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INK, PAPER, AND PEOPLE

Last month, I wrote about the enduring value of print ... not as a relic, but as a rhythm. About how, in an age of scrolling and swiping, the printed page still has the power to make us stop, breathe, and connect. I expected a few nods of agreement. What I didn't expect was the flood of messages from readers who took the time to say, "Thank you for still printing."

One note in particular hit home. It began simply:

"Steve!!!! Omg!!!! Thank you!!!!!!"

It came from **Gina Lee Hockenberry**, a name many of you might recognize. Gina has spent decades shaping Maryland's hospitality scene. From **Gina's Cantina** in Millersville to **Gina's Café** in St. Michaels, and now **Gina's at the Bridge** on Tilghman Island. She wrote to me about the feeling she gets when the Beverage Journal arrives in her mail each month; that quick spark of anticipation that says, "There's something worth sitting down for."

Gina put it beautifully:

"When it's in my mail stack, it makes my heart jump, and I know I have something to look forward to. The printed Beverage Journal is the one thing that continues to cement the memories of beverage choice fun AND provides continued hope that there is still interest and a future for us wolves in the industry."

That line — "hope for us wolves in the industry" — gave me pause.

It's easy to forget, in the rush of deadlines and digital everything, that what we create here isn't just a trade publication. It's a connection point. A shared space for the people who make Maryland's bars, restaurants, and package stores so vibrant.

Print, for us, has never been about nos-



talgia. It's about belonging. When you hold this Journal, you're part of something: a living record of an industry that thrives on relationships, craftsmanship, and community.

And make no mistake, our industry is changing. Many suppliers and distributors have moved fully digital with their product listings and communications. There's efficiency in that. But there's also a loss of texture, of the tactile, the personal side of doing business. A printed issue of the Beverage Journal isn't just information; it's a monthly handshake between the people who make, sell, and serve.

That's why Gina's letter meant so much. It wasn't just a thank you. It was a reminder that the work matters. That print isn't merely "old school." It's where people still mark a page, jot a note, or hand something across a bar and say, "Hey, did you see this?"

So to Gina, and to every one of you who flips through these pages with pride and purpose ... **thank you.** You're the reason this publication endures. Your stories, your successes, and even your struggles are what keep this Journal alive and relevant.

As you turn the page on this month's issue, you'll find plenty of evidence that our industry's heart is still beating strong. From product updates and market insights to stories that showcase Maryland's beverage innovators.

And if you're one of those "wolves" still fighting for excellence, service, and the spirit of hospitality ... keep howling. We hear you.

See you next month. ■

STEVE PATTEN PUBLISHER

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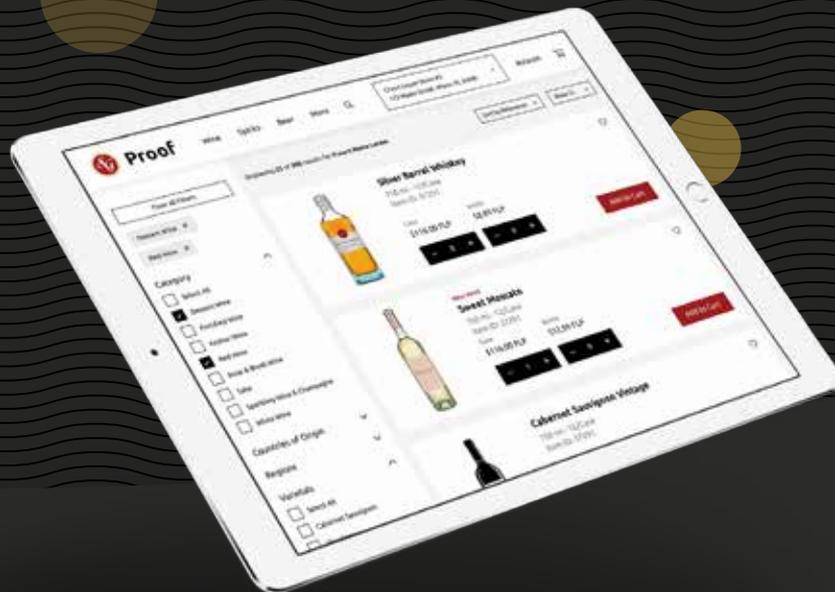
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1. SLOW & LOW

Best known for its Rock & Rye, Hochstadter's Slow & Low expands its rye-based, ready-to-drink cocktail portfolio with two 40% ABV additions. Starring Luxardo's Sangue Morlacco cherry liqueur, the Cherry Old-Fashioned mingles notes of cola and vanilla. For the Maple Old-Fashioned, Crown Maple's organic maple syrup puts forth a burst of crème brûlée and molasses sweetness.

\$ SRP: \$29.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 drinkslowandlow.com

4. CROWN ROYAL

Crown Royal ramps up its Canadian whisky portfolio with a limited-edition chocolate flavor. Delivering layers of toffee, caramel, and dark cacao on the palate, the velvety 70-proof blend is ideal for weaving into old fashioned and espresso martinis.

\$ SRP: \$26.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 crownroyal.com

2. ETHOS

Ethos, the newest label from Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, celebrates the pioneers who transformed Washington's rugged Columbia Valley into an epicenter of high-quality Cabernet Sauvignon production. Led by winemaker Tristan Butterfield, Ethos kicks off with a 2022 Cabernet Sauvignon. The full-bodied wine melds grapes from Cold Creek Vineyard, as well as the Red Mountain, Horse Heaven Hills, and Wahluke Slope appellations.

