



A fistful of roubles

How many shebeens have you visited in your life? I've been to a few. One was in Diepkloof Extension (or Diepkloof Expensive, as envious neighbours refer to it – one of the more salubrious parts of Soweto). My friend Sello took me there to enjoy a Zamalek quart with some locals once.

Another shebeen was Chumley's in New York. This speakeasy started doing business in an anonymous West Village location at a time when the sale of alcohol was banned across the US, and had remained largely off the radar since.

A mate of mine shared the secret address when I first visited Manhattan – it looked like just another residential unit from the outside. But the interior was steeped in history. Covers of books that had reputedly been written on those very tables by legendary authors such as John Steinbeck and William Faulkner adorned the walls. But, though Chumley's survived Prohibition, the Great Depression, World War 2, September 11 and any number of other crises, it was killed off by Covid a few months into lockdown. It would have been 100 years old this year. Sad.

I also visited what is arguably the grandest shebeen in the world, only a hop, skip and jump from Berkeley Square and some of the most expensive properties in central London. Regulars might not like it that I refer to the place as a shebeen, but, as at Chumley's, I saw no outside signage providing any clue about the alcoholic and other delights to be encountered upon entering.

I'm referring to Alfred's, a members' club based in the only detached house in Mayfair, a building that was once home to the Duke of Westminster. The place is so exclusive that to this day it doesn't even have a website. I guess they don't want the riffraff to find out about it (please don't tell them I let you in on the secret).

No, I'm not a member of Alfred's, but I was lucky enough to crack an invite once. The name of the establishment



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provides a clue of its history: it shares a premises with luxury brand Alfred Dunhill. No surprise, then, that both are ultimately controlled by the same patron, one Mr Rupert. You may have heard about this gent; I'm told he's not short of a bob or two. As they say in and around greater Stellenbosch: "Net die beste vir die Boere, nè? [Only the best for the Boere, right?]"

Across the road from Alfred's is Hedonism, a wine shop as magnificent as its neighbour. It was founded in 2012 by Russian billionaire Yevgeny Chichvarkin, who originally made a fortune as co-owner of Yevroset, the largest cellphone retailer in Russia. Due to the resounding success of this business he ended up the richest man under 35 in Russia in the early 2000s, with a net worth approximating \$1.6bn.

Chichvarkin is nothing if not eccentric. Google his name and you'll find countless pictures of him sporting a Salvador Dalí moustache and a variety of colourful outfits. He also has extremely high standards. When looking for some top tipple after moving to the UK with a fistful of roubles 13 years ago, he was not impressed by either the variety or the service offered by Berry Bros & Rudd (the wine merchant with more than 300 years of history which holds royal warrants for the Queen and the Prince of Wales), or any of its competitors across London.

Against this background, Chichvarkin decided to take them all head-on, and opened a shop that caters for oligarchs and other ultra-rich members of society. Today the total stock is worth well in excess of £10m and includes more than 3,000 different spirits and 7,000 wines.

Looking for a bottle that goes for more than £10,000? Hedonism has no fewer than 200 different ones of those. If you'd like to impress your host at Saturday's braai, for example, perhaps consider a magnum of Romanée-Conti DRC 2005, a snip at £124,000 – it's the equivalent of two normal bottles, after all.

The success of Hedonism illustrates the UK's confused relationship with Russians and their money. For decades, Russians' riches were welcomed with open arms, all the way up to the highest echelons in Westminster. But after the invasion of Ukraine, these turned into a taboo overnight.

I wonder whether Hedonism is a purveyor of booze to Alfred's? It would certainly help with business, now that all the owner's Russian friends have taken their private jets to Dubai.

Perhaps Chichvarkin would need to become a fully paid-up member of the shebeen first. I guess it might also help if he starts learning Afrikaans. Can somebody arrange an interview with Mr Rupert, please?

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