

TASTED

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“Old Wine in New (York) Bottles”

Chasing New York’s Finest Wine Shops

By David Orange and Joel Leffer

New York, New York, The Big Apple, The Great White Way – impressive titles for a tiny town. From the Bronx to the Battery this finger of an island is only 13 miles long and less than 2½ wide. It has the highest density of any county in the country. And we don’t mean people. We’re talking about Wine & Liquor stores. Over 250 retailers are listed for Manhattan’s 23 square miles. You do the math ... and the list keeps growing.

There’s a perfect storm sweeping through Manhattan: rapidly changing neighborhoods, soaring real estate values, an increasingly affluent and savvy populace, and a high tide of interest in fine wine. In this storm’s wake has risen a reef of new ‘boutique’ wine shops, specializing in one region or hard-to-find wines and liquors. They’re the newest craze in old New York, springing up in dumpy old neighborhoods like splashes of color in a black and white world. And what cool new names! Wine Therapy, Elizabeth and Vine, Bottlerocket, just to name a few. There’s imagination here. The old mega stores and even the local mom and pops have to keep up.

Want to try before you buy? Take a class to learn more? There are ‘stores’, ‘shops’, ‘cellars’, ‘vaults’, ‘merchants’, and more for all your drinking needs. There are also soaring rents, arcane liquor laws and the fickle NYC scene to deal with. But the goal we heard over and over, expressed with great zeal, seems clear-- to give people more and better choices. New sensations. More fun! What is driving this growth? Can they compete with the super stores? Is bigger better? How do they handle those ancient New York liquor laws? What about the internet? And where does all this competition leave the old neighborhood shops? Can they hope to survive?

Armed with these questions and more, our two intrepid reporters, David and Joel, embarked on a tour of the best and brightest of Manhattan’s retail wine shops. The big ones, the teeny, tiny ones, the old neighborhood standbys, the brand new sleek and shiny ones. We were forced (not really!) to sample many wines, buy some bargains we couldn’t resist and generally have a great time wandering around the city that never sleeps, except when forced to by law. Here goes: “Great wines can be found in every tiny hole in the world.”...Guy Goldstein.

Bustling Union Square is just a few blocks away. Here, the lunch crowds are streaming through the Greenmarket (maybe picking up a Hudson Valley Wine for dinner) or heading for Trader Joe’s or grabbing a park bench for a quick picnic. The big store here is UNION SQUARE WINES, on Fourth Avenue and 13th St. with it’s great Enomatic tasting machine and huge selection. It’s been a steady fixture in the city’s wine scene for

years. But today, we’re heading for a smaller place that packs a monster wallop, ITALIAN WINE MERCHANTS, on 16th St.

“It’s not what we sell, but what we don’t sell.” Sergio Esposito

Italian Wine Merchants was the first boutique wine shop in New York to specialize in Italian wine, and especially small-production, artisanal producers. Founder Sergio Esposito travels to Italy ten times a year and personally selects and tastes every wine they sell, his goal being to provide the highest quality-to-dollar ratio in each price point. Sergio started to develop his palate at age six after moving to the United States from Naples when his Uncle Aldo insisted he toast the end of the day with a glass of wine at dinner. Now, after many years in the wine business (yes, he was a sommelier) he’s one of the leading authorities on Italian Wine in the U.S. and with his partners, the famous restaurateurs Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich, have made Italian Wine Merchants a major destination for finding exceptional Italian wines.

A stroll through IWM with communications coordinator Dianna Tingg and vice president Christopher Deas showed us the scope of this precision operation. They offer monthly wine clubs, regular tastings and seminars with the major winemakers of Italy, online wine tracking tools and a Wine Cellar management program. Still, it all comes down to the wine. IWM doesn’t use other people’s ratings or scores. “Every person’s palate is unique,” says Sergio, “and all winemakers have different objectives and styles.” They use their carefully crafted network of contacts, proprietary notes from internal tastings and Sergio’s own skills honed at an early age. Some things you never forget.



ITALIAN WINE MERCHANTS