\$ SRP: \$27.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 ethoswine.com

5. AMARETTO ADRIATICO

Alcohol-free amaretto sours are poised to become more commonplace thanks to the arrival of Amaretto Adriatico Zero. Like the brand's full-proof amaretto offerings, the alcohol-removed version is made from 100 percent Filippo Cea almonds grown, hand-picked, and sun-dried in Puglia, Italy, and showcases a deep, nutty complexity that is ripe for cocktails.

\$ SRP: \$32 per 700-ml bottle
🌐 amarettoadriatico.com/en-us

3. ROW 94

Country music singer and songwriter Dierks Bentley introduced Row 94 bourbon in 2024. Now he's added a 100-proof variety to the mix. Made in partnership with Lofted Custom Spirits at Green River Distilling Co. in Owensboro, Kentucky, the uncut Row 94 Full Proof maintains the same mashbill as the original—70 percent Kentucky-grown corn, 21 percent rye, and nine percent malted and row barley—and balances honeyed sweetness with a smoky oak finish.

\$ SRP: \$54.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 row94whiskey.com

6. CHÂTEAU LAGRANGE

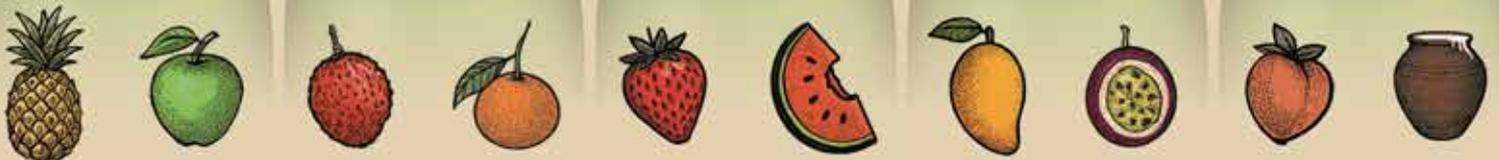
Bordeaux meets Japan in Château Lagrange's limited-edition 2023 cuvée. The Grand Cru Classé estate in Saint-Julien was acquired by Suntory in 1983, and the wine, part of the Heritage collection, commemorates this 40-year milestone. Composed of 46 percent Merlot and 54 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, the numbered magnums, adorned with the original château label, rest in bespoke wooden cases.

\$ SRP: \$325 per 1.5-liter bottle
🌐 chateau-lagrange.com

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7. CANTINE RIUNITE

Italian wine cooperative Cantine Riunite is capitalizing on demand for non-alcoholic options with the launch of Riunite Zero Red Semi-Sparkling and Maschio Zero White Sparkling, two alcohol-removed wines featuring less than 0.5% ABV. The former, gently fizzy and distinguished by aromas of dark fruit and spice, is best savored chilled over ice, while the latter is redolent of a Prosecco DOC.

\$ SRP: \$9.99 to \$12.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 riunite.com | cantinemaschio.com

10. TAYLOR FLADGATE

Pinhão Valley, in the center of Portugal's Douro Valley, has long been renowned for its Port wines. Taylor Fladgate's Sentinels Vintage Port 2022 illuminates that heritage with a blend of wines from its four historic properties in the area: Terra Feita, Junco, Casa Nova, and Eira Velha. Each of the estates contributes singular characteristics, culminating in an elegant Port exploding with fresh plum and black cherry flavors.

\$ SRP: \$70 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 taylor.pt/us

8. MIJENTA

Mexico's tequila-producing states each grow agave flaunting distinctive flavor profiles. To investigate how these different terroirs impact tequila, Ana María Romero, Mijenta's maestra tequilera, sourced agaves from single estates in each area, distilled them separately, and then blended them all. The result is a limited-edition expression that matches spiced and herbal notes of cinnamon, cardamom, spearmint, and freshly mowed grass.

\$ SRP: \$74.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 mijenta-tequila.com

11. HARTFORD FAMILY WINERY

In 1982, the Jurassic Vineyard was planted on sandy, limestone-rich soils in California's Santa Ynez Valley. From that old-vine site, Hartford Family Winery has crafted the Hartford Court Jurassic Vineyard Chenin Blanc 2023. Expressing jolts of citrus and quince rounded out with a mineral finish, it points to the grape's promising potential in Santa Barbara County.

\$ SRP: \$38 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 hartfordwines.com

9. 1792 BOURBON

1792 Bourbon first explored finishing with Port casks. Now, that early experiment has paved the way to a 95-proof Cognac cask finish that joins the permanent collection. The Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey, aged in charred American white oak barrels, is then further matured for a minimum of six months in hand-selected former Cognac casks placed on the top floors of Barton 1792 Distillery's rickhouses. This prime positioning yields flavors of stone fruit and Bananas Foster.

\$ SRP: \$37.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 1792bourbon.com

12. EL MAYOR TEQUILA

Tequila-based coffee cocktails are becoming popular and El Mayor has responded with Café Reposado. The earthy, floral innovation revolves around 100 percent estate-grown, Blue Weber agave blanco tequila mellowed for three months in bourbon barrels that previously held coffee beans. Its subtle coffee finish works especially well in an espresso martini.

