

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2007 - VOL. CCXLIX NO. 44

Tastings | Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Wine's New Wave—Stores With Shtick

Novel Techniques
Target New Buyers;
Service With a Parka

TOM GENIESSE used to help develop movies and television series. He left that to start an Internet business-education company and not long ago sold that. All the while he was a wine lover, so we suppose it was natural, given his creative bent, that he would decide that there had to be a better way to design a wine shop.

So last year he opened Bottlerocket Wine & Spirit in New York City. There are 365 different wines in the store, one for every day of the year. All are lined up on the right side of the store, alphabetically by country, from Argentina to the U.S. Then, down the middle of the store, the same wines are organized around kiosks by theme. There's wine to have with seafood, for instance, which is then broken down into heavier and lighter fish dishes. There's even a kiosk marked "Gifts," with subheadings including "Third Date."

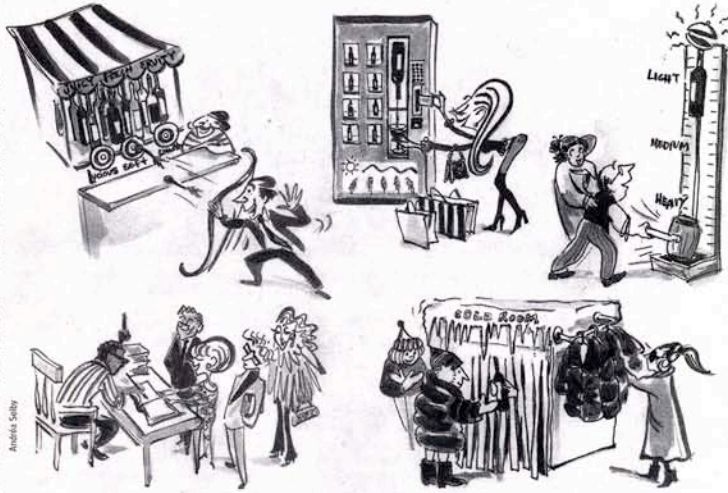
"The traditional store does nothing to help the consumer buy intelligently and learn, other than provide a knowledgeable salesperson," Mr. Geniesse says. "Wine is a confusing but very rewarding subject. So I thought, gee, there must be a way that this complex world can be presented to folks in such a way that they can be intelligent and learn and grow confident."

Making It Fun to Shop

Call them Stores with Shtick. Or, better yet, let's identify them by the generation many of them seem to covet: Let's call them Y stores. All over the country, Y stores are opening up with all sorts of new ideas to make the wine-buying experience more fun and less intimidating. Some are already franchising their ideas and others hope to do so in the future. Some stores will make it and some won't; some ideas will last and some will die. But right now is a particularly good time to be a wine lover because there are more interesting stores—and wines—out there than ever.

Joshua Wesson, co-founder of the Best Cellars chain, was way ahead in this trend, beginning in 1996 in Manhattan with an easy-to-navigate store. The wines are organized in eight style categories: fizzy, fresh, soft, luscious, juicy, smooth, big and sweet. There are seven Best Cellars now in six cities. "I do think that we lit the sparkler. It's kind of great to see," he says of the explosion of interesting stores that followed his innovations, and in some cases went beyond them. "Our goal was to make shopping for wine as much fun as drinking it."

To be sure, the new wave hasn't reached everywhere yet. Some areas still have state stores or laws that inhibit modernization of the wine-buying experience, while other places just haven't yet been touched by the trend. In addition—and we



can't emphasize this strongly enough—nothing will ever replace a store with an interesting, ever-changing selection, fair prices and friendly, passionate, knowledgeable merchants, whether the store has shtick or not. All that said, though, here is a mixed case of interesting trends we've seen recently. We have focused on stores around New York City, which is a hotbed of Y stores, but these trends are apparent in many places.

- **Smaller selection.** It would seem that consumers would want as much choice as possible. That's why we love giant stores like Sam's Wines & Spirits in Chicago. But many Y stores believe that less is more, that a limited number of good bottles makes the experience

be stored well, at a temperature around 56 degrees. Some Y stores keep the store temperature around there. Moore Brothers in New York offers coats to customers when they walk in. Moore Brothers, which also has stores in Wilmington, Del., and Pennsauken, N.J., also promises that the wines were handled from the winery to the store under temperature-controlled conditions. Another store in New Jersey is so proud of its temperature-controlled environment that it's named 56 Degree Wine.

- **Food pairings.** The new-wave merchants realize that wine goes with food and that most people pick up a bottle for dinner that night. So some stores specifically have areas for, say, Asian food. Some provide recipes. Customers who walk into Pour are greeted with the question: "What are you having for dinner tonight?" Some stores, such as Who Cut the Cheese in Maui, Hawaii, focus specifically on selling cheese and wine.

