: he appears yet more excited than usual, describing her as the “most important guest in Wine Library TV history” (with apologies to all his other guests) – and urging her not to be “bashful” and tell the viewers how many books she has written. While she warms to the occasion, she described it as “fascinating” in a way that implies she didn't quite know what to make of Planet Vaynerchuk. “I can't think of anyone remotely like Gary on our side of the Atlantic,” says Robinson. “I think he is not so much quintessentially American as quintessentially NewYork/New Jersey.”

Robinson may have a point, not least because the US has led the world in its adoption of the tools of social media – without which Vaynerchuk the Brand might not exist. By way of context, Robinson has 3,650 Twitter followers and her website receives 400,000 page views a month. With over 750,000 followers, Vaynerchuk is nearly half way to having as many as Barack Obama.

Vaynerchuk gives the impression that if it wasn't wine, it would be something else. While clearly he loves the stuff, his phenomenal success is much more about sweat equity, smart business and the cult of personality than it is about a specific product.

Indeed, he has made no secret of his ambition to one day buy his local American football team, the New York Jets (pricetag: several \$bn). To do this, Vaynerchuk will have to sell more than just wine and books. No problem – after another 16-hour day, he's already thinking about the next product extension of Brand Vaynerchuk. ■



beer guy. I watched a few of his shows and ended up ordering wine from him. In a very short time I had 300 bottles in a Eurocave, and a spreadsheet.” What keeps Hadley going back is the lack of attitude. “Gary took away the whole stigma of not knowing about wine. If you understand something or it doesn't make sense, there's no shame in saying so.”

It is doubtless a sign of the times that Hadley was initially inspired to explore wine by a recommendation from someone on the 'net. And although aware of the far more established 'offline' sources of advice, he feels a stronger connection with Vaynerchuk.