\$ SRP: \$33.99 per 750-ml bottle
🌐 elmayor.com



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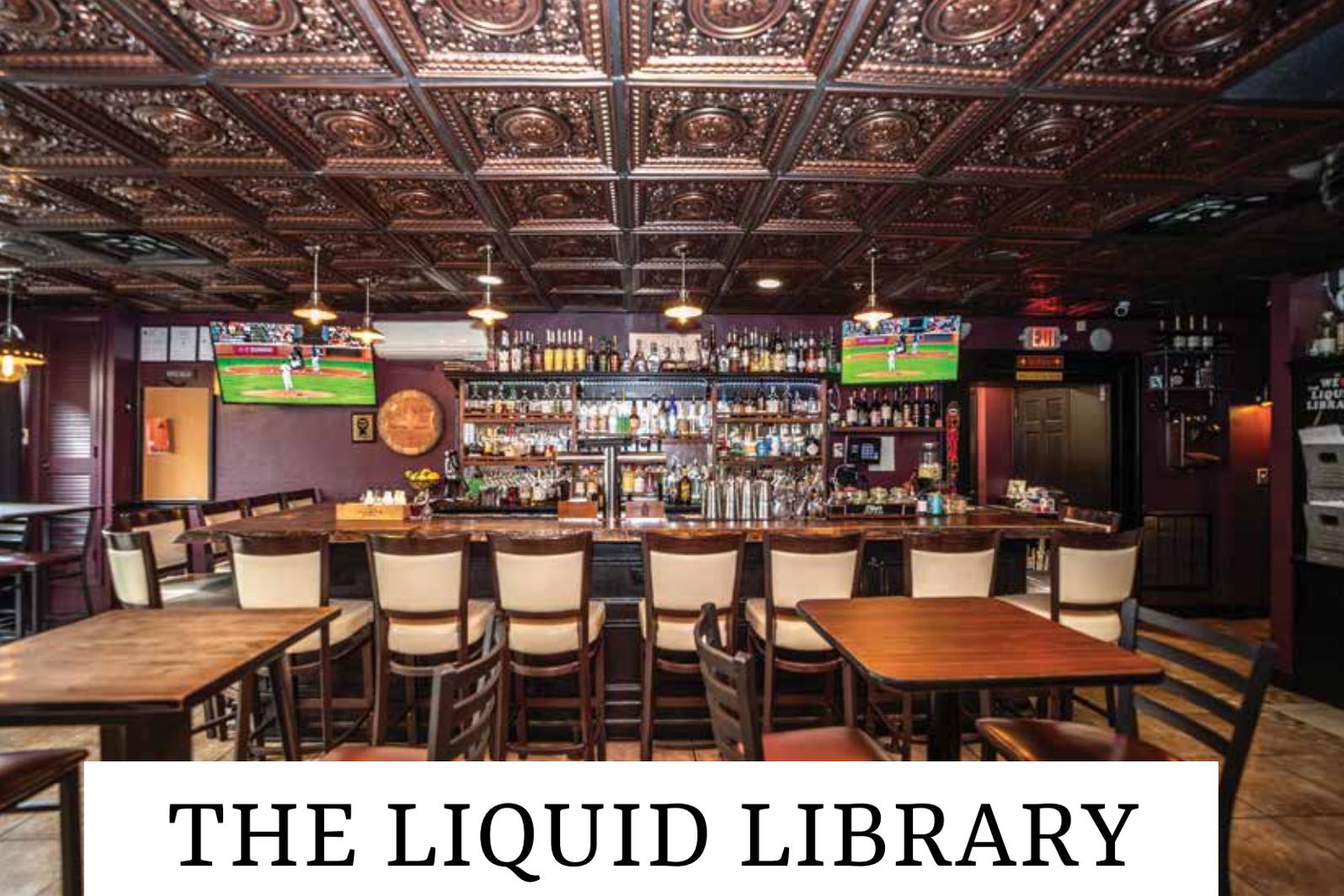
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NOTHING TO KEEP QUIET ABOUT

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | PICTURES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

Entrepreneurs Chad Ferrari and Andrew Schuster were both greatly influenced by their fathers. So, when it came time a few years back for these two career bartenders to open their own place – in this case, The Liquid Library in Westminster – both leaned on the lessons they learned in their younger years from their family patriarchs.

Ferrari (OK, let's all just agree right up front, that's a cool name!) recalled, "Something my dad used to tell me was 'Being tired for yourself and being tired for somebody else are two entirely different things!' Meaning that if I ever got the chance to work for myself, I should absolutely do it. Those words of wisdom motivate me, especially in those times where we're working 30 hours in two days."

Schuster's father was equally instrumental in putting him on the

path to being his own boss. "My first few jobs that my father had me do growing up were in concrete and construction," he said. "I learned a lot about hard work from those jobs, and those times have made me a hard worker all of my life."

The result is an eating and drinking establishment that has become a favorite for a wide demographic in one of Maryland's most charming college towns. Located on E. Main Street in Westminster, The Liquid Library boasts a wood-fired kitchen that produces a diverse menu of pizzas and entrees that satisfies all appetites.

