

NEW YORK | WINE MERCHANTS

## Small is beautiful in New York

BY THOMAS PELLECHIA

**I**N NEW YORK City, the hundreds of wine and spirit shops make it easy to find rated Médoc, Rioja, Tuscany, Victoria, Marlborough, Napa. But what about Irouléguay Courbu, Oltrepo Pavese Bonarda, Savoie Roussette, Styrian Morillon, Jura, Jumilla, Ontario and New York State?

Until recently, these wines were available only to New Yorkers with adventurous spirits and perhaps frequent flyer miles. But now, the city-bound have access to hitherto under-represented wines thanks to a handful of small, niche wine retailers.

Best Cellars is arguably the best-known niche retailer. In 1996, Joshua Wesson went to Manhattan's Upper East Side shopping district with a selection of unknown wines. He applied trademarked descriptive words to make wine seem 'edible', and capped prices at \$10 per bottle. His success spawned a trend and his business is now located in a few states with prices up to \$15.

Before Wesson, however, there was Nancy Maniscalco. Located in the Upper West Side, Nancy's Wines for Food began in 1992. Later, when Maniscalco met importer Willie Gluckstern, the former succumbed to the latter's infectious excitement over German wine. Today, with its 'Discover Riesling for Food' programme, Nancy's niche – German, Austrian, Alsatian – accounts for more than a tenth of inventory.

Nancy's success, with a focus on affordable, food-friendly wine, commanded serious attention; then, between 1999 and 2000, niche wine retailing took off.

Among the first of the new crop, Italian Wine Merchants filled a void. Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich helped to create a buzz over the then misunderstood Italian wine sector. Just off bustling Union Square, the shop is invitingly calm, warmly lit, and its wooden shelves display a few hundred Italian labels (the wine



New York's niche wine merchants have knowledgeable staff and are the best places to discover new wines. Clockwise from top: Italian Wine Merchants; winesby.com; Vintage New York

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you take home is stored in a temperature-controlled basement). The back tasting room doubles as a kitchen for wine with food pairings. Aimed at the uninitiated, this shop is not for the under-financed.

### CLOSE TO HOME

New York law allows a local winery to sell not only its wine in the tasting room but wines of other New York wineries. Talk about a niche: a winery named Vintage New York represents 75% of the 200 wineries that produce in four separate New York appellations. The wines are sold at a tasting room in fashionable Soho and one on the Upper West Side.

'Unlike regular retailers, we can sell food,' says the aptly named Susan Wine. 'Perfect for our signature, food-friendly, inexpensive local wines.'

In Greenwich Village, [winesby.com](http://winesby.com) takes us global. 'I thought the internet was the place,' says Jeff Hock. 'I established with the express purpose to sell wine online, but today the internet accounts only for 20% of sales.'

NY State alcohol laws require a physical location from which off-premise alcohol sales can take place, resulting in Hock having had a rough start. To help kick things off,

he offered local delivery within 90 minutes for as little as one bottle. Business has since picked up and the shop rotates a global stock of about 80 obscure labels priced between \$10 and \$40 a bottle.

About a kilometre across town, in the East Village, is wine Innovative Wine Merchants has a rotating stock of 125 hardly-ever-seen worldwide labels. The shop has a warm design, including well-worn upholstered chairs that draw people in.

But what counts here, as the shop's Kathy Green puts it, is that 'Wine should not be over-oaked, over-extracted, or over-priced.' A majority of terroir-driven wines priced at \$12-18 per bottle prove she's not kidding. The shop is light on California.

Then there are two off the beaten trail. At Chambers Street Wines, near the World Trade Centre site, the focus is crus Beaujolais and Loire. Staff are professional and knowledgeable, and average price is \$15 per bottle.

In Park Slope Brooklyn, Prospect Wine gives 25% shelf space to wines produced worldwide from organically grown grapes and 10% to grower Champagnes.

How do customers know they've entered a New York niche wine retail shop? When staff aren't mystified by a request for Pignolo, Quarts de Chaume or Gamashara. And since the State Liquor Authority abandoned the so-called 'Blue Laws', these wines can be found on Sunday too.

## ONE TO WATCH



### RUDD VINEYARDS & WINERY

Leslie Rudd (pictured), a successful businessman from Kansas with vast experience of fine wines and the restaurant world, acquired the Dean & DuLuca epicurean food stores in 1996. Late in 1996 he bought the former Girard Winery and its 26ha (hectares). Located at the heart of the Oakville District, the 22ha vineyard was pulled and meticulously replanted to Cabernet Sauvignon and its supporting cast. This is prime Oakville turf, and Rudd redeveloped it by sparing no expense. The winery was given a facelift and new ageing caves were constructed. While this 'successful-businessman-fulfils-a-dream-and-takes-the-high-road' scenario is not unusual in Napa Valley, the wines coming from Rudd are. The Estate Red and Estate Cabernet Sauvignon have been impressive and bode well for the site. The 2001 Oakville Estate Red - only the winery's second vintage - can hold its own in the company of Oakville's well-established Cabernets. In 2002, Charles Thomas, who honed his skills at Robert Mondavi and Cardinale, climbed aboard as winemaker to finish the reds and refine the whites. Made from purchased fruit, both the Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay were knock-outs in 2002, confirming Rudd's high standards.

### Rudd Vineyards, Chardonnay, Bacigalupi Vineyard, Russian River Valley 2002 ★★★★★

Rudd has produced a remarkably concentrated and age-worthy Chardonnay. Fermented using the native yeast, the wine was aged in French oak (65% new) for 18 months. Frequent lees stirring contributed a lovely roasted-grain flavour. Displaying ripe apple fruit with hazelnut and mineral background notes, this broad-shouldered, intense Chardonnay should age well for 5-6 years. **\$60; US MARKETS**

by Norm Roby

### NEW YORK WINE CONTACTS

■ **Best Cellars**

1291 Lexington Avenue,  
Manhattan +1 212 426 4200  
[www.bestcellars.com](http://www.bestcellars.com)

■ **Nancy's Wines for Food**

313 Columbus Avenue,  
Manhattan +1 212 877 4040  
[www.nancyswines.com](http://www.nancyswines.com)

■ **Italian Wine Merchants**

108 East 16th Street,  
Manhattan +1 212 473 2323

[www.italianwinemerchant.com](http://www.italianwinemerchant.com)

■ **Vintage New York**

482 Broome Street,  
Manhattan +1 212 226 9463  
[www.vintagenewyork.com](http://www.vintagenewyork.com)

■ **winesby.com, inc**

23 Jones Street, Manhattan  
+1 212 242 5144

[www.winesby.com](http://www.winesby.com)

■ **is-wine Innovative Wine Merchants**

225 East Fifth Street  
Manhattan +1 212 254 7800  
[www.is-wine.com](http://www.is-wine.com)

■ **Chambers Street Wines**

160 Chambers Street  
Manhattan +1 212 227 1434  
[www.chambersstwin.com](http://www.chambersstwin.com)

■ **Prospect Wine**

322 Seventh Avenue  
Brooklyn +1 718 768 1232  
[www.prospectwine.com](http://www.prospectwine.com)