



START YOUR WINE-ING

From a dizzying array of product selection to upscale clientele, wine shops and garden centers have a lot in common — and even more to learn from each other.

By Pete Mihalek

Independent, locally-owned business. Big-chain competition. Multiple pricepoints. A somewhat limitless pool of vendors. Intimidating shopping experience. Sound familiar?

Your local wine shop might have more in common with your business than you think. *Lawn & Garden Retailer* recently caught up with the owners of three independently owned, community-praised wine shops to get their take on product mix, customer service and what it means to keep it local.

So, read on — we're optimistic there's something in here you can adapt to your business.

The Product Selection

"I think it starts with defining who we are as a shop," says Matt Miller of East End Wines in Austin, Texas. "We want to represent value. East End Wines is a throw-back to a Mom and Pop approach to standing behind everything we sell. To do that, we taste everything before placing it on the shelf."

Like what many independent garden centers are facing, wine shop owners and managers are seeing a trend in wine merchants going away from neighborhood shops and into larger, discount, box stores.

"It is important to let the customer know what makes us different," he says. "More often than not, we choose wines that you don't see in retail as much. There are more than 30 distributors we deal with, so there is a wealth of wine available that you might not see in other retail shops. That keeps our selection unique as well as being value priced."

East End Wines wants to represent as many international regions as it can, all while providing value. "It needs to rock for the price we sell it at, competing with higher priced wines in their category," Miller adds.

At Cork Wine Shop in Portland, Ore., the approach to product mix is a little different. "We really focus on small, sustainable producers," says owner Darryl Joannides. "Price, place of origin, unique or obscurity mostly matter within the context of how good is the wine compared to similar types and is it priced competitively — basic stuff that all businesses should pay attention to, regardless if you're selling a plant or a Pinot."

Both Miller and Joannides agree that their customers find comfort in knowing they have staff that has tried — or in this case, tasted — everything

in stock. "Most of our customers are coming in to talk to us and learn about what we've selected and why," Joannides says. "It's that service and knowing someone on staff can talk intelligently about them that separates our shopping experience from the grocery stores we have to compete with here in Oregon."

Becoming Customer Friendly

Cork Wine Shop stands behind its signage when it comes to providing customers a unique and non-intimidating shopping experience. "Most wines in the shop have shelf talkers that describe the item," Joannides says. "We write them all in-house after tasting the wine and often after meeting with the winemaker or estate owner in person. We also try to make them humorous and often suggest food pairings. That way if someone is intimidated about wine, they don't have to ask for help because the information is right in front of them to learn on their own. And if they do ask, we are always happy to converse."

The Cork owner goes on to add, "As someone who knows nothing about plants but has a half-acre garden, I wish garden stores would do this to help educate me about what plants are, how to care for them, how to prune them, where best to plant them, all with signage in front of the plant I'm considering so I don't have to always go find someone with that answer for me."

In addition to signage, this Portland wine shop hosts weekly tastings, classes and more formal sit-down tastings to introduce its customers to new things. "All of this is done in an unpretentious format, or so we hope," Joannides says. Similar to gardening, "The biggest challenge with wine is people think it's snooty or too difficult to try and figure out, so they just avoid what they don't know about."

Miller agrees that the wine industry can carry the unfortunate label of being pretentious. "I began working in the wine industry a month after I turned 21 and knew very little about wine," he says. "I also come from a blue collar background; there was very little fine dining or other wine exposure at a young age in rural Texas. What drew me to wine in the first place was everything that you didn't see in the fancy restaurants and collector's cellars: farmers, family, tradition, culture and terrior.

"[We] want to convey this passion to the young and old, so, to do that,

“Whether it’s remembering what a customer likes and emailing or texting them when it comes back into stock, or having a marketing device like e-newsletters or an active Twitter account to blast out news of specials, new arrivals, what you’ll be demonstrating that coming weekend — these are all effective tools for a successful small business with a limited marketing and advertising budget.”

— Darryl Joannides, Cork Wine Shop, Portland, Ore.



there is no room for snooty attitude or elitism. We are just regular guys who love wine, and that is how we interact with our customers. You may hear classical music at the shop, then maybe a little Led Zeppelin to Coltrane, followed by some hip-hop. That helps with the younger crowd for sure.”

Playing (Local) Favorites

As more lawn and garden retailers learn the

value of developing strong community partnerships, so are wine shop owners and managers.

“This is very important to us and we do it all the time — mostly with local restaurants,” Joannides says. “We are really fortunate here in Portland to have such a vibrant culinary scene. Many of these restaurants have great wine buyers who know the value of cross-promotion.

“We put a lot of energy into creating these

events with our restaurant partners and always see it pay off in spades with repeat customers to both businesses, as well as that community spirit of knowing you are working to help other small businesses survive and thrive.”

Chuck Kanski, co-owner of Solo Vino in St. Paul, Minn., shares a similar experience with the owners of Tangletown Gardens, Scott Endres and Dean Engelmann.

Tangletown Gardens hosts an annual Garden & Art Tour, and Solo Vino provides wine for this event. Proceeds from the tour help fund public art, along with charities and garden projects throughout the community.

“Scott and Dean give so much back into the community, so when they wanted to incorporate wine tastings into the event’s after party, we wanted to be in step with that and donate our time and our wine,” Kanski says.

He goes on to add that Solo Vino’s support of Tangletown Gardens and its Garden & Art Tour is not about connecting with new customers.

“This is more about relationships than it is business,” Kanski says. “Scott and Dean are local farm boys and what they’re doing for our community is amazing. And if you want to support and help people like that, everyone benefits.”

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