Ferrari remarks, "We get a gamut of pretty much everybody, and we appeal to them all depending on the time of day. During the week, we open at 2 p.m. So, it's kind of an early dinner/late lunch crowd at first. We get a lot of 30- to 50-year-olds during that time who just want to hang out and go into Happy Hour. Our evening hours attract everyone from dinner parties who want some elevated cocktails to anniversaries and 75th birthdays for grandma. For late nights, we change the vibe a little bit. We turn the lights down and play different music to catch that

Chad Ferrari & Andrew Schuster
owners & operators
The Liquid Library



college age to late 20s crowd.”

It’s that college crowd that compelled Ferrari and Schuster to come up with the rather intellectual name for their business and the main reason why The Liquid Library is being featured in this ongoing series of articles on bars, restaurants, pubs, and taverns with funny and/or quirky names around the state.

Ferrari stated, “We decided we were going to do a craft cocktail lounge themed around the ’20s Prohibition era. We got the list of names down to seven or eight. The Apothecary was one. Then, we started to talk about how [McDaniel College] was such a big influence in town. So, one night we were sitting around and thinking about names that would be fun to say if you were a college student

and figuring out, ‘Where do I want to go to-night?’ I don’t remember who actually said it aloud. But The Liquid Library came out of that discussion, and we all fell in love with it quick. It fit the whole motif.”

Schuster added, “The other thing we really liked was we started Googling it and found there was no other bar in America that has the Liquid Library name. We were surprised. There’s one in Canada. But I thought it was

really cool that we would be the only place in the United States with that name.”

In terms of their drink selection, the menu offers more than 60 cocktails at all times and features a lot of rare bottles. “We were both, at certain times in our lives, career bartenders for 10-plus years,” said Schuster. “I did some traveling overseas and bartended in Australia and New Zealand. I’ve also bartended in the Florida Keys and out West. So,

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just the number of drinks I've learned in my travels and drinks that Chad and I had made up . . . it became exciting for us to put not just your standard, regular cocktails that everybody serves on the menu, but to also add our own flair."

Ferrari concurred, adding, "When we got together, we realized our combined experience allowed us to be a little bit different. We talked a lot with our regulars -- we had a big following already at the places we'd worked -- and the big thing we kept getting was they wanted to leave and go to Frederick or Baltimore to get their craft cocktails. We

thought, 'Well, if that can be done there, it can certainly be done here.' So, I think we've combined every drink we have ever made and every drink we could have made, then narrowed it down to our top sixty-something of the moment. It's been fun!"

Fun is the central goal of The Liquid Library. That, and making money, of course. With the fun that Ferrari and Schuster's loyal clientele has night in and night out, the money has definitely come.

Schuster said, "I love to sit back and watch people get food they haven't had before or get a cocktail they've never had and seeing the

smile on their face and the nod of their head. I love those tables where everybody is sharing their cocktails and sharing their food, taking pictures and posting those pictures [on social media]. It's just cool to sit back and see something that we created making people happy."

Ferrari also shared some of the fun he has personally experienced: "I love the amount of community support we've gotten since we started this. We've met a lot of people who we would never have met otherwise -- city government people, the mayor -- who have rallied behind us and continue their support. This is our first try at a business. And to be accepted and liked and respected is just great."

But operating The Liquid Library has required its own set of sacrifices. Fortunately, having been in the service and hospitality sector most of their adult lives, Schuster and Ferrari were prepared. The former remarked, "Balancing a work-family life can be hard. We are the only place in Westminster and, I believe, the county that is open until 2 a.m. every Friday and Saturday. We are a packed house on those two nights, so we have to spend another two hours putting the place back together before you can go home. It's



been a lot of long hours, but it's also been an amazing experience."

Ferrari then made mention of one of the "good problems" he and his partner are now facing. "Space!" he exclaimed. "As much as we have loved creating this niche spot that is sometimes hard to get into, it is rather small. Our No. 1 complaint is, 'Why won't you guys get a bigger place?!' I like to keep it exclusive, so to speak, but there is a need and a want. I think eventually we are going to have to branch out."

Both men were eager to close our conversation with some helpful tips for any bartender or barback reading this who might be thinking of branching out also and opening their own place someday. Schuster cautioned, "One of the toughest things you'll encounter is trying to figure out all of the different paperwork and certificates needed from the state, the city, the county, the liquor board. It seemed like every time we thought we were getting close to opening and having all of our ducks in a row, it was, 'Nope! Now you need



to go and get this signed off on.' Be aware that some of those documents take two or three months to get signed off and be completed."

Ferrari, though, encourages a full-speed-ahead attitude to take the checkered flag in this competitive business. He concluded, "You will be able to do it whether you think you can or not. We had a lot of times where we doubted ourselves. But, in every situation, with a little bit of research and a couple of phone calls here and there, we figured it all out . . . and so will you!" ■



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WHISKEY: WHAT'S NEW



GET RHYTHM

An ode to the vibrant nightlife and *ritmo* synonymous with luxury Latino culture, **Buchanan's Green Seal** melds a never-before-released Glen Elgin single malt and a wine yeast. Rife with tropical fruit flavors, the subtly peaty, 80-proof, blended Scotch whisky is housed in an emerald green glass bottle adorned with gold touches.

