

Beverage Journal

OCTOBER 2022

PROPELLING AMERICAN WHISKEY FORWARD

INSIDE AMERICAN
SINGLE MALT'S FIGHT
FOR RECOGNITION

THE NEW, U.S.
INDEPENDENT
WHISKEY BOTTLERS



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ABL HONORS RETAILERS OF THE YEAR

American Beverage Licensees (ABL) recognized outstanding bar and package liquor store owners from across the country as ABL Retailers of the Year at the ABL Annual Meeting in New Orleans in July. Nominated by their state licensed beverage associations for excellence in advocacy, commitment to responsible sales and service practices, community engagement, and support of their state association, these leaders are ambassadors of the vibrant retail alcohol marketplaces found in states throughout the country.

"The Retailer of the Year Awards provide ABL with an opportunity to honor our members – those individuals who serve as the face of the beverage alcohol industry to customers," said ABL Executive Director John Bodnovich. "After the last two years, we know how important they are in their communities and the role they play in keeping the social fabric of our country intact."

Whether operating on-premise bars or taverns, or off-premise beer, wine and liquor stores, these business owners are fitting examples of American entrepreneurship and the small businesses that create jobs that power the economy.

Due to the reaction to covid, and the cancellation of in-person ABL Annual Meetings in 2020 and 2021, this year ABL recognized Retailers of the Year from 2020, 2021 and 2022.

The 2020 ABL Retailers of the Year:

- Adam Blau | The Liquor Box | Independence, KY
- Doug Bryant | Sherlock's | Marietta, GA
- **Marshale Burgess | Rip's Country Inn | Bowie, MD**
- Judd Campbell | The Historic Wolf Hotel and Restaurant | Saratoga, WY
- Steve Conrad | Conrad's Saloon | Ashkum, IL
- Joe Hobbs | High Note Liquors | Nashville, TN
- Johnny Hudson & Jennifer Elliott | Catch 22 Bar | Tuscaloosa, AL
- Deanna Johnson | Fowler Liquors | Fowler, IN
- David LiSacchi | Midnight Liquors | Tonawanda, NY
- Massachusetts Retailer Plaintiffs in the 2020 Ballot Initiative Lawsuit | Massachusetts Package Stores



Association | Westborough, MA

- Justine Palmer | The Pour House/Midtown Tavern | Bozeman, MT
- Jay Patel | Liquor at Ovation | Davenport, FL
- Roshan Patel | C-Mart Spirits | Northport, AL
- Brad Schinke | Kamps Bar & Grill | Combined Locks, WI
- **Jimmy Spiropoulos | Town Center Market | Riverdale, MD**
- Scott Sturgeon | Party Stop, Inc. | Amarillo, TX

The 2021 ABL Retailers of the Year:

- Jennifer Collison | Local Folks | Burlington, WI
- Neal Pascale | Pascale's Liquors | Liverpool, NY
- Robert Selby | Kappy's Fine Wine & Spirits | Everett, MA
- Henry Tucker | Tuckers' Southside Package & Lounge | Lakeland, FL
- Kent Wiese | The Corner Keg | Highland, IL

The 2022 ABL Retailers of the Year:

- Stacy Barr & Mark Barr | Big Mike's | Big Spring, TX
- **Marshale Burgess | Rips's Country Inn | Bowie, MD**
- Judd Campbell | Hotel Wolf | Saratoga, WY
- Meghan Cimini-Jones | Yankee Spirits | Sturbridge, MA
- Connie Commesser | Hey Bryan's | East Moline, IL
- David Dean | Friendship Package | Opp, AL
- Don Mjelde | Richard Crainiums | Green Bay, WI
- Mark Notarius | Premium Wine & Spirits | Williamsville, NY
- Gary Reckers | Top Shelf Liquors | Milton, GA
- Travis Scheidt | Cork Liquors | Columbus, IN
- Neal Simms & The Simms Family | B&S Liquors | Panama City, FL
- Jeff Sirkin | Gallette's | Tuscaloosa, AL
- **Jimmy Spiropoulos | Town Center Market | Riverdale, MD**

ABL congratulates all of the honored businesses and licensees for their outstanding and continued contributions to their communities and the beverage alcohol industry.

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1. BATCH 22

Actor Matthew Arkin fell for aquavit on a European film set more than 40 years ago, and that passion has sparked the creation of Batch 22 Classic Gold, an American version of the traditional Scandinavian spirit created with partners Bruce Glassman and Marc Marosi. Instead of anise, fennel, and cumin, ingredients that typically define aquavit, the founders opted for a less overpowering citrus-spice-botanical recipe—fittingly the 22nd iteration—that emphasizes dill and caraway.

\$ SRP: \$39.99 per 750-ml bottle
📱 drinkbatch22.com

4. BREAD & BUTTER WINES

Bread & Butter's roster of everyday wines includes California Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, rosé, and a DOC Italian Prosecco. Its most recent innovation? A crisp, food-friendly Pinot Grigio spun from California grapes by winemaker Linda Trotta.

\$ SRP: \$15.99 per 750-ml bottle
📱 breadandbutterwines.com

2. SILVER OAK CELLARS

Family-owned Silver Oak Cellars produces only Cabernet Sauvignon from its Napa Valley and Alexander Valley wineries. Its latest offering, the Silver Oak Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon 2018, is rounded out with 4.2 percent Merlot and one percent Cabernet Franc. Aged in American oak barrels for 18 months after blending, the fruit-forward wine exhibits juicy cassis and pomegranate on the palate.

\$ SRP: \$90 per 750-ml bottle
📱 silveroak.com

5. RAGNARÖK RYE

Virginia distillery Catoctin Creek and American heavy metal band GWAR—which also has roots in the state—have teamed up once again for the second edition of Ragnarök Rye, which first made its debut in 2021. The 92-proof whiskey, aged in charred new white oak, sugar maple, and cherry wood barrels, is adorned with label artwork from GWAR's album, *The New Dark Ages*, and capped in collectible metal die-cast toppers that represent all five band members.

\$ SRP: \$99 per 750-ml bottle
📱 ragnarokrye.com

3. CITADELLE GIN

It was 1996 when Maison Ferrand owner and master blender Alexandre Gabriel introduced Citadelle, the revolutionary French gin marrying 19 botanicals. To celebrate the spirit's 25-year anniversary—and its state-of-the-art distillery that opened in Cognac last year—Gabriel has released Citadelle Gin Juniper Décadence. Aged in small, custom juniper casks, it has a smoky, herbaceous profile rife with juniper, pepper, coconut, and ginger.

\$ SRP: \$34.99 per 700-ml bottle
📱 citadellegin.com

6. LINDEN LEAF

Harmonious bundles of botanical molecules are the backbone of Cambridge, England-based Linden Leaf's 88 Organic Molecular Gin and Singularity Organic Molecular Vodka, now available stateside. The sipping gin comprises 88 flavor molecules from 28 botanicals (20 percent of them fresh) like yuzu, calamansi, grains of paradise, and Aztec sweet herb, while the silky vodka stars an organic, non-GMO mix of wheat, barley, rye, and ancient grains such as spelt.

\$ SRP: \$38.88 to \$28.99 per 750-ml bottle
📱 shoplindenleaf.com



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7. RENEGADE RUM

The Caribbean island of Grenada flaunts motley terroirs and Renegade Rum Distillery—from Mark Reynier of Waterford Whisky fame—is putting them front and center with its quartet of Single Farm Origin white rums. Highlighting different cane varieties and distillation styles, the pre-cask collection spans Nursery, from La Calome Valley; Hope, influenced by pyroclastic boulders; and Lake Antoine, one from cane grown on Lower Crater Lake South and the other from Upper Crater Lake South.

\$ SRP: \$65 per 700-ml bottle
🌐 renegaderum.com

8. HARD ROCK GRAB 'N' GO COCKTAILS

Hard Rock International expands its ready-to-drink portfolio of hard seltzers and classic libations with Grab 'N' Go Cocktails under the license of Stewart's Enterprise Holdings, Inc. First up: breezy, single-serve cans (10% ABV) of Long Island Iced Tea and New Orleans favorite, the Hurricane.

