



A toast to success

Opening an upscale wine store requires plenty of bottle

By LOIS WEISS

CITY and state laws make opening new wine shops nearly as difficult as porn palaces.

"It's the only business I know of where your competitors are notified and they can make a case as to why you shouldn't open in their neighborhood and they can win," said Jeff Angel, director of real estate services for RES Commercial.

Angel is referring to the state liquor authority rules that require potential liquor store owners to ferret out those already in the neighborhood, notify community boards and run public notices. And those other liquor store owners do show up at the State Liquor Authority hearings.

"The other stores had some objections and we had a hearing, and we prevailed," said Tola Talabi, a partner in Bacchus Wine Made Simple on the Upper West Side.

He and partner Deen Solebo looked for a location for two years before stumbling upon this wine store of the same name at 2056 Broadway which had been put up for sale. Of its 4,000 feet, however, only 1,000 was being used for sales. They knew they could renovate to become a European-style wine shop with an expansive international selection from small wineries, offering ongoing tastings.

Under SLA rules, however, the liquor license doesn't go with the business — the new owners have to earn it themselves.

To cut competition further, only one license is issued per person in the entire state.

"We had a compelling story and we weren't just another expanding liquor store," explained Talabi.

Solebo and Talabi, who had previously opened a store in New Jersey, also praised the building owners, the Brodsky Organization, who even extended the long-term lease they had initially bought.

Tom Geniesse, the owner of Bottlerocket Wine & Spirit at 5 W. 19th Street in the Flatiron District, also looked for over a year for his location.

"To find something that is not within 200 feet of a church or a school and is not

LICENSE TO THRILL

There are hoops you need to jump through to get a liquor license.

■ Must have a signed lease or contract to buy property.

■ Cannot be within 200 feet of a school, church, synagogue or other place of worship.

■ License applicants must notify the appropriate government entity in the village, town or city clerk or the appropriate community board if in NYC.

■ Public notices must run in designated newspapers of a pending license application at a particular location.

■ The SLA will conduct a public hearing for any premises within five hundred feet of three or more similarly licensed premises.

■ If the premise is within a 500 foot radius of three or more on-premise liquor licenses and have not been continuously licensed since 11/1/93 you must explain in detail why you believe issuance of your license would be in the public interest.

■ Application has to list the names and addresses and map out the four closest package stores and note the distance from the proposed premises.



Tola Talabi and Deen Solebo sample the fruits of their labors in the tasting room of Bacchus. Upstairs, clients get expert advice on the wines from staff (below.)

Lorenzo Ciniglio (2)



Tom Geniesse (right) searched for a year before finding the right storefront for Bottlerocket (above). Zandy Mangold (2)

close to an existing wine shop and is a viable location in and of itself is really challenging," he said. "I failed in my first effort and watched a year of my time go up in smoke."

He also had to find a building owner who was willing to sign a lease with a startup business and grant an out, because if you don't get the license you can't open the shop. "I don't know anyone who would switch

gears and say fine, I will open a make-up store instead," laughed Geniesse, who was intent on creating the ultimate service oriented wine store. "People aren't that loosey goosey about their ambitions."

Working with Angel, Geniesse finally found the current location, which also needed approvals from a co-op board.

"It's a very tough thing to find a space because the



owners don't want to give any contingencies," agreed Angel. Yet, he noted, liquor is a very clean use with no associated vermin because all the "food" is bottled.

"I'm reluctant to take on

new wine and spirit shops," Angel admitted. "It's a hard task and the success rate is discouraging — not only for them but for me to have them walk away. Then there are extremely high retail

rents, so once you find a place that falls into the pocket, you have to find a place with the right rents."

Geniesse was able to sign his deal for Bottlerocket right off Fifth Avenue just before Flatiron rents surged to over \$100 a foot.

Similarly, Sherry Lehman managed to get its deal done for 11,000 feet at 505 Park Avenue at 59th Street that includes a huge basement and some second floor space when area asking rents were around \$350 for the ground floor space.

"They got the contingency because they didn't want to be on the hook for a \$25 million lease if they didn't get the liquor license, and we wanted the deal," said Gene Spiegelman, executive director of Cushman & Wakefield who represented the Glorious Sun ownership.

Spiegelman initially had only a small space on the market but once he found out the neighborhood landmark needed to move from its longtime Madison Avenue home, he was able to make the larger area available.

"There were concessions made on both sides," he said of the pact with Sherry-Lehman. "It's reputable, it's dry and it's great."