SRP: \$99.99 per 750-ml bottle

DISCOVER SCOTLAND

Joshua Hatton and Jason Johnstone-Yellin, the founders of independent bottler **Single Cask Nation**, personally selected their new trio of single-cask, single-malt offerings from Scotland. Along with the 122.2-proof Clynelish 12-year-old, flaunting its characteristic waxy texture and layers of fruit, there is the 115.8-proof BenRiach 14-year-old that benefits from an extra four years in second-fill Chinkapin oak and the 117.2-proof Cawdor Springs eight-year-old, named for the water source that brought it to life.

SRP: \$85 (Cawdor Springs), \$120 (Clynelish), and \$140 (BenRiach) per 700-ml bottle



DECADE IN THE MAKING

Sagamore Spirit has ramped up its Reserve series with a limited-edition 10-year-old straight rye whiskey, the Maryland distillery's oldest yet. Aged in new charred American white oak barrels, the 110.8-proof whiskey straddles sweet and spice, tasting of crème brûlée and white pepper.

SRP: \$79.99 per 750-ml bottle



FRENCH TWIST

Hirsch Selected Whiskeys and **Hine Cognac** first collaborated in 2022, and now the two Hotaling & Co. brands have reunited on the The Cask Strength Kentucky Straight Bourbon. Comprising 72 percent corn, 13 percent rye, and 15 percent malted barley, the 114-proof, limited-release whiskey was matured for five years and eight months in both new char #3 and toasted American oak barrels before transferring to 30-year-old Hine Cognac XO casks for nearly another two years. The result is a complex fusion of vanilla and muscat grape notes.

SRP: \$180 per 750-ml bottle



INDIAN DREAM

To capture the vibrancy of India, **Johnnie Walker Blue Label** turned to Delhi-based fashion designer Rahul Mishra. Mishra's collections center on bold hues and elaborate embroidery, and the limited-edition bottle and packaging for the 80-proof blended Scotch whisky are just as eye-catching, featuring whimsical florals and animals.

SRP: \$264 per 700-ml bottle



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When you assemble a bourbon by hand, using the richest and rarest straight bourbons, but do it in Brooklyn of all places, you're bound to draw some attention. We don't mind. That's why we overruled the rule book. Then tossed it. We decided to grow our own corn. Heirloom style. We revived the art of blending. We proof our bourbons using mineral water from the Rosendale Mines of New York. It might not be how it's normally done; it might even raise a few eyebrows. But sometimes if you want to create the extraordinary, you can't be afraid to disturb the peace.



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At wine-sense in Andover, Massachusetts, owner Samanta Ettore tries to eliminate some of the chaos for customers.

THE SECRETS TO HOLIDAY RETAIL SUCCESS

FROM WINEMAKER TASTING EVENTS TO GIFT SETS THAT GO BEYOND JUST BEVERAGE, THESE ARE THE BEST STRATEGIES FOR WINE RETAILERS TO MAXIMIZE HOLIDAY SALES

BY KATHLEEN WILLCOX

The holiday season has traditionally been essential to retailers' bottom lines. And for wine and spirits merchants, who have been facing declining sales as alcohol consumption rates drop across the board, the months of November and December have become increasingly important.

Beer, wine, and liquor stores get close to 20 percent of their revenue in the weeks leading up to the holidays—and some find that, with the right offerings, events, marketing plan, and extra elbow grease, these exhausting months can deliver even further returns to their bottom lines.

We spoke with retailers across the country to find out what works, from strategic behind-the-scenes planning to on-the-floor product pushes.

OFFER EXTENDED SHOPPING HOURS

When it comes to anticipating customer needs, put yourself in their shoes. This time of year can be chaotic, so anticipate and meet that chaos with solutions and sanity.

"When I write my newsletters, I try to think about what I would want in my house," says Samanta Ettore,

the owner of wine-sense in Andover, Massachusetts. "How can I get the help I need, but from the wine retailer? This customer-first mindset drives everything, from my signature holiday packages, to my willingness to open at 9 am on what would normally be a closed Monday, simply because the Whole Foods across the street is bustling with holiday shoppers."

Like Ettore, Sage Wine & Spirits' owner Jes Rich also extends the Ballston Spa, New York, shop's hours and clearly communicates these additional hours and days across digital channels.



Jes Rich,
Sage Wine & Spirits

“I make sure that my hours are clearly posted on Google, Yelp, my website, Instagram, and the shop door,” Rich says. “I usually do this a few weeks ahead of time, and I start mentioning the holidays in my individual interactions with customers, so as to plant the seed early.”

For Andrew Turner, the proprietor of Valley Wine Merchants in Newburg, Oregon, it’s not just about extending hours—it’s about extending convenience.

“I offer an increased schedule of porch drop-offs within certain zip codes leading up to the holidays,” he says. “Again, making it ‘let me take the wine part off your plate for the holidays’ is appealing to our customers.”

LEAD WITH HOSPITALITY

Ettore thinks about the different stages many of her customers are in with their planning process and their level of wine knowledge, and tries to accommodate a range of needs.

“I let people know that we’re here to help them with pairings, from private appointments for organized planners or

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Andrew Turner, the proprietor of Valley Wine Merchants; Samanta Ettore, the owner of wine-sense.

corporate clients who want dedicated consultations, to email menu consultations, and even text-based pairing advice for last-minute shoppers,” Ettore says. “It translates to more stress and more work, but this is the season where we have to give it our best.”

At Millesima in New York, which draws customers with a range of budgets, general manager Fabrizio Germano creates à la carte and custom gift sets that start at \$40 and surge past \$2,000.