\$ SRP: \$2.99 per 19.2-oz cans
🌐 hardrock.com

9. WILDERTON

Portland, Oregon-based Wilderton crafts non-alcoholic spirits with raw botanicals from around the globe, including smoky Earthen and bright Lustre. Now, there's the spritz-ready Bittersweet Aperitivo, melding grapefruit, orange blossom, and Italian lemon with sandalwood, gentian, and wormwood. Chardonnay grape juice adds a balanced wine-like jolt of sweetness.

\$ SRP: \$34.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 wildertonfree.com

10. BRISTOW GIN

Bristow Gin, produced at Mississippi's Cathead Distillery, has rolled out a bold seven-year-old Barrel Aged Reserve alongside its one- and four-year-old expressions. One of the oldest barrel-aged gins to hit the market, it is reminiscent of a whiskey, layered with notes of mature oak, caramel, and vanilla.

\$ SRP: \$100 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 catheaddistillery.com

11. SCOUT WILD

Scout & Cellar, the fast-growing winery founded by Sarah Shadonix, has partnered with Miller Family Wine Company to unveil Scout Wild, a line of wines spawned from grapes grown without toxic pesticides and free of artificial ingredients. The inaugural lineup of California Sauvignon Blanc, rosé, and a red blend—Scout & Cellar's first foray into retail—all embrace the brand's trademark Clean-Crafted Commitment.

\$ SRP: \$18.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 scoutandcellar.com

12. LITTLE BOOK

For "To the Finish," Chapter 6 of Freddie Noe's Little Book Whiskey series, the eighth-generation master distiller of the Fred B. Noe Distillery turned to the kitchen for inspiration. The five complementary liquids Noe combined in the 117.45-proof whiskey take cues from the woods he smokes in the grill for family meals. A five-year-old Kentucky straight bourbon is joined by four-year-old straight malt whiskeys finished with cherry and maple wood staves as well as hickory- and apple wood-smoked barrels.

\$ SRP: \$124.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 littlebookwhiskey.com

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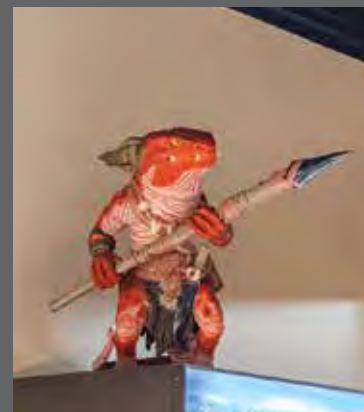


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Bard's Bistro

Serves Dungeon Masters and Commoners Alike

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY NATALIE GRACE PHOTOGRAPHY

These days, people will sit around a bar or restaurant and go back and forth about everything from sports to politics to the Kardashians. At the new Bard's Bistro in California, Md., most of the customers are bandying about who is going to be Dungeon Master and what each players' ability scores are going to be. Yes, Bard's Bistro is a "Dungeons & Dragons"-themed eating and drinking place. Actually, it is meant to cater to gamers of all types and persuasions. But "D&D" more than anything.

Owner Rebecca Ali opened Bard's earlier this year as an extension of her High Tide Games store that she has been operating since March 2013. During a recent interview with the Beverage Journal for our ongoing series on themed bars and res-

taurants around the state, she remarked, "What makes this different is that I already knew many of the people who would be my customers before opening. Yes, they're my customers. But I know them like they are family. I know that sounds cliché. But I

really feel connected to this group of people. So when I was looking to come up with the concept for the restaurant and figure out the menu and everything, I wanted to have food and drinks that I would be proud to serve my family. It's been a journey, but



Rebecca Ali
Owner
Bard's Bistro

I've stuck with that [basic philosophy]. I'm a part of this community, and I want to make it better."

High Tide Games welcomes gamers of all ages and playing abilities. It features a large open space for them to learn, play, and compete in card games, board games, role-playing games, and table-top miniature games. The store also offers a separate room for holding private games, parties, or classes. Ali wanted Bard's Bistro to

be just as inviting. And, indeed, the interior feels like you have stepped into your favorite game of "D&D."

"Everybody knows about 'Dungeons & Dragons,'" Ali said. "It's a table-top role-playing game. It's very fantasy-themed. We have a big community here locally of 'D&D' players and it's growing. A lot of younger kids and people have gotten into it, and even that crowd is growing. The whole 'Stranger Things' [a popular Netflix

show that has incorporated the game into its overall story arc since debuting in 2016]. phenomenon really put it into overdrive. When I was going to expand my business and open the restaurant, I thought, 'What better way to connect the restaurant to the store than to make it a Dungeons & Dragons theme?' One of the most popular things in 'D&D' is at the beginning of the game, you go into your local tavern. You're sitting there, somebody approaches you, and they give you a quest to go on. It's a part of the game, and it lends itself well to some fun in the real world."

The theme has led to fun and creative business choices for Ali and her crew, too. The menu design is one example. There is the "Sharpshooter Board" instead of the charcuterie board for an appetizer. Other food selections include the Adventurer's Salad and the Barbarian Pretzel.

As for beverages, the fun continues with some equally fun libations. "With

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people here for several hours, serving drinks is a good idea," Ali stated. "They can relax and not have to worry about driving five minutes later. The drinks are fairly new to us. We just got our liquor license last month [this interview was conducted the last week of August]. I'm trying to stick to what a D&D tavern would be like. Some of the beers that I have on tap are not your traditional domestic beers. I don't have Bud Lite or Blue Moon or any of that stuff. I have things like a Smores stout and a vanilla barrel ale and a blood orange IPA. These are all drinks you might find if you walk into a tavern in a D&D game."

She continued, "Then, I have some bottles of what you'd call 'mead,' which my distributor told me, 'We don't sell mead very often. Everybody that's tries it doesn't sell it.' And I'm like, 'I feel like I can sell it.' And [laughing] we've been through cases of mead! We have a scotch ale that has a really high alcohol content, but it's smooth and people are really loving that one. I also have some wines I've brought in from the local winery, Port of Leonardtown. And our mixed drink menu has been a lot of fun. We're serving them in potion bottles like you would have in a game. In some games, you buy a potion, you drink it, and something would happen. So, we're doing fairy bottles and Alchemist's Fire and the Potion of Healing. There's so much you can do with the theme that it's really fun."

And how did Ali find the process of obtaining a liquor license? She was quick to answer: "Here in St. Mary's County, it is a process.

But if you go through it step by step, it's not impossible. There is training and background checks. There is a petition and you have to have the community sign off on it. There's lots of paperwork. And then you have to go before the alcohol beverage board, which is made up of elected officials. It was a very formal meeting and a bit intimidating. There is an administrator for the board, and she sets up the initial meeting and lays out everything you need to do. When you have questions, she answers them for you. So, she was really helpful. It was just a matter of going through all of the procedures."

From a distance, one would assume that Bard's Bistro's clientele is somewhat limited. But that is not the case, according to Ali. Yes, she was able to start with an already loyal customer base. But in the months since opening, she and her staff have noticed a growing diversity among the paying public.

"Mix is a good word for our customers," she said. "People come into the store to play games. They are usually there for several hours at a time. And every day of the week, it changes. Wednesdays are D&D. Fridays are Magic the Gathering [a strategy card game]. Sundays are Pokemon. Every single one of those events that happens every week has a different crowd that it draws in. Pokemon tends to be younger. D&D is sort of all across the board. Magic is mid- to late-20s. Board gamers tend to be older. Also, we are right near a Navy base. So, we are getting the lunch crowds from the base. I've also noticed a lot of people wandering in from the community because they've heard our food is good."

Looking ahead, Ali expressed positivity as her most pronounced real-life super power and ability. Part of her charm is that she never considers herself a business person. Her background is actually in computer programming. But she sounded very much like an entrepreneur when she offered this bit of advice: "One thing that someone told me early on, and it's stuck with me, is 'Just focus on making money.' That sounds silly. But it's really easy to get caught up in ideas and lose sight of how to make those ideas happen, which is by having money. Whatever it is you are doing is fine . . . as long as you are making the money!" ■



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THE NEW FINANCIALS OF RUNNING A WINE PROGRAM

HOW BEVERAGE DIRECTORS ARE DOING MORE WITH LESS
IN A TRANSFORMED RESTAURANT ENVIRONMENT

BY ERIK SEGELBAUM

Beverage programs have always been integral to the financial success of restaurants. While food sales might typically account for 60 to 70 percent of gross revenue, the beverage category often accounts for 80 percent or more of gross profit dollars. There are myriad reasons for this, such as beverage's smaller loss, lower labor costs, and less prep variation. Plus, it's not nearly as perishable as food. Simply put, it costs far less to put a bottle of wine on a table than it does an entrée or dessert.