- **Do one thing well.** With America's increased interest in wine, some merchants think now's the time to make a go at a store that sells the wine of only one country or region. Wine stores have specialized in this region or that forever, but there now are more stores that sell only wines from one place. Tinto Fino in New York, for instance, sells only wines from Spain. This means consumers can go deeper into certain regions than ever before because these stores tend to find unusual stuff from small producers. Mani Dawes, owner of three-month-old Tinto Fino and part-owner and wine director of Tia Pol, a tapas bar, majored in Spanish in college and lived in Spain for three years. "I just fell in love with it and couldn't get it out of my system," she says. The all-Spanish inventory, with 115 labels and a focus on Sherries, is, she says, "my way of getting closer to the country."

- **Kids' areas.** Some stores are providing small sections in the

back or off in a corner with books or crayons to keep kids busy while Mom and Dad shop. This is inevitably controversial—some people surely think that kids and wine stores don't mix—and not allowed everywhere, but Mr. Geniesse, who has a small kids' area at Bottlerocket, says, "I think that all retail is really, on some level, a neighborhood phenomenon and a service and it just seemed so logical to provide for the little people, too, so they can enjoy their experience and then their parents can enjoy their own experience."

- **Tasting notes.** It's hard to believe this has been so long in coming, but many Y stores display their own tasting notes for every bottle in the store and, in many cases, include a copy of the notes with purchased bottles. At Discovery Wines in New York, consumers scan the barcode of any bottle at one of many computers and the screen displays all sorts of information about the wine, including tasting notes and food pairings.

- **Remember me.** At the Greene Grape in Manhattan and Brooklyn, the stores' computers keep a record of every wine you buy. Yes, this sure seems simple in this day and age. We wonder why it took so long. Amy Bennett, the owner in Brooklyn, says the computer file was inspired by her tech-savvy partner and by her experience being in a large store next to a woman who approached a clerk and asked, "I had this great Spanish red. Do you remember which one it was?"

- **"Handpicked" wines.** Many of the Y stores use this exact expression to explain that the stores are filled with small-production, unusual wines that you probably won't see anywhere else. With Costco, Total Wine & More, Trader Joe's and other big players selling all of the common stuff like Yellow Tail, Y stores are more likely to offer the unusual.

- **"Enomatic" machines.** These machines give customers a

chance to try a wine, for a small price (or, in some cases, for free if they've built up a kind of frequent-buyer points), from a machine in the store that keeps quite a few wines in good condition using gas. Put in your card and get a taste. At the Seventh Street Wine Company in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., managing partners Mark Darley and Chris Skillicorn have eight Enomatic machines, with a total of 96 wines—64 reds and 32 whites. The store sells debit cards with a minimum of \$25 credit that are inserted to purchase a one-ounce pour. Among the offerings is 2002 Opus One for \$15 a taste. The two-year-old store also has a Champagne bar and 1,100 wines for sale the conventional way. "We call ourselves the tasting place," Mr. Darley told us. "The idea is that you taste, buy and linger a while." According to Enomatic company representatives, there are dozens of these machines all across the U.S. in at least 55 wine stores from Sugar Land, Texas, to Escondido, Calif.

- **Meeting, tasting or lounge space.** Y stores often have a separate area where people can sit and read wine books, making the store seem a little more like a lounge than simply a retail space. The space is often also used for book signings and tastings. And, by the way, Y stores generally offer tastings with real wine glasses. For decades when we were growing up in wine, we never tasted a wine at a wine shop in anything but a plastic cup. Now, many of these tastings include food, once

again focusing on the simple idea that wine and food go together.

- **Quiet education.** Put together many of the things above—printed tasting notes, books in the store, regular tastings, book signings—and you see an emphasis on a very gentle kind of education. No one wants to go into a wine store and get pounded with information, or wants to be told that you have to study wine to enjoy it. But the Y stores understand that the more people enjoy wine, the more they will want to know about it, and the more they know about it, the more they will enjoy it. Cova, in Houston, offers what it calls the "Monterville Wine Experience," a series of classes, tastings and dinners organized by the store's owner, Montereyville Horton IV. In fact, Cova embodies many of the current Y store trends. It is a restaurant and a wine bar and wine store stocked only with wines Mr. Horton has tasted and selected. The wine experience Mr. Horton offers has many features including a wine boot camp—32 hours of intensive study and tasting—and progressive dinners. Mr. Horton says that for the progressive dinners, participants ride "a rock-star motor coach the size of a Greyhound bus." Over six hours, usually from 6 p.m. to midnight, the diners visit three or four of the "finest restaurants in the area" and sample a dozen to 20 wines with carefully paired dishes. To us, that's an appropriate symbol of wine finally getting on the road to modern, clever retailing.

You can contact us at wine@wsj.com. Don't forget that Saturday is Open That Bottle Night, when all of us, world-wide, finally pop the cork on that bottle that is always too special to open. After your evening, be sure to drop us a note about what you opened and the story behind it.