“We work with individuals and on the corporate level for gifts that feel personal and are truly memorable,” he says. “They always include a beautiful box with a handwritten card, and they are completely customizable.”

PROMOTE HOLIDAY SPECIALS AND EVENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Because many people live and shop on their phones, getting social during the holidays is crucial. Close to one-third of consumers research their purchases on social media before making them, according to the “State of the Consumer 2025” report from management consulting firm McKinsey & Co., and according CGA Strategy Powered by NIQ data, 83 percent of

Gen Z consumers are more likely to purchase a food or drink product because they saw it on social media.

“I post more diligently on social media, with posts featuring items that are perfect for gifts, from reasonably priced host gifts to more expensive special bottles,” Rich says. “But I’m also careful not to overdo it, because people are already overwhelmed during the holidays.”

Turner uses social media to lure in customers with fun taste-and-shop events. He finds that keeping it simple and straightforward often has the best ROI, and once people come in, the wine sells itself.

“A post on Instagram just saying, ‘stop in and stock up before the holidays while sipping bubbles’ works,” he says. “Once they taste an inexpensive but high-quality wine, like a Crémant de Bourgogne, the wine just flies out the door along with other wines that I help them select around their menu. It’s a lot of fun for me and adds an extra touch of the old-fashioned service that I’ve become known for.”

COLLABORATE WITH WINEMAKERS

David and Sarah Gregory, who co-opened Ora et Labora in Portland, Oregon, three





ABOVE: Millesima often hosts intimate tastings with well-known winemakers to create a luxury experience.

years ago, have found that creating opportunities to meet winemakers while shopping keeps their cash register busy.

“We host independent winemakers for a winter wine market, even though 95 percent of our wines are from Europe,” David Gregory explains. “We have five vigneron coming in, each of whom farm and make wine as one-man or one-woman operations, including Junichi Fujita, Little Crow, Dacha, Perkins-Harter, and Amity.”

They’ll each pour three or four wines, and the ticket price covers the cost of sample bottles (though each producer contributes a bottle to keep the price low). Similar events typically bring in between 70 and 100 guests.

At Millesima, Germano says that hosting intimate tasting experiences with Champagne producers like Laurent-Perrier and icons like Château d’Yquem moves the needle in terms of sales, but even more importantly, creates the distinct luxury experience for which the store has become known.

“Our goal is always to turn buying wine in a retail setting into an experience,” Germano says. “Proposing a product that you cannot try is always going to be limited in success, so we have activations that are designed to deliver unique, special experiences. While the events themselves don’t necessarily drive the majority of the holiday spending, they create a sense of exclusivity that turns people into long-term clients.”

CREATE CURATED GIFT SETS

Gift packages are common around the holidays, so how do retailers make theirs stand out? Turner finds that it’s best to create options that speak to customers’ holiday needs, insecurities, and pain points.

“The key with the holidays is to make it stress free and a no-brainer,” Turner says. “Take one thing off their plate.” Valley Wine Merchants packages mixed cases as “what Andrew would drink for Thanksgiving” or “the perfect holiday six-pack,” which are both appealing and accessible. “I find that people buy it for personal festivities and as gifts,” he adds.



ABOVE: Sarah and David Gregory, the co-owners of Ora et Labora.

Then there are the packages ready for last-minute panic purchases. “Last-minute shoppers are a reality,” Rich says. “At Sage, I always have a grab-and-go six pack of wine curated to pair with typical holiday meals.”

If your state’s liquor laws allow you to sell non-alcoholic products as well, use food items and other tools to add value to gift packages. “My most successful holiday strategy revolves around my Wine Essentials packages,” Ettore says. “And they aren’t wine-only. My formula includes a wine suitable for cooking and sipping at the same time, a premium olive oil for holiday meal prep, a specialty salt or other popular seasoning, food-pairing suggestions, and a set of glasses with a wine key.”

She packages it up, and makes it easy to order online and pick up in the store.

Hospitality is always foundational to successful sales. During the holidays, and amid a rash of unanticipated challenges across the industry, making wine easy to select for a range of occasions, eminently available, and stress-free to purchase is as vital for retailers as it is for their customers. ■



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OF AGING
GENERATIONS
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SEASONAL STAFF PICKS FROM RETAILERS ACROSS THE U.S.

WHETHER FOR HOLIDAY GIFTING OR FESTIVE GATHERINGS, THESE ARE THE 11 BOTTLES OF WINE, SPIRITS, AND BOOZE-FREE BEVERAGES THAT RETAILERS RECOMMEND

BY TYLER WETHERALL

The holiday season is the time when shoppers are most often looking for staff picks or seeking guidance—and having some recommendations at the ready always helps with hand selling. With that in mind, *Beverage Media* spoke to nearly a dozen retailers around the country to find out what their go-to holiday recommendations are for wine, spirits, and non-alcoholic options—whether that’s for gifting or taking to yet another festive party. (All bottles are listed with the retailer’s price per 750-milliliter bottle, unless otherwise indicated.)

WINE

1 Gaintza ‘Bixigu’ Getariako Txakolina 2023, Basque Country, Spain; \$20

Selected by Oscar Garcia Moncada, wine and spirits buyer, 67 Wine, New York City

“Every holiday season I get tons of questions regarding a white wine to serve as

an aperitif for a holiday dinner party,” says Oscar Garcia Moncada, the wine and spirits buyer at New York City’s 67 Wine. “My philosophy is to choose a wine that will enlighten the palate and serve as a precursor to what is to come.”