Though the restaurant industry is inching its way back to operational nor-

malcy, the way beverage programs are run has irrevocably changed. Now more than ever, profitable beverage programs are hyper-important to a restaurant's success, due to factors like increased operating costs (such as outdoor dining construction and single-use items), wage and benefit increases necessary to retain staff, and diminished capacity for some restaurants.

On top of all this, budgets have been slashed and inventories have been reduced, forcing beverage directors to do more with less. Bobbie Burgess, the wine director of Restaurant Tyler in Starkville, Mississippi, was asked to downsize her list, reduce carrying inventory, and dra-

matically lower her beverage cost of goods sold (COGS). "Our COGS margin pre-COVID was at about 33 percent," she says. "Since COVID, that number has changed to about 22 to 30 percent—while we've simultaneously been asked to push sales."

This seems to be an industry-wide phenomenon. "Beverage programs are always a hustle," says Andy Myers, MS, the current wine director for Koha-naiki resort in Kona, Hawaii. "Times are good? You're expected to triple revenues and cut costs by a third. Times are lean? You're expected to double revenues and cut costs in half ... Beverage programs are looked at like golden-egg-laying geese,

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but too many people have no idea how expensive it is to feed a goose!"

So how does one achieve this? In interviewing a number of beverage professionals from programs large and small, varying from upscale casual to Michelin star fine dining, a number of common themes were revealed. Welcome to the brave new world of on-premise beverage financial management.

BLEND YOUR BTG COSTS

A well-curated BTG program can be a lifesaver for most restaurants. This extends far deeper than simply having an interesting selection; a BTG program is the true workhorse of beverage program profitability. The right selections at strategic prices can pave (and pay) the way for revenue-driving options that might bring in more dollars even if they carry higher COGS percentages.

For example, a \$10 glass of sparkling that costs \$6 to \$8 per bottle can accommodate a BTG Champagne that should be \$40 per glass but can be sold for a compelling \$25. The increased COGS percentage of the Champagne is offset by the higher margin of the less expensive sparkling, while the high-end pour simultaneously generates more gross profit dollars with each sale.

GET CREATIVE TO BRING VALUE TO BTG

With rising costs, many beverage managers are pressured to increase prices across the board. "We are being asked to charge more for certain items [than we would like]," says Raquel Ortega-Torres, the wine

"Beverage programs are looked at like golden-egg-laying geese, but too many people have no idea how expensive it is to feed a goose."

— Andy Myers, MS, Kohanaiki Resort

director of Imperfecto in Washington, D.C. "We need to be conscious of the underlying cost of items we are carrying."

Rather than categorically raising prices—a tactic that is often noticed and typically not well-received—one strategy is to switch out existing placements for similar wines with higher margins. For instance, instead of increasing a BTG Malbec by \$2, source a new one with lower COGS that can be sold at the same price.

Wine directors can also change up BTG offerings more frequently. This allows an operation to continually serve wines at higher price points or with more appealing margins without guests feeling gouged. "Pricing follows our passion and palates, but of course you want to find those gems that help you remain stable and supported at the same [cost], or lower," says Kat Thomas, the wine director of Ada's Wine Bar in Las Vegas.

Effective application of this strategy

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Bobbie Burgess, the wine director of Restaurant Tyler in Starkville, Mississippi // Andy Myers, MS, the wine director for Kohanaiki resort in Kona, Hawaii

includes seeking wines outside of the local market's competitive set (rather than offering the same BTG that half a dozen restaurants nearby are pouring). Embrace unique regions, varieties, and cuvées, but don't venture so far into the obscure that the list alienates would-be wine drinkers. A healthy program must still be approachable—not woefully esoteric.

THINK ABOUT BEVERAGE BEYOND WINE

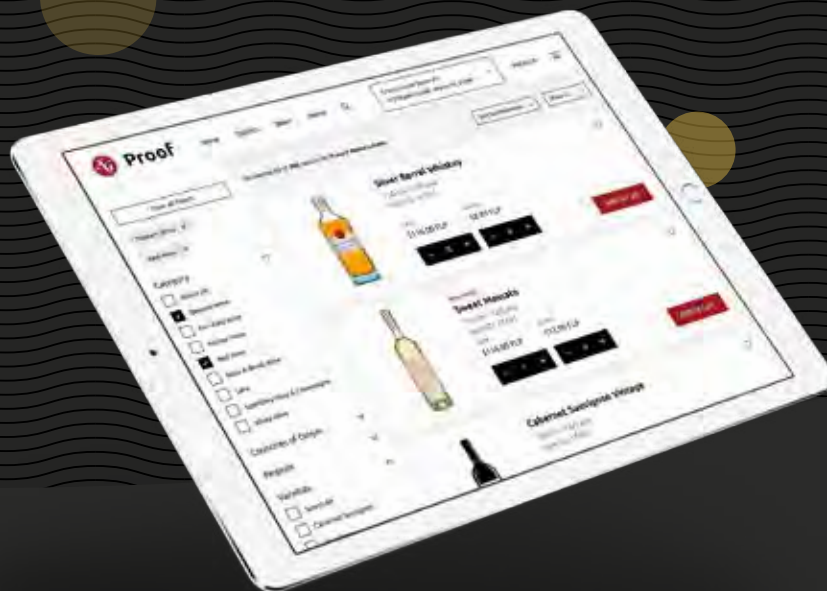
Outside of wine, many restaurants are seeing a surge of interest in cocktails and non-alcoholic beverage offerings, both of which can be financial boons. When Yannick Benjamin opened Contento in NYC, it was known for having a thoughtful, adventurous wine list. However, post-pandemic drinking habits have shifted some focus into cocktails. "Our bar has expanded exponentially as we have a very strong demand for cocktails," notes Benjamin.

Non-alcoholic beverages are another incredible source of revenue and profitability. Many more diners are avoiding alcohol, so a program limited to the soda gun is a massive missed opportunity. The combination of a simple shrub, fresh fruit, soda water, and a garnish not only provides an exciting and interesting option, but can also run at an extremely high profit margin. Typically, these types of non-alcoholic cocktails cost 20 to 30 cents to produce and can be sold for \$8 to \$15. Plus, it demonstrates mindfulness by providing enjoyable and unique options to those who prefer not to drink alcohol.

SCRUTINIZE BEVERAGE SALES DATA

While regular check-ins on the financial health of a beverage program have always been important, now is a vital time to take a deep dive. Assess the program's product mix and ensure that the highest-selling beverage items are also contributing the most gross profit dollars to the

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bottom line. Something can sell well at a high price point while also hemorrhaging money or failing to contribute meaningfully to the program's gross profit.

This isn't about percentages. While COGS is an important metric, owners don't deposit percentage points in the bank. A bottle that has a high COGS percentage but contributes \$100 of real, gross profit is far more valuable than a low COGS bottle that only contributes \$40 of gross profit.

In order to drive sales to these higher gross profit dollar items, it is important to accept a higher COGS percentage in order to make expensive options more compelling. This will increase sales frequency of these more expensive items, providing greater gross revenue and greater gross profit dollars for the operation.

STRATEGIZE BOTTLE PRICE POINTS

In order to maximize consumer spend, it's important to maintain a balanced by-the-bottle list, particularly within popular categories of purchasing. The BTB program should have gradual steps between price points rather than large gaps—for example, an \$80 Pinot Noir and a \$150 Pinot Noir, without options in between.

These gaps have become more common as restaurants have burned through inventory without replacing it, seeking lower inventory carrying costs, but it's time to fill them. The goal is to make it as easy as possible for a guest to spend incrementally more without feeling gouged or pi-



geonholed into a choice. When there aren't logical steps between price points, guests are more likely to trade down; in the Pinot Noir example, a guest who would have happily purchased a \$120 bottle is less likely to increase their budget to \$150 and will more often opt for the \$80 bottle. Not only could this be a less satisfying experience for them, but it also means \$40 of potential gross revenue was left on the table.

