

The road to Damascus via San Vicente

Writing a column when you are actually on holiday is a tricky thing. The article itself, on Vodafone's pricing problems with the EU, had been relatively straightforward to complete. But finding an internet connection to submit it was proving to be a different matter altogether.

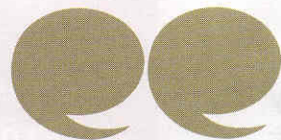
And so it was that last Friday I found myself driving madly around Rioja in northern Spain in a desperate search for an internet hot-spot. The agricultural region of Rioja offers visitors many distinct pleasures, but internet connectivity is not one of them. By five o'clock that afternoon I gave up the chase. My partner and I pulled into a little guesthouse near the tiny town of San Vicente for the evening.

We opted for the only restaurant in town, Casa Toni. We weren't expecting much: the town of San Vicente appeared to be no more than three streets and a church. Our expectations were not bolstered by the fact that when we arrived, shortly after 10pm, the only other diners in the place were the staff. Yet what followed, without going all Egon Ronay on you, was a sensation. The food was gobsmacking; the wine astronomical in quality but not price – and yet we were the only customers.

Fuelled by marketing indignation and two bottles of fine red wine, I began to explain in painstaking detail Casa Toni's key marketing mistakes to my partner. Clearly with food this good and a restaurant this empty, Casa Toni needed to market itself better – an integrated marketing campaign; some international PR. The food and wine were under-priced, so value was being lost. Rather than the single sitting every evening

that it currently offered, two sittings a table each night would double revenues. Toni could then open more Casas across Spain and then Europe. The marketing possibilities were endless.

My partner smiled at me and said: 'Perhaps they don't care about any of that.' From the



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kitchen, playful laughter echoed across the empty restaurant. And with perfect timing, a five-year-old girl ran out from the kitchen into the arms of a returning relative who had just walked in.

My partner was right. Casa Toni did not need a strategic turnaround. It was perfect. They made great food because they loved doing it. The owners were as content with a single customer as a full restaurant. They were not pricing their food and wine to maximise value, they were pricing it to sell. Casa Toni has



only one sitting every evening because diners should take as much time as they like for their meal. The idea of opening a second Casa Toni was inconceivable; why would such a thing be necessary?

Sometimes we work so tightly within an overtly capitalist model that we forget its prevailing influence. Most of us work for organisations that must increase annual turnover, profit and share price. Customer orientation is a means to these ends, rather than an end in itself. Most of us attempt to engineer artificially what Casa Toni had created naturally: a happy staff, a wonderful product, an amazing experience. We do it because it's the best way to increase stakeholder value. They do it for the sheer pleasure. Maybe I was the one who needed the turnaround.

My vacation ended the next day and I returned to London – a city where capitalism rules unnoticed and unchallenged; where restaurants run three sittings per table per night; where the same Spanish vintage that fuelled my original epiphany would now cost me four times as much. A city where marketing is very much a means to an end.

Next week, normal service resumes: Vodafone and the EU.

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30 seconds on... Rioja

- Rioja itself is not a type of grape, but rather the **biggest winemaking region of Spain**. Red wines from Rioja usually consist of Tempranillo grapes, but these are often complemented with a blend of Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano grapes.
- Red wines originating from Rioja are divided into four categories: **young**

unoaked Rioja, Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva, based on their quality and the length of time they have spent aging in the cask.

- The UK is the **biggest single export market for Rioja**, accounting for about 20% of global sales.

- Scientific research has suggested a link between moderate red wine consumption and **protection against a range of ailments** such as cancer, heart disease and herpes.
- Casa Toni can be found on **Zumalacarregui, 27 in San Vicente de la Sonsierra**. Bookings are highly unlikely to be necessary.