



Decanting Complexities

One New York wine and spirit store finds innovative ways to make its products more approachable for consumers.

By Abby Kleckler

White or red? Sweet or dry? Light, medium or full-bodied? Wines, much like plants, are a very complicated product category and choosing exactly what is needed for a dinner party or in the garden is not always easy.

"Wines are enormously complex, and that's fun if you relax about it and get into it," says Tom Geniesse, owner of Bottlerocket Wine & Spirit. "But from an enthusiastic yet not necessarily knowledgeable consumer's perspective, it's totally overwhelming, and the traditional retail model does nothing to help."

After leaving both the television industry and Internet education business, Geniesse decided to tackle a problem with an idea that had been percolating in the back of his head for years.

"The definition of a good wine store was four walls with bottles of wine, a price tag and maybe a guy in the back," he said. "That was it."

In 2006, Geniesse opened the first Bottlerocket Wine & Spirit in New York, N.Y., with one primary goal in mind: make wine more approachable for the average consumer.

Intuitive Approach

Bottlerocket does not completely stray from the traditional approach as wines are lined up along the outer wall in alphabetical order by country. This Dewey Decimal System of classification, however, is not the focus.

Large islands in the center of the shop command attention with vibrant statues of things like cows, chickens and take-out containers. Each side of the island has wines that pair well with what's for dinner. The meat island, for example, has one side for beef, one for pork, one for game and one for lamb.

"Anybody that comes into a wine store knows why they need wine, but they don't know what wine fulfills that need," Geniesse says. "We present wines in a way that people intuitively understand them."

Even with the unique layout of the store, a knowledgeable staff is still crucial to providing customer assistance and a welcoming atmosphere.

"Even after being given all the information in the world and having things organized in a way that's intuitive, there's still a way in which people want to be supported in their decision," Geniesse says. "Most people want to just check in with one of us and make sure they're making the right decision."

Sharing a Story

All the wines at Bottlerocket are displayed with an information card and a copy of this card is then placed in the bag with a purchase. Not only do these cards provide information about taste but also a story of its origin.

"If you want to attract a 28-year-old at the retail store as opposed to a 48-year-old, having some sort of nod to the stories of the producers or the tools is something that resonates," Geniesse says. "Having really good local wines and supporting interesting, small producers that are trying to do something with excellence may be a reason to choose one thing over another thing."

Geniesse has tried to find the things that consumers really want and he says organic and local stories are a top priority for many people today, especially the younger generations.

Family Approach

Younger generations may mean age 21 and older when referring to those actually purchasing Bottlerocket's products, but the store also

addresses the needs of those who are years away from buying wine.

"Every retailer should have a kid's area," Geniesse says. "When you have happy kids, you have happy parents."

The kid's area does not take up very many square feet, has some books, toys and chalk tables so they can draw on top of it and is situated in the back of the store for security.

Geniesse says he hopes this area will make better memories than those kids may have of being dragged around stores by their parents, "bored to tears".

"The parents can relax and instead of thinking they have to hurry because their kids are going to freak out any second, the kids run over to the play area and sit right down," Geniesse says. "Sometimes they cry because they don't want to leave, which is something new."

Recipe for Success

Utilizing an intuitive layout, telling the wines' stories and embracing children are working for Bottlerocket. Geniesse and his team recently opened a second store in Westport, Conn.

How can you create little islands to make plants more approachable? Can you convey the stories of the plants you sell to your customers? Have you implemented things to make the shopping experience more relaxing for parents? Both wine and plants may be complex product categories but that does not mean shopping for them has to be complicated. **L&GR**

Abby Kleckler is an associate editor at Lawn & Garden Retailer. She can be reached at akleckler@sgcmail.com.