LEVERAGE SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIPS TO MANAGE INVENTORY

Not only are buyers being asked to do more with less money—they're also being asked to do more with less inventory. In some cases, these inventory reductions are mandated by ownership in an attempt to increase cash flow and liquidity, but supply chain issues have also led to inventory reductions. "When you cannot get product from the state you have to search for it, and unfortunately, sometimes buying everything a liquor store has in a certain SKU still doesn't equal a full case," says Burgess, who works in a control state. "Some of our by-the-bottle selections only consist of two to four bottles." Adds Ortega-Torres, "We are forced to accept a greater chance of 86s on our list."

Some see an upside in operating with reduced inventories. "We lowered the number of selections from pre-pandemic, leading to less waste and more buying power with a more limited scope," says Brahm Callahan, MS, the corporate beverage director for Boston's Himmel Hospitality Group.

LEFT: Yannick Benjamin, the owner of Contento in NYC // ABOVE: Raquel Ortega-Torres, the wine director of Imperfecto in Washington, D.C.



Whatever the reason for a program's inventory reduction, supplier relationships make all the difference in coping. Strong, mutual supplier partnerships can allow buyers to access special deals or take advantage of by-the-glass or quantity discounts, where allowed. "Our reps have helped us to get ahead of cost increases, reserving cases for purchase prior to a jump in price and working with us on bottle cost in exchange for featuring items BTG," says Ortega-Torres.

Maintaining open communication with sales reps can also help beverage directors plan for delayed orders, which can lead to loss of continuity for BTG products and outages of popular liquor brands. In these conversations, buyers can set realistic usage expectations and ask suppliers to lock down inventory for the restaurant's needs; they can also seek out alternatives for delayed BTG placements.

Even when buyers lack the budget or space to take advantage of quantity discounts, supplier relationships can come in handy. Suppliers can often provide quantity discounts with a commitment to future quantity, even if a buyer cannot take the product all at once. Many suppliers will also offer a bill and hold option if space, rather than budget, is the issue. As both of these options require multiple layers of approval, it's essential to have strong relationships to make this happen.

A global pandemic and its related supply chain issues have dramatically shifted the way beverage programs must operate. In order to stay successful, buyers must recognize and embrace the new financials of running a beverage program. ■

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THE SLOW BURN OF AMERICAN SINGLE MALT

AFTER A SIX-YEAR FIGHT FOR OFFICIAL RECOGNITION, IS IT FINALLY
AMERICAN SINGLE MALT'S TIME TO SHINE?

BY AMY ZAVATTO

During a fierce blizzard at the bitter end of winter in March 2016, nine American distillers gathered at Binny's Beverage Depot in Chicago to hash out a definition for the nascent category of American single malt whiskey.

"We gave ourselves four hours to discuss what would be figured out in 45 minutes," laughs Matt Hofmann, the master distiller and cofounder of Westland Distillery, a 100 percent single

malt producer in Seattle. To him and his cohorts—who that same day also formed the American Single Malt Whiskey Commission (ASMWC)—it was a no brainer. With the abundant availability of barley (thanks, in part, to the growing craft beer industry), the fascinating potential of regional style and climatic influences, and the global thirst for single malt whiskeys, the notion of officially establishing American single malt seemed a shoo-in.

Six years later, the application to make that definition official has finally made it through the door of the Bureau of Trade, Tobacco, and Firearms (TTB), which announced on July 29, 2022 what Hofmann and the other ASMWC founding members have been wait-

ing for: An amendment to federal law 27 CFR part 5 to include American single malt whiskey as a distinctive product worthy of its own official standards of identity, codified into U.S. law. At the time of writing, it was in the requisite public comment period.

For producers making American single malt—which grew from a few pioneers of the category in the late '90s and early aughts, like McCarthy's Single Malt from Hood River in Oregon and St. George Spirits in Alameda, California, to over 200 today—it's been a long road just to get to the beginning. But in the crowded U.S. whiskey arena, where bourbon is booming and rye is king, will the few lines added to the current TTB regulations be enough to make the category stand out? Or is it just another novel liquid notion doomed to dissipate like whiskey evaporating into the ether? Hundreds of distillers are gambling on the former—and there's reason to believe they may well be right.

THE NEW (OLD) DEFINITION OF AMERICAN SINGLE MALT

Indeed, Hofmann, along with his former marketing director at Westland, Steve Hawley, and the other distillers at the table on that frigid day years ago—among them, Balcones Distilling in Austin, Texas; Westward Distillery in Portland, Oregon; Few Spirits in Evanston, Illinois; Triple Eight Distillery on Nantucket, Massachusetts; Santa Fe Spirits in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Virginia Distillery Co. in Lovington, Virginia; Headframe Spirits in Butte, Montana; and Copperworks Distilling in Seattle—quickly agreed on the basic tenets to define American single malt.

"As we understood them, and which are enshrined into law in other countries, single malt must be made in one single distillery. It is malt, meaning 100 percent malted barley, and, for our purposes, it's made in America," says Hofmann. "The only thing that's really different from the Scottish definition is we allow use of any type of still, where they use pot still only."



OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Owen Martin, the head distiller at Stranahan's // Westland Distillery // ABOVE: Matt Hofmann, the cofounder and master distiller at Westland Distillery

So why did it take so long for the TTB to get on board? It wasn't that they weren't amenable or it isn't a good idea; it was more a case of bad timing. Not long before the ASMWC launched, the TTB kicked off a massive, 144-page overhaul of the federal standards of identity for all spirits categories, a huge, time-consuming undertaking in its own right. Add to that an administration change at the highest level and a government shutdown, and, well, American single malt was just going to have to wait in line a little longer than expected.

"I've been flying to D.C. and sitting in front of [the TTB] saying this needs to be a priority for the last six months," says Hawley, who has been president of the ASMWC since its inception. "My sole goal has been to keep it at the top of their priority list." With the overhaul of old regulations sewn up and a new executive order by the Biden administration to encourage more competition in the alcohol space, it seems American single malt's time has come.

HOW AMERICAN DISTILLERS ARE DIFFERENTIATING

The unique character of American single malt, as compared to other country's versions of the same, may be the real muscle in making the category fly. In addition to

having ample access to the necessary agricultural resource (barley), distillers embrace a spirit of *vive la différence* here, pushing to differentiate it even within the confines of its narrow definition.

"I'm excited to see regional diversity. Scotland as a region is only as big as Texas, and the temperature doesn't vary that much. But in the U.S., you'll see regional differences all over the place because the country is huge," says Owen Martin, the head distiller for Stranahan's in Colorado, who has been focused on making single malt since its founding in 2004. "Single malt spirits here allow for embracing regional differences that add a unique character to the category."

Nora Ganley-Roper and Adam Polonski, the owners of Lost Lantern, a Vermont-based independent bottler of craft whiskey, have been keeping an eager eye on American single malt's development and consumer demand for it, slowly but surely adding bottles to their stock. "We think that Balcones in Texas is doing an amazing job of exploring what single malt from a hot and dry climate looks like; it's something not seen anywhere else in the world," says Ganley-Roper. "We also really like what's going on in American single malt in the Southwest, with distillers like Santa Fe Spirits and Whiskey Del Bac in Tucson, which are both independently making single malt smoked with mesquite wood. It's a distinctly regional answer to Scottish peat."

American single malt makers are also wisely using the category's lesser-known status in the U.S. on a broad level to learn from the mistakes of other single malt-producing countries. Creativity and regional style aside, as competition ramps up, legally defining the category means less problems with faux imitators, lawsuits, and headaches down the road. Japan in particular has suffered from lack of a legal definition for its whisky, despite commercial production dating back to the 1920s, and evidence of whisky distilling going back 50 years before that. "Japan has a long history of complications with single malt because they never defined what whisky and malt whisky meant in Japan," says Hawley. As a result, "there are unscrupulous players making and selling fake single malt at a premium."

Meanwhile, the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States has successfully worked to get countries like Japan to officially recognize American whiskey categories, such as bourbon. Up to now, however, Japanese importers wouldn't recognize American single malt. "The response we got from Japanese regulators on American single malt was if you guys don't recognize the category domestically, then we won't recognize it here until you do," says Hawley. Once the standards of identity are accepted, Japan and other countries ripe for exporting will broaden the consumer base for American single malt internationally.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS WITH EDUCATION

American single malt's anonymity to a larger audience isn't just about regulation. It's safe to assume that your average whiskey dabbler doesn't regularly peruse the TTB's multi-page section on spirits regulations, but consumer education is only part of where American single malt's issues lie.

