The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Exile Chichvarkin Does Branding for Wine and Politics

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December 23, 2012



The self-exiled Chichvarkin standing in his new venture, Hedonism Wines.

LONDON — Oxford Street is illuminated by colorful Christmas decorations as cheerful crowds shop furiously. But a few miles away, in the prestigious Mayfair neighborhood, the number of consumers is not as significant as the high level of individual spending going on.

This is particularly true at one shop, whose owner's face is familiar to those acquainted with Russia's most famous entrepreneurs.

Hedonism Wines, run by self-exiled businessman Yevgeny Chichvarkin, is decked out like Santa Claus' house. And his usual flashy attire is attuned to the season.

Chichvarkin sports a heavy beard and bright red Christmas boots. But unlike Santa, he's not there to give away gifts but to earn money. He's counting on the Christmas crowd to buy his wines and spirits, whose prices peak at £120,000 ($193,000) for the rare 2004 Kalimna

Block 42 Cabernet Sauvignon, which is encased in an ampoule made of hand-blown glass.

"This is a retail store, not an auction or private collection. People buy our wine for holidays, or they might be huge wine fans," Chichvarkin said, sitting in the lower level of his 700-square-meter shop. "We have sold some very serious bottles: a Montrachet wine from 2005, Macallan whiskey from 1955, Napoleon cognac from 1811."

Given the shop's exotic offerings and corresponding prices, its name seems to make sense. Even the table at which Chichvarkin is sitting is decorated with fake wine stains, which Chichvarkin jokingly says were caused by a "fit of hedonistic delight."

"I can't say everything is exactly as we want it to be [in the shop], but the atmosphere that we managed to achieve is very cozy," he said, sitting among wooden shelves containing thousands of bottles.

He has built his ambience piece by piece: a dark-brown ceiling, a children's corner with iPads, books on wine and a record player with hundreds of rare records.

Chichvarkin has been completely immersed in his new business. In the four months since the shop opened, he has spent almost every day there.

"I am a board of directors of one person," he joked. "I made the decision to sell wine a couple of years ago. I saw there was a place beyond everything that already existed on the market. I instinctively felt there was a niche for me."

Chichvarkin, the sole owner of the shop, declined to say how much he had invested. And he is getting used to a business environment different from the one he left at home.

"This [Western] information world is not like Russia," he said. "After newspapers wrote that we opened the best wine shop, I was really scared that 3,000 people would show up the next day. But I underestimated that consumer inertness was so strong."

Although Chichvarkin acknowledges that his life in London is very Russian, he insists that Hedonism Wines was not created for his countrymen. The only Russian presence in the shop besides the owner is the vodka for sale.

"I am very isolated in terms of language," he said. "I write single-syllable messages [in English] because if I don't know a word I am embarrassed to admit it, so I am trying not to get into correspondence. I'm too lazy to learn the language."

"We have just one wine expert who speaks Russian," he continued. "Neighboring Berkeley Square is an old global financial center. Hedge fund managers, bankers, investors, asset managers live in the nearby buildings. They are our main customers. And, of course, we have celebrity buyers,"

As the well-known business adage asserts, location is everything.

"It is possible to open such a shop in Moscow, but prices would be twice as high because to import wine you need to pay monstrous taxes and give bribes to police officers and others," Chichvarkin said. "Here in London, you just need to pay high rent, high taxes and high

salaries."

But he doesn't conceal that he misses Russia, even though he enjoys London weather and likes British people for their hardworking character.

"I lived in Russia for 34 years. Of course I miss it," he said.

"When Putin dies of old age — and I will be very old too — I will come to Moscow," he said. "I won't open such a wine shop but will build a tourism village near Moscow."

Chichvarkin is very critical of the current Russian government and especially of President Vladimir Putin, acknowledging that he wouldn't be able to criticize openly if he lived in Russia.

"Putin is a guarantor of the largest corruption system in the world, the largest mafia state. He is very smart, very foxy and very evil," he said.

"Two major problems are coming his way. The first one is nonfulfillment of social obligations, and the second one is structural catastrophe," Chichvarkin went on to say. "These are two things Putin can't get escape. But instead of solving these problems, [officials] continue to steal as much as they can. Therefore, there's no chance they can hold out longer than 2017 or 2018.

"Plus, in line with global tendencies, there will be another reevaluation of oil, real estate, corn, everything around," he added. "The bubbles, some of which are already overinflated, will burst."

"After that, I will come back [to Russia]," the 38-year-old concluded. "The wine shop will be paid off by the end of 2015. The 2015 Christmas season sales will allow me to get back my investments. So wise in experience, a gray-haired man will come back to [Russia] to build heaven on earth."

He sympathizes with the Russian opposition and shares some of its liberal ideas, but he said it is not necessarily the current opposition that will create the revolution — which he believes is coming.

Instead, the foundation could also be ordinary people unhappy with fact the government hasn't fulfilled its social obligations," Chichvarkin said.

Chichvarkin applies his business thinking across the board, even to political and social issues.

"Ideology is the most important thing, but branding is an essential part," he said about his vision of an opposition strategy. "I met Ilya Yashin three years ago here [in London], told him about branding, about common color, common signs. A year and a half ago, I tried to explain that to Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Ashurkov.

"But we are a long way off from common branding. There still needs to be the realization that it has to become clear who is really with us and who isn't. When we achieve this, the regime will fall, because people will see how many there are of us, and how few of them."

"The most massive protests were held when all people were united by one color," he said. "When they got tired of putting on a white ribbon, the protest movement abated. Modern marketing is a huge thing. You may not watch television, but it directs our consciousness nonetheless."

"I'm speaking as if I weren't in the wine business but had decided to become a politician," he said, adding that he had inadvertently gotten involved in politics before and became active.

"But the past four months, I have been too busy with the wine shop," he said.

Asked if he would be a part of the current opposition if he was living in Russia, Chichvarkin became somber.

"If I decided to become a Coordination Council member, they would make up some criminal story, and I would have to leave the country anyway because I'm not ready to save everyone and be crucified for that. I'm not a hero," he said.

But he continues to support some initiatives in his homeland.

"I gave some money to [Khimki mayoral candidate Yevgenia] Chirikova's campaign. I hope I was an example for others. And I took part in Coordination Council voting," he said.

In Britain he feels safe, despite reports about assassinations of compatriots.

"[Alexander] Perepelichny's murder was hushed up because they were searching for polonium," he said. "To put people under stress before Christmas is a serious loss of political points. And Britain doesn't want to spoil relations with Russia while the deal of TNK-BP and Rosneft is under way, which is the last step of legalizing the assets stolen from [Yukos founder Mikhail] Khodorkovsky's company."

In the end, Chichvarkin says it's all about marketing.

"[William] Browder did the right thing," Chichvarkin said about the publicity campaign led by the head of the company that lawyer Sergei Magnitsky was working for before he died in prison. "The Yukos people, however intelligent they were, didn't do that — although they could have."

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