For Garcia Moncada that’s this Gaintza Txakoli, made from sustainably farmed Hondarrabi Zuri. “Packed with fresh citrus aromas and flavors, and layered with an unmistakable sea-breeze salinity, Bixigu Txakoli is sure to turn heads at any holiday gathering,” he says. “At just 12% ABV, [it’s] perfect to keep your guests happy and energized. The finish is refreshingly dry and thirst-quenching.”

2 Cantina Bolzano ‘Huck am Bach’ Santa Maddalena Classico 2023, Alto Adige, Italy; \$24

Selected by Ole Thompson, wine director, Esquin Wine & Spirits, Seattle

Santa Maddalena, a hillside subregion of Alto Adige, is known for its blends of Schi-



Ole Thompson, Esquin Wine & Spirits

ava and Lagrein, like this one from Cantina Bolzano. “The wines of Alto Adige are a little off the beaten path, but I love recommending them for the holidays because they are some of the best food wines in the world and great value,” says Ole Thompson, the wine director at Esquin Wine & Spirits, Washington state’s oldest wine store.

“Santa Maddalena is a lighter-bodied red with a balance of freshness, bright cherry fruit, and delicate spice that makes every glass vibrant yet comforting,” he says.





Karen Williams, Acme Fine Wines

③ Oakville Winegrowers Cabernet Sauvignon 2022, Oakville, California; \$985 per 1.5-liter bottle
Selected by Karen Williams, founder, Acme Fine Wines, Napa Valley, California

Acme Fine Wines is a boutique wine merchant in Napa Valley, California, specializing in highly allocated or small-production wines from cult and classic producers, with a concierge-level of service. While founder Karen Williams's large-format pick is high-end, it "speaks to our niche of having access to rare Napa Valley bottlings."

A gift for the wine collector, this Cabernet Sauvignon is produced by Oakville Winegrowers, a collaborative group that bottles limited blends of select lots. "We always keep this rare bottle stocked," says Williams. "Living in the Napa Valley community, we are always on the lookout for exceptional wines that aren't widely available elsewhere." She adds, "Magnums are perennially in high demand for holiday gatherings and special gifts."

④ Raventós i Blanc Blanc de Blancs, Penedès, Spain; \$22
Selected by Troy Revell, wine and beer director, Ferrington Village, Pittsboro, North Carolina

"Sparkling wines are of course a staple for holidays and occasions, and having a favorite selection that is delicious but does not break the bank is quite the useful tool," says Troy Revell, the wine and beer director for Ferrington Village's The Ferrington House Inn, Restaurant

& Spa, Galloway's Wine & Beer Bar, and Galloway's Wine Shop in Pittsboro, North Carolina. For him that comes from the Raventós i Blanc estate in Penedès, Spain, where the Raventós family helped establish the Cava DO.

"Overuse of the Cava term has now led them to leave the official Designation of Origin, again establishing themselves as a trendsetter in Spanish bubbles," says Revell. "Their wines are dry styles using Champagne methods, just like Cava still does, but the quality is a major step up with only a slight bump in price point."

SPIRITS AND LIQUEURS

⑤ Ardnamurchan Sherry Cask, Western Highlands, Scotland; \$80
Selected by Brendan Noble, spirits buyer, The Whisky Shop, San Francisco

Ardnamurchan is one of Scotland's most remote and most sustainable distilleries, located on the rugged western Highlands coastline. Brendan Noble, the spirits buyer at San Francisco's The Whisky Shop, calls out their Sherry Cask release as a go-to gifting recommendation. "Light peat and coastal minerality lend complexity to the rich sherry casking," he says. "Red fruit, nuttiness, gentle spice and earthiness; it has depth and funk aplenty, while remaining readily approachable for all."

Part of its appeal as a gift is its sleek bottle. "It wouldn't look out-of-place in a grandfather's cabinet," he says. "A great whisky to share, and to introduce your friends to the world of Scotch."

⑥ Jean Fillioux XO Grande Réserve Cognac, Grande Champagne, France; \$170 per 700-milliliter bottle
Selected by Jacob Brower, spirits buyer, Amanti Vino, Montclair, New Jersey

For Jacob Brower, the spirits buyer at Amanti Vino in Montclair, New Jersey, a

must-have when heading into the holidays is a great selection of Cognac. "There are some stunning indie Cognac producers out there making brandy that is both better and cheaper than the big houses and other ultra-aged spirits categories," he says.

This year, he's excited about Jean Fillioux XO Grande Réserve Cognac, a release from Domaine de la Pouyade—an independent grower-producer with vineyards in the heart of Grande Champagne. "Containing brandy at least 32 years of age or older, it is a decadent, complex, wonderfully dry Cognac with outstanding rancio and no use of boisé or sugar syrup for adjustment," he says. "It's bottled a few points higher than the typical 80 proof for Cognac, adding wonderful texture. Most importantly, it's a remarkable value compared to similarly aged single malts or lesser Cognacs from bigger producers."