"I've seen American single malt grouped with Scotch whisky and Japa-

nese whisky sections of stores. I've seen American single malt listed on a menu with bourbon and just scattered all over," says Christian Krogstad, the founder of Westward Whiskey, which has been solely focused on making American single malt for a decade. "The consumer piece is hardest, but it's coming along because the trade is finally getting behind American single malt. More and more, you're seeing liquor stores and bars with an American single malt section. Total Wine, for example, is going to do an experiment in 20 stores creating an American single malt section. It's happening! And it's getting shelf space."

Another issue American single malt is slowly overcoming is that of barrel age. "Name more than one or two American single malts that are over 10 years old. Age is a big factor; despite [the fact] that it doesn't necessarily mean quality, consumers think that way," says Colton Weinstein, the cofounder of roving distilling outfit Liba Spirits, who also dabbled in single malt expressions while the head distiller for Corsair. Current releases of American single malts with more than a decade of age include Triple Eight Distillery's American single malt, the Notch, with 12- and 15-year-old releases available, and Stranahan's, which began releasing Mountain Angle, its 10-year-old single malt, in 2020. Others are likely to follow.

ABOVE: Lost Lantern Whiskey // BELOW: Aged whiskey samples of Westward Whiskey



BIG BRAND SUPPORT IS THE NEXT STEP

"Perhaps the larger issue is the big guys haven't released any, so there are no vast marketing campaigns to educate consumers about the category," says Weinstein. "So much money is behind bourbon as a category, but you don't see that with American single malt yet."

This is quietly changing. Jack Daniels recently announced the release of a trio of bottled-in-bond whiskeys; one, the Triple Mash, contains 20 percent single malt Tennessee whiskey in the mix. Hot on its heels is its limited-edition release, a 100 percent American single malt finished in Oloroso sherry casks, which will hit the shelves this fall. And while Beam-Suntory would not comment on rumors to the same effect, it seems there may well be a Beam single malt in the works as well.

With bigger brands on board, that means more pressure to educate and define American single malt from a retail and on-premise perspective—something American single malt producers have been working at for a long time. The establishment of official standards of identity, when passed, means the trade will, at last, have clear product identification from which to position and promote it.

"To some extent, you have to see some clear, sustained profitability. I don't think it's right around the corner that big companies will buy up or create their own single malt, but in the long run I can see that, and it's where the TTB designation will help," says Clay Risen, a whiskey expert and author. "If the public recognizes it as a category, then they'll begin to ask for it, for sure. It will be par for the course." ■

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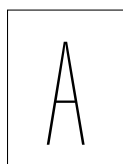




MEET THE NEW INDEPENDENT WHISKEY BOTTLERS

THESE U.S. PRODUCERS ARE ADAPTING A SCOTTISH PRACTICE TO MAKE
WHISKEYS BY BLENDING BARRELS FROM SELECT CRAFT DISTILLERS

BY ROGER MORRIS



A new breed of American whiskey producer is copying a trusted page from Scotland's book of whisky-crafting traditions—they blend and bottle whiskeys that someone else has distilled.

Called independent bottlers, they search out the best and oldest barrels from both craft distillers and major producers across

the U.S. and Canada, purchase them, and then create innovative blends, usually in small batches of a few hundred bottles. Some of these blends are made to become standard, repeatable brands, while others are simply one-off bottlings. And not all purchased barrels are bound for blending.

"We mainly do blends, but occasionally we will find a barrel that is particularly interesting—something unique—and earmark it to sell as a single barrel," says Joe Beatrice, the founder of Bar-



rell Craft Spirits [*sic*], an “independent blender” in Louisville, the heart of bourbon country.

In the way they are assembled, these new blended American whiskeys are similar to the Scotch blended malt whiskies, such as Johnnie Walker or Chivas Regal, which were dominant during the late 20th century before single malts began gaining market share.

Dave Schmier, the founder of Proof and Wood in New Canaan, Connecticut, says the practice of independent bottling also has historical roots in the U.S. “Before Prohibition, most of the bottlers along Whiskey Row in Louisville were not distillers—they bought barrels and blended them,” he says.

A NEW ERA OF INDEPENDENT BOTTLER

When Vermont-based independent bottler Lost Lantern released its first vatted whiskey in 2020, it was a blend of barrels from six craft distillers—Balcones in Austin, Texas; Copperworks in Seattle; Santa Fe Spirits in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Triple Eight Distillery on Nantucket, Massachusetts; Westward Whiskey in Portland, Oregon; and Virginia Distillery Co. in Lovington, Virginia. “Our process is to first visit a promising distillery and choose barrels we like and take samples from them,” says Adam Polonski, the cofounder of Lost Lantern. “When we get the samples home, we

“Before Prohibition, most of the bottlers along Whiskey Row in Louisville were not distillers—they bought barrels and blended them.”

– Dave Schmier, Proof and Wood

taste them again, then buy the barrels we want for blending.” Because of their growing reputation and the costs involved, Lost Lantern’s blended whiskeys often sell for more than \$100 a bottle.

Independent bottlers also make an important semantic distinction between “blended whiskeys” and “whiskey blends.” “A whiskey blend may legally have neutral spirits [unflavored alcohol] in it, while by blended whiskeys, we mean the same as blended malts with no neutral spirits,” Beatrice explains.

Barrell Craft was one of the first of the new breed of indies. “I got the idea to make whiskey without going to the expense of building a distillery in 2012, and it took me more than a year to put things together,”

says Beatrice, a former internet entrepreneur. “We sold our first case in 2014.” Today, he produces more than a million bottles annually, including blends finished in previously used barrels housing everything from pear brandy to sherry.

Lost Lantern took a similar path but, Polonski maintains, they had an added motivation. Polonski, a trade journalist, formed Lost Lantern with Nora Ganley-Roper because “there are so many really great craft producers out there who only sell locally,” he says. “Lost Lantern can help give them national exposure,” either by using their whiskeys in blends or selling single barrels.

Giving credit where credit is due to craft distillery partners is important, says Blake Riber, a whiskey blogger who founded Seelbach’s in 2018 to sell online whiskeys made by both craft producers and independent bottlers—whom he calls “blenders.” “Blenders are beginning to get some respect,” he says, citing the practice some years ago for some distillers and bottlers to fake or not reveal their sources. “But today, blenders like Lost Lantern and Pursuit are very transparent in telling who distilled their whiskey.”

Pursuit Spirits was founded in 2018 by hosts of the *Bourbon Pursuit* whiskey podcast, Ryan Cecil and Kenny Coleman, to bottle and sell single barrels from craft distillers to their built-in audience of whiskey lovers. But because a barrel may

OPPOSITE: Nora Ganley-Roper and Adam Polonski of Lost Lantern // ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Joe Beatrice of Barrell Craft Spirits // Kenny Coleman of Pursuit Spirits

"I got the idea to make whiskey without going to the expense of building a distillery in 2012, and it took me more than a year to put things together."

– Joe Beatrice, Barrell Craft Spirits

produce around 200 bottles or less, "A single barrel isn't scalable," Coleman notes. A blender, on the other hand, can produce hundreds of bottles by combining barrels, so Pursuit began blending as well.

Although independent bottlers don't distill whiskey, Beatrice says there is an art in blending it. Like others, he has built up a library of barrels, and he and his team "sit down and 'whiteboard' what we want in a blend, then we have lots of trials in the laboratory before coming up with what we will blend." But rather than dumping everything into the 6,000-gallon blending tank that Barrell Craft uses, they first assemble less than half according to formula, then slowly build up the rest in 10 percent increments, adjusting by taste as they go along.

EXPANDING A CRAFT DISTILLER'S NETWORK

Marketing strategies of the independents vary. Pursuit, Coleman says, originally planned to be "totally digital" in selling directly to podcast "patrons," but now also has sales through distributors. Lost Lantern put together an extensive retail network. "We don't actually sell directly to consumers, but we partner with online-focused retailers that, between them, can ship to around 40 states," says Polonski. A



minority of independent bottles are sold through brick-and-mortar retailers.

So, what's in it for the craft distillers? Cash-strapped producers may need this upfront money. But Herman Mihalich, the founder and distiller at highly-rated



ABOVE TOP: Dad's Hat Distillery // ABOVE: Herman Mihalich of Dad's Hat Distillery

Dad's Hat near Philadelphia, points out he can make more money bottling the barrel himself than by selling the same barrel to a blender.

However, like most craft distilleries, he sees an upside. "Lost Lantern contacted me last fall," says Mihalich, "and when they tasted barrels, they talked me into selling them two—one that was finished in a vermouth cask, which isn't all that common." He transferred the two barrels via food-grade containers to Lost Lantern to bottle, not as blends but as single barrels.

"I consider it a win-win situation," he adds. "I've been in the business 10 years, but this is still good publicity." Most of the handful of independent bottlers currently operating do extensive online promotion, and Mihalich took part in a virtual media presentation featuring his two barrels on Lost Lantern labels—188 bottles of Lost Lantern Dad's Hat rye for \$90 per bottle and 119 bottles of Dad's Hat vermouth-finish rye for \$120 each.

"Today's consumers are no longer scared of the idea of buying blended whiskey," concludes Schmier. "Now, they are increasingly asking us, 'What's next?'" ■



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CESARI'S INNOVATIVE SPIRIT TAKES LIQUID FORM WITH JUSTO, A WINE THAT SHOWCASES THE ELUSIVE INTERSECTION OF CONCENTRATION AND LIGHTNESS



In Verona, a region where wines range from ethereal and crisp to powerfully rich, Cesari's Justo manages to land at the elusive intersection of concentration and lightness. Combining elements of Amarone with stainless steel fermentation and a focus on freshness, the wine has an ideal tension on the palate—exactly as its name suggests.

A combination of the English word *just* and the Italian word *giusto*, meaning right, Justo is an homage to finding Goldilocks-esque balance in the glass and loosely translates to “just right.”

It's no surprise that the Cesari clan has mastered combining the rich, dense characteristics of Veronese reds with an uncommon vein of brightness: The fam-



ily has been making wine in the region since 1936, when Gerardo Cesari set out to craft an Amarone to rival the world's best reds. Since that time, successive generations of Cesaris have helped the estate acquire prime vineyards and maintain the tradition of high-quality production. Cesari was one of the first Italian wines to be exported to five continents, and today the brand retains its strong global following—while utilizing over 100 hectares of pristine vineyards to keep elevating the estate's legacy.

Justo itself fuses regional winemaking traditions with an innovative edge, blending the native Corvina grape with Merlot to give the wine its “just right” texture. Harvested together in September, the grapes are dried in the traditional *appassimento* style for 20 days. This relatively short drying period concentrates

their sugars and aromatic nuances to optimal levels, while maintaining the grapes' inherent freshness. Then, the grapes are fermented on their skins for 15 days before aging exclusively in stainless steel. The process serves to generate balance between lightness and concentration, resulting in a red wine with pure red fruit flavors that radiate from the glass. Its rare equilibrium likewise makes Justo a consistent crowd pleaser among both buyers and consumers.

Cesari has always been a leader in northern Italy. From aging their wines well beyond DOCG requirements to embracing single-vineyard wines before the trend was in vogue, the winery's forward-thinking energy is palpable. Today, Cesari is maintaining their commitment to excellence and innovation by embracing technology and sustainability across their vineyards and two wineries. With Justo, their innovative spirit takes form in a wine that's agile yet concentrated, and vibrantly reflects its home terroir. ■

This advertising content was produced in collaboration with our partner, Opici Wines & Spirits.



JÙSTO

The name Justo comes from a combination of the English word Just and the Italian word Giusto – meaning Right. This wine is made in an appassimento style – the grapes are dried for a short period of time (about 20 days) thereby creating a wine that is “just right”.



JÙST + GIUSTO = JÙSTO

[dʒʌst] + [giù_sto] = [dʒù_sto]

English:
(adj)
exactly

Italian: = "Just Right"
(adj)
right or
correct



CESARI



WHISKEY: WHAT'S NEW



FIELD TRIP

Islay's idyllic, white-sand Traigh Bhan beach is the inspiration behind the 92.4-proof Batch Four of **Ardbeg's** Traigh Bhan 19 Year Old, part of the brand's permanent portfolio. The latest installment of the single malt Scotch whisky, aged in a higher proportion of Oloroso sherry casks than earlier releases, has a spicy, herbal quality, layered with wood smoke, aniseed, and menthol.

SRP: \$299.99 per 750-ml bottle

PACIFIC NORTHWEST TOUCH

Copperworks Distilling Company in Seattle, Washington, has simultaneously released two new, small-batch, 100-proof American single malt whiskeys spun from 100 percent malted barley and twice-distilled in Scottish copper pot stills. Release 044 marries various casks and unleashes citrus peel and pipe tobacco; Release 045, with its notes of honey and fig, highlights whiskey made from Fritz barley grown on a single farm in the Skagit Valley, balanced with a touch of another aged in a Manzanilla sherry cask for 60 months.

SRP: \$69.99 per 750-ml bottle



AQUATIC JOURNEY

Trey Zoeller, the zany founder of **Jefferson's Bourbon**, once again illuminates the alchemy of aging whiskey on a boat with the 90-proof Voyage 29 Wheated. The newest addition to the Jefferson's Ocean: Aged at Sea collection, these casks of wheated bourbon traversed the world on a vessel, making their way from Savannah to the Indian Ocean and across the Pacific. Exposure to extreme heat and salty air elicits rich notes of vanilla and toasted caramel.

SRP: \$79.99 per 750-ml bottle

THE FIFTH

Brown-Forman revived its **King of Kentucky** whiskey label in 2018, and to celebrate the five-year anniversary of the straight bourbon, has rolled out two new single-barrel expressions. The 130.6-proof 15-year-old bourbon, available in Kentucky, Illinois, and Ohio, has notes of dried fruit and sorghum, while the extremely limited-edition 18-year-old, found only in the Kentucky market, tastes of molasses and dark tea.

SRP: \$249.99 (15-year-old) and \$349.99 (18-year-old) per 750-ml bottle



POLITICALLY CHARGED

With midterm elections around the bend, Caskshare's U.S. debut of **The Big Lie** is well-timed. An irreverent reference to Donald Trump, the limited-edition bourbon is a follow-up to **The Big Lie** Scotch whisky, the U.K.'s ode to Boris Johnson, the recently resigned British prime minister. Although production details—including where the 95-proof whiskey was distilled, how long it was matured for, and in which type of casks—are playfully shrouded in mystery, the bottle is undoubtedly a cultural keepsake.

SRP: \$80 per 750-ml bottle





GATHER AROUND

High West's Campfire is back for the season, melding Scotch, bourbon, and rye whiskeys aged between four and 15 years. The return of the 92-proof spirit, which fittingly culminates in a toasted marshmallow finish, coincides with the Park City, Utah, distillery's launch of Protect the West. This initiative will dedicate one million dollars to organizations fighting wildfires and climate change as well as conserving wildlife. First up: High West's \$50,000 donation to the Wildland Firefighter Foundation and matching consumer donations of up to an additional \$50,000.

SRP: \$79.99 per 750-ml bottle



BROAD APPEAL

Bill Karlson and John O'Mara founded **KO Distilling** in Manassas, Virginia, in 2013. Nearly a decade later, the entrepreneurs are ramping up distribution of their cast-strength (126-proof) Bare Knuckle High Rye Bourbon and four-year-old Distiller's Reserve bottled-in-bond straight bourbon and rye whiskeys (100-proof). After recent expansions into Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Minnesota, KO plans to enter the Missouri and Michigan markets later this year.

SRP: \$69.99 to \$74.99 per 750-ml bottle

JUST PEACHY

Conjuring year-round summertime vibes, sweet, bright peach is the newest flavor from **Black Velvet**. Like its apple and toasted caramel iterations, the 70-proof Canadian whisky, made in Alberta from a blend of grains, works well in cocktails such as the breezy Canadian Peach Tea and Peach Lemonade Smash.

SRP: \$10.99 per 750-ml bottle



EASY DRINKING

Slow & Low, from The Cooper Spirits Company, diversifies its ready-to-drink lineup of Rock & Rye and Coffee Old-Fashioned with a duo of breezy, new, 20-proof canned libations. Developed by Chad Solomon, the director of innovation, and Christy Pope, the senior brand manager, the two cocktails are Whiskey Sunshine, a riff on the Whiskey Collins that bolsters straight rye whiskey with lemon, yuzu, sweet orange, and Oro Blanco grapefruit, and the mule-like Whiskey Buck that pairs rye with real lemon juice and ginger beer.