⑦ Fuentesecca Cosecha 'Huerta Las Antenas' Blanco Tequila 2018, Jalisco, Mexico; \$131
Selected by Mike Moreno, Jr., co-owner, Moreno's Liquors, Chicago

At Moreno's Liquors, known to be one of the best agave retailers in the U.S., they're big fans of Fuentesecca Cosecha. "It's the kind of bottle that feels right at home during the holidays: something special to gift a true tequila lover or to pour when you're hosting and want to share something unforgettable," says co-owner Mike Moreno, Jr. "Plus the presentation is spectacular."

A single-estate, small-batch tequila produced by master distiller Enrique Fonceca in Micohoacán, Moreno describes it as having "layers of baked agave, warm spice, a touch of herbal notes, and subtle sweetness." He adds, "This vintage-dated tequila really captures the pure character of agave with a kind of elegance you don't see every day. It may not be the cheapest bottle around [but] it will be a crowd pleaser."

BUYER PICKS



Steven and Emily Sadri,
Tahona Mercado

📍 **Cinco Sentidos Pechuga de Mole, Puebla, Mexico; \$160**

Selected by Steven Sadri, co-owner, Tahona Mercado, San Francisco

Tahona Mercado is a craft agave spirits and Mexican foods specialist store, with a small kitchen and a loyal following. Co-owner Steven Sadri steers his customers towards the Cinco Sentidos Pechuga de Mole. “Holidays are about celebrating with family and friends and enjoying the bounty of traditional dishes that tend to be heartier and warming,” he says. “This expression is distilled with chicken, fruits, and spices which adds another dimension of flavors to your family gathering.”

Cinco Sentidos bottles agave spirits purchased directly from small-scale producers, such as this one from master distiller Delfino Tobón Mejía in Puebla. While pechuga mezcal is defined by the use of raw chicken during distillation, giving it a savory edge, here Tobón Mejía has added mole poblano to the mix, a fairly unique variation. “Pechugas are traditionally only made for celebratory events and nothing says that more than this expression of mezcal,” adds Sadri.

📍 **Chinola Mango Liqueur, Dominican Republic; \$33**

Selected by Rachel Malm, agave lead and shopkeeper, Bitters & Bottles, South San Francisco, California

“Chinola is one of those rare brands that we reach for time and time again, and especially around the holidays because it really does everything,” says Rachel Malm, the agave lead and shopkeeper associate at spirits speciality store Bitters & Bottles. Made from 100 percent fresh fruit and natural cane spirit, Chinola comes in three expressions, but the mango is Malm’s favorite. “It melds three distinct Dominican mango varieties (Kent, Keitt, Banilejo) to deliver a lush tropical punch balanced by bright acidity ... That balance makes it an absolute crowd-pleaser and a perfect addition to any bar, particularly around the holidays when versatility is key.”

Malm recommends it to customers for both gifting or as an addition to a home bar ahead of holiday parties, when it can be used to top off a glass of Champagne or offer a fruit-forward twist on a Margarita.

NON-ALCOHOLIC

📍 **Drømme Calm, San Diego, California; \$39**

Rob Theodorow, owner, Generation NA, Lafayette, Indiana

Generation NA in Lafayette, Indiana, has amassed a following for its curated selection of over 150 non-alcoholic options. Owner Rob Theodorow’s go-to holiday beverage recommendation—and personal drink of choice—is Drømme Calm. “I take this to all of my holiday gatherings and have had such a positive response,” he says. “I’ve even had family members switch over from traditional bourbon to Drømme because they preferred the taste and feeling.”

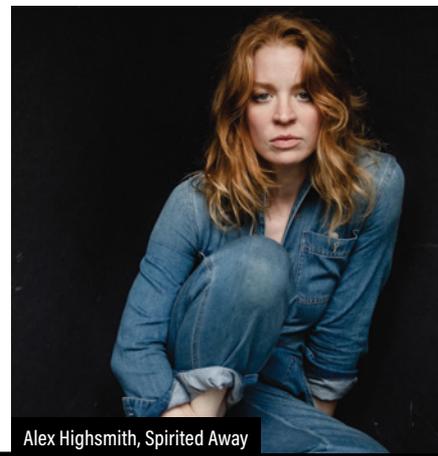
Drømme uses a blend of botanicals and adaptogens for the creation of zero-proof cocktails. “Calm is a unique combo of adaptogenics, including ginger, lemon balm, valerian root, turmeric, l-theanine, ashwagandha, and 5-HTP. It delivers a nice calming sensation without feeling too tired,” says Theodorow. “Flavor wise, it’s both sweet and spicy with a solid kick at the end, which I absolutely love.”

📍 **Mad Flora Ophelia, Brooklyn; \$42 per 500-milliliter bottle**

Selected by Alex Highsmith, general manager, Spirited Away, New York City

Spirited Away is the first non-alcoholic bottle shop in New York City and a destination for consumers to pick up booze-free alternatives. General manager Alex Highsmith is planning to recommend Mad Flora, a spirit-free amaro that launched earlier this year. She’s especially fond of its hallmark Ophelia expression, with thyme, gentian, and angelica.

“She’s a super herbaceous amaro that both my wine enthusiast and non-drinking friends alike all enjoy,” says Highsmith. “[It] makes a great Negroni, or you can just add tonic and a sprig of rosemary for a simple but deeply complex cocktail. I also love that the founder Lauren [McGurrin], a private chef and food stylist, names each expression after a ‘mad’ woman from history who inspires the liquid.” ■



Alex Highsmith, Spirited Away