SRP: \$19.99 per four-pack of 200-ml cans



GOING BANANAS

Ultimate Fighting Championship president Dana White is the cofounder of **Howler Head**, a versatile, natural banana-flavored Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey that satisfies in shot form as much as it does in a Manhattan. Crafted by Green River Distilling Co.'s master distiller, Jacob Call, the 80-proof spirit is distilled in a century-old, all-copper column still and aged for two years in American white oak casks toasted with #4 alligator char.

SRP: \$29.99 per 750-ml bottle

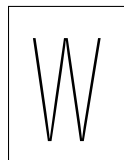




THE RETAILER'S GUIDE TO STORE DESIGN

HOW WINE AND SPIRITS RETAILERS CAN MAXIMIZE SPACE AND CRAFT AN AESTHETIC THAT FITS THEIR BRAND

BY ALIA AKKAM



When Ivy Mix, Conor McKee, and Piper Kristensen signed the lease for Fiasco! Wine and Spirits in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, the space “was a giant red box—not at all inviting,” as Mix puts it. The ambitious proprietors handled the demolition themselves, ripping down drywall and unearthing swathes of alluring brick.

“I think we got pretty lucky,” admits McKee, noting the prime “corner spot with lots of indirect sunlight and a barn full of retail-ready furniture from Ivy’s mom.” Its size is also a boon, he adds: “You can walk in with a stroller, your dog, a backpack, or all three, and not feel like you’re going to knock everything over.”

The smart design of a wine and spirits shop—equal parts welcoming, visually striking, and functional—is as crucial as the inventory, solidifying a brand’s distinct identity while providing repeat customers with an attractive, efficient layout. Beverage Media spoke with a few retailers about their own successful approaches to design.

CAPTURING A SHOP’S PERSONALITY

Beyond selling bottles, the goal for the team at Fiasco! was to “serve as a beacon in the community,” says Mix, and the design reflects that. “The space is big with a lot of light, which is quite different from the shoebox stores you see frequently in New York City,” she says. “We have a large book collection and encourage people to come and sit on benches in our windows and read up.” Between the rugs, wood tables, and presence of Monty, McKee’s



dog, “it really feels like you’re at someone’s home that happens to have a lot of booze,” McKee adds.

Brandon Loper, the co-owner of Golden Age Wine in Mountain Brook, Alabama, outside of Birmingham, also desired a transporting vibe to complement the James Beard-nominated shop and wine bar’s minimal intervention wines, and tapped his wife Amanda, a principal at the local office of David Baker Architects, to elicit one. “It’s such a nice space to work and play,” he says. “We used reclaimed oak from a local cast-iron pipe company on the ceilings to connect to wine barrels and a concrete bar top that mimics one of our favorite fermentation vessels.”

BLURRING THE LINES

In many states, melding the on- and off-premise sectors is legal, but that combination poses logistical challenges that can be solved by savvy design. Consider Cork Wine Bar & Market in Washington, D.C., which expanded into Spring Valley in the northwest part of the capital in 2021. Located inside Pizzeria Paradiso (both spaces were designed by local firm Gronning Architects), it stands out from the restaurant with a white and gray color scheme that emphasizes the wine.

Likewise, in Houston, Goodnight Hospitality partnered with local architects Curtis & Windham and Studio Robert McKinley in New York on the design of Montrose Cheese & Wine. June Rodil, MS and Goodnight Hospitality partner and CEO, says that the retail-wine bar hybrid can sometimes be confusing for visitors, “so it was important for the initial impact of the

space to be clear about what we can do and what we offer. Our philosophy is, if it’s not on the floor, people can’t buy it, so we try our hardest to have everything we can for guests to see.” An upside to the mere 700 available square feet? Views of the entire stock from practically any vantage point.

COPY MATTERS

The shelf talker is a handy, enlightening sales tool, but it can also reinforce design aesthetics. Orange Glou, a shop in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, specializes in orange wines, and founder Doreen Winkler’s vision for the design is complementary, mixing natural wood and white with bursts of orange neon. Likewise, Winkler adorns all bottles with orange tags bearing handwritten tasting notes and pairings. At Golden Age Wine, shelf talkers display just the producer, region, variety, and price via a slot designed by Loper’s wife that deftly integrates into the shelving. “We wanted to encourage customers to engage us, so we purposely do not have huge signs pointing to different sections or stacks highlighting wines on sale,” says Loper.

Knowledgeable staff members are also a draw at Montrose Cheese & Wine. “We knew we wanted to have a human experience, and with so little space, it would almost be awkward not to have a conversation and rely heavily on shelf talkers,” says Rodil.

But Diane Gross, the owner of Cork Wine Bar & Market, eager to help demystify

wine, set up the store so that “consumers can explore without having to ask for help, especially if they don’t want to,” she says. “Shelf talkers tell you what you are getting.”

Shelf talkers dreamed up by McKee are a playful art form that elevate the friendly neighborhood feel of Fiasco!. “He has a snappy wit that gives you a vivid idea of how a bottle will taste,” says Mix.

ORGANIZATION IS A PRIORITY

Rodil’s desire that customers see as many bottles as possible is a good starting point for the layout, “however, we have to be artful about how it’s set up to maximize space and flow,” she says. For example, a feature wall puts the spotlight on seasonal wine and current allocations, and the top shelf is always stocked with June’s Rosé, “our number-one seller, so it means our regulars always go to it and naturally look through the featured selections,” Rodil elaborates. “It’s purposely placed that way so we don’t have stagnant features and can change our theme at least once a month.” More expensive selections are found in the back of the shop and large-format bottles, she adds, are placed at the very top “to give height to everything and the illusion of a bigger space.”

Winkler takes a different approach at Orange Glou, where her offerings are intentionally tightly edited. “Rather than being hit by hundreds of wines when you walk in, you can really take in what you see,” she points out. There is also a display devoted to the O.G. Wine Club, the precursor to the brick-and-mortar store, and a small fridge in front that showcases several cans. During the summer, this display of portable

OPPOSITE: Golden Age Wine in Mountain Brook, Alabama
ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Montrose Cheese & Wine in Houston, Texas // Cork Wine Bar & Market in Washington, D.C.



Piquette wines came in handy for last-minute picnics and beach excursions, but Winkler says most customers seek out the bottles that line her plant-bedecked floating shelves, which required a design hack to install on a brick wall. “A special bracket had to be created to hold all this weight. We found something slim and light to use so it still looks great,” says Winkler.

When it comes to organization of the wine categories themselves, strategies differ wildly—but should also be thought out. At Fiasco!, the wines are arranged “a bit like a wine list, but in a grid formation, divvied up by white, skin contact, rosé, red, sparkling, and then broken down left to right by geography and bottom to top by price,” says McKee.

Inside the shotgun-style Golden Age Wine, red wines are laid out on the right side of the wall by region, grape variety, and body; everything else, from rosé and pét-nat to white Burgundy and fortified wines, is on the left. Old World wines get the lion's share of counter space at Cork Wine Bar & Market, categorized by region, but there are also special displays singling out the likes of New World picks and off-season rosé.

“Our back-end storage mirrors, as much as possible, our front-facing shelves so keeping products on the floor is easy to manage. Every nook and cranny is used.”

— June Rodil, MS, Goodnight Hospitality

AMPLIFYING SPACE

For many big city shops, space is limited, but Winkler knew from the outset that she wanted Orange Glou to contain a dedicated storage section in the back for shipping materials and inventory and built the space into the shop's original design. For the Fiasco! owners, creating the back-of-house operations was a more spontaneous process; the discovery of arched doors in the basement prompted them to hire a contractor who used the doors to subdivide the once sprawling room to create an office in the back. Now, they are using it to help assemble products for the Fiasco! wine club, cocktail kits, and collaborative packages with the podcast *Ask Ronna*.

Short on space at Montrose Cheese & Wine, Rodil notes that high-volume or soon-to-retail bottles are case-stacked on dunnage racks and current releases are broken out of cases and stored on Lockwood shelves. “Our back-end storage mirrors, as much as possible, our front-facing shelves so keeping products on the floor is easy to manage. Every nook and cranny is used,” she says.

Another pivotal part of any wine and spirits retail operation is its cold storage facilities. Cellars and fridges are fixtures, but how they are utilized is also key. Mon-



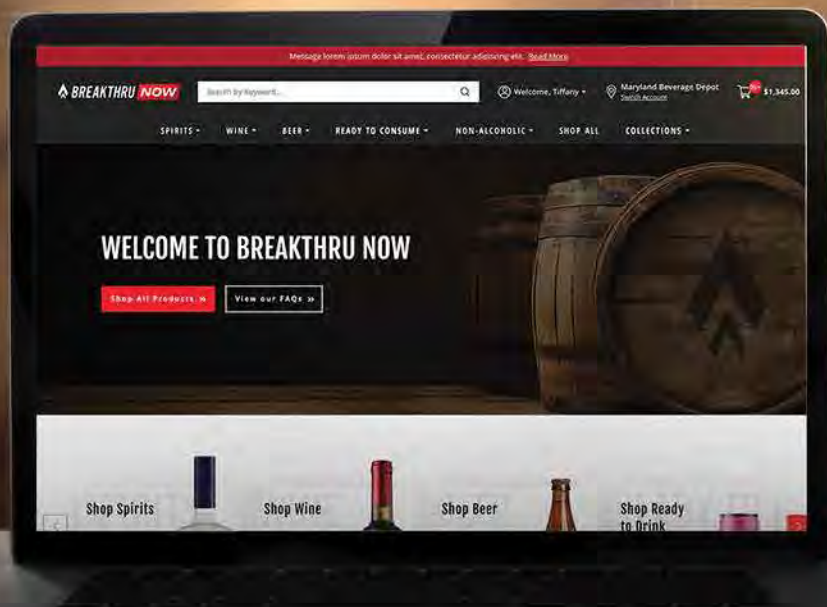
trose Cheese & Wine stashes popular purchases in two upright coolers at the back of the store and a Wine Well cooling unit is reserved for more expensive or room temperature bottles in need of a quick chill. Most of Orange Glou's chilled wines are housed in an on-brand big orange Smeg.

ROOM FOR EXTRAS

Private tastings unfold in the newly opened Champagne room at Golden Age Wine, Thursday night tastings draw crowds at Fiasco!, and it's not uncommon for Montrose Cheese & Wine to throw parties with DJs and dueling raclette machines. With only 10 stools at the bar, however, Rodil and her team transformed a small breezeway between the building and the one next door into a bustling small patio for company happy hours and classes.

Along with demarcating the shop into retail and storage, Winkler was adamant there be a third zone for private events, classes, and weekly tastings at Orange Glou. “I was very keen on a tasting room, as I do not like the idea of just pulling up a table in the middle of the room,” she explains, “or worse, a barrel.” ■

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Shelf talkers at Fiasco! Wine and Spirits in Brooklyn // O.G. Wine Club display at Orange Glou in New York



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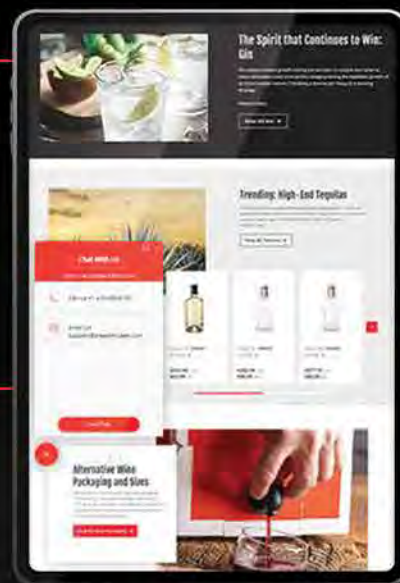
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BOXED IN

Allison Luvera and Lauren De Niro Pipher take boxed wines to new heights with their launch of **Juliet**. The two inaugural selections, Sauvignon Blanc 2021 and Grenache Rosé 2021, originate from a Certified California Sustainable winery in Santa Barbara's Happy Canyon AVA, and are housed in colorful cylinder containers made with recycled materials. These packages, dubbed Eco Magnums, hold two bottles' worth of wine accessed via a spout and are equipped with handles to facilitate on-the-go gatherings.

SRP: \$45.99 per 1.5-liter box of wine



CHILEAN MILESTONE

In honor of its 25th anniversary, **Seña**, the pioneering Chilean wine estate established by Eduardo Chadwick and Robert Mondavi, is reintroducing its well-received 2009 library vintage from the Aconcagua Valley. The Cabernet Sauvignon-dominant blend, rounded out with Carménère, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc, leads with chocolate and tobacco aromatics, morphing to raspberry and cherry on the palate. Available alongside the recent 2019 release, the 2009 is nestled in a collectible wooden box.

SRP: \$150 per 750-ml bottle

BOTTLE AND BOOK

Tuscan winery **Ornellaia's** Poggio alle Gazze dell'Ornellaia 2020 is characterized by a bright straw yellow hue and aromas of peach and sage. The Mediterranean-style wine, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, Verdicchio, and Vermentino, is fittingly accompanied by a cookbook that brings together chef recipes celebrating the Mediterranean Sea.

SRP: \$82 per 750-ml bottle



ODE TO SICILY

Quattro Quarti Bianco 2021, from the Italian cooperative **Cantine Ermes**, comprises four different Grillo grapes grown in Sicily's Trapani region. The balanced, food-friendly wine showcases soft layers of orange blossom, yellow peach, and almond.

SRP: \$18 per 750-ml bottle

FRESH ADDITION

Fresh Vine Wines, founded by actresses Nina Dobrev and Julianne Hough, has bolstered its Napa-produced lineup of lower-carb, lower-calorie Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and rosé with a Sauvignon Blanc. Tasting of white peach, Meyer lemon, and pomelo, the wine contains 98 calories, 0.1 grams sugar, and 2.8 grams carbs in an average five-ounce glass.

SRP: \$22.99 per 750-ml bottle





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HEIGHTENED SENSES

OAX Original has rolled out the second installment of its wild, single-origin foraged agave mezcals distilled by maestro mezcalero Enrique Hernández Zenea. The limited-edition Arroqueño, Tobalá, and Tepeztate styles are packaged in eye-catching matte black, white, and pink bottles, evoking vernacular Mexican architecture by such talents as the late Luis Barragán. Flaunting a higher proof than the original release, Batch #2 also marks the debut of a reforestation initiative, in which every bottle of mezcal produced will restore an agave plant back to its endemic environment.

SRP: \$125 to \$185 per 750-ml bottle



AMERICAN COMEBACK

After a three-year hiatus, **Botran Rum** has returned to the U.S. market. Made in Guatemala, the single-estate aged rums, including No. 8, No. 12, No. 15, No. 18, and Reserva Blanca varieties, also sport a new look. The updated colorful packaging now references Guatemala's abundance of natural resources and incorporates stamps that highlight the brand's ISCC Plus (International Sustainability and Carbon Certification) accreditation and "Ron de Guatemala" Protected Designation of Origin.

SRP: \$19.99 to \$44.99 per 700-ml bottle



HIGH DESIGN

The London furniture and lighting designer Lee Broom has teamed up with **Rémy Martin** to reimagine the Cognac house's glittering XO decanter for the first time since its inception in 1981. Broom, who has a background in fashion, captured both the brand's sumptuousness and the liquid's appeal simply served over a single ice cube through the presence of myriad starburst cuts carved into the limited-edition decanter. Recalling icicles, they represent the hundreds of eaux-de-vie found within the Rémy Martin XO blend.

SRP: \$260 per 750-ml bottle

SOFT DRINK

Boston-based **Harpoon Brewery** has introduced its first-ever non-alcoholic offering. Open League (less than 0.5 % ABV per serving) is a light, hazy IPA alternative that clocks in at just 35 calories, brewed with tropical simcoe, citra, and mosaic hops as well as toasted buckwheat, chia seeds, and sea salt for electrolytes.



SRP: \$9.99 to \$10.99 per six-pack of 12-oz cans

PERFECT SHOT

At the now-shuttered New York bar Ghost Donkey, guests savored a 50/50 blend of mezcal and **Mr Black** coffee liqueur. Smitten with the combination, Mr Black founder, Tom Black, set out to create Mezcal Cask Coffee Liqueur, a limited-edition collaboration with Illegal Mezcal that flaunts undertones of smoke and nutmeg. A follow-up to Mr Black's barrel-aged expressions with Whistlepig Rye and Bundaberg Rum, the spirit was matured in Illegal's American oak barrels, imported to Australia from Oaxaca for three months, and then invigorated with fresh joven mezcal.

SRP: \$59.99 per 750